

Impartial and honest

Each staff member has the obligation to be a responsible journalist who is fair and unbiased. A yearbook is not a platform for personal opinions or views. A good story will cover both sides of a story fairly.

Truthfulness and accuracy

Names and quotes should be carefully checked for accuracy. Quotes and statements must be fact and, if false, are considered libelous. Opinions or comments are not subject to libel or considered injurious.

Common sense and good taste

Students must make certain the yearbook is void of questionable material like sexist or racist comments, crude humor, ethnic slurs, inside jokes, cruel statements or making illegal activities look attractive. Gag cutlines or comments may be funny to some, but weaken credibility, hurt feelings and potentially may attract a lawsuit. Do not make up information. Do not assume anything. Do not add opinion. If anything is funny about the moment, it is the content of the photo itself or the subject's direct quote. It should not be the information within the story.

Privacy

There are laws that attempt to balance the privacy rights of individual and the right to provide news and information to the public. Be aware of your presence and be courteous when covering a story or event.

Implied consent

Many potential problems can be easily avoided by using common sense. A staff photographer must identify himself and explain why photographs are being taken. Obtaining a full name for story information typically establishes the subject's "implied consent" for using his information or photo.

Intrusion

Photographers understand that a photographer's presence cannot intrude on anyone's seclusion or privacy. Photographs of people cannot be taken in places where they have a reasonable expectation of privacy, like their own homes. However, shooting in public places is allowed, unless it disrupts a normal activity or may cause harm to the facilities or users of the facilities in a library, museum, school or hospital. Yes things get a little murky when shooting in a public place that is privately owned, like a movie theater or small business. It is understood that shooting in these settings is permissible, unless there are notices posted or a photographer is told he cannot take pictures. Always seek permission from management to avoid any problems. Anything seen on public streets with the naked eye is fair game. However, no one may scare, intimidate or deny people from their normal activity to gain these photographs. And they may not necessarily be publishable without written consent. Use common sense and be courteous.

Libel

Statements that harm a person's reputation, name or causes disgrace are considered libelous and are not protected under the First Amendment. To help clarify what is libel, here are some basic components to be aware of.

Identification – An individual must be identifiable for libel to occur. For example, if you talk about a blonde cheerleader without naming her, and all the cheerleaders are brunettes except for one blonde, you have identified her.

Publication – A statement must be published as words or photo to be considered libel.

Injury – If a person's name or reputation is damaged in any public community, a statement can be considered libelous.

Fault – A private individual in most states has to prove the writer did not validate the information. A public figure must prove that the writer knew the information was false or was careless in presenting the story. Even if the writer and editor are minors, they can be held responsible and sued in a libel case.

It was just a joke – It isn't important what the author intended to convey, but if a statement can be reasonably taken seriously it is possible to be considered libelous. Gag or joke comments that are an attempt to be funny can be potential libel lawsuits.

Refer to the Student Press Law Center should you have any questions because it is better to be safe than sorry.