

Make the commitment to create an ethical yearbook

Written by Jim Jordan

I used to have a recurring yearbook nightmare – that when I died, every word in the 35 yearbooks I advised that was not completely accurate would turn red and would expose how much students made up. To avoid that potential embarrassment, I tried to create a culture with my staff that championed the essential importance of having journalistic integrity – of being 100% accurate in all we wrote and reported.

But creating an ethical yearbook and being ethical as a staff goes much deeper than content accuracy alone. A vibrant, ethical staff will make commitments together about the kind of book they want to create, who they want to be as a staff and how they want to conduct themselves as they produce a book that accurately captures a year in the life of their school.

Yearbook staffs need to discuss, define and follow a set of moral principles that will guide all they do in the production of their book as well as the staff policies they implement. In a world of fake news and incivility, make the commitment as a staff to not only create an ethical yearbook, but also to be an ethical yearbook staff. Here are some ethical commitments to consider as a staff.

1. Commit to balanced and fair coverage of the student body.

Are you committed to equal and fair coverage of all individuals and groups on campus? Assess where you gave the most page real estate of last year's book. Then look closely at the major activities your students are involved in. Are you providing fair and equal coverage of all the diverse groups that exist on campus? If 20% of your student body is involved in the music program, are you allotting enough pages to cover it, or are you giving a disproportionate amount of coverage to one sport, club or event? Consider what events and activities should be covered from the first day of school to your final deadline and if you should create a supplement to cover spring sports, prom and graduation.

Not every individual, group or event will have the highest profile on campus or the most popular members, but the ethical staff will cover them well. Commit to cover as much of the year as you can, understanding the number of pages available and time necessary to create it.

2. Commit to objective and unbiased coverage of the student body and events.



Jaclyn Honn sits down to point out and discuss sports and activities photo assignments for the upcoming deadline with another photo editor at Shawnee Mission North High School. Careful attention to detail and a foundation of ethics made the Indian yearbook a consistent national award winner year after year. Photo by Mathew Cunningham

Are you committed to providing coverage that is objective and explores all sides of an issue? Do you strive to eliminate all editorializing with a specific story? As a journalist, you must be willing to do the research and interview enough people to be sure you are getting all sides of a story. For example, with the presidential campaign in full swing, will you provide equal and unbiased coverage to all sides, regardless of personal views?

An ethical yearbook will provide objective coverage and not take sides on an issue or promote specific points of view.

3. Commit to original work.

Are you committed to using original work written, designed and photographed by your staff, or are you tempted to grab a news photo or logo off the internet and use it without permission from the creator? When you have not gotten photos of a specific event, will you resort to taking and using photos from Twitter or Instagram without permission?

When you find that great piece of inspiration from another yearbook, ad or magazine, will you use it and vary its look significantly or copy it EXACTLY as it is? Specifically with covers, it is easy to do a direct copy of a great piece of inspiration. Be sure to alter the look to make it your own.

Because of limited resources, staffs may choose to use photos from other students, parents or your school photographer. If used, these photos must be given proper photo credit in the caption, and it's best to have written permission to use the photos.

An ethical yearbook staff will strive to use staff-created material in the book so that it truly is a STUDENT publication.

4. Commit to accuracy of all quotes and information.

Have you ever personally been misquoted in a story? I have, even in ones written by the professional media. Nothing is more disappointing and annoying. Have you seen a quote in

a story that just does not sound like how a student would talk? Too long. Too eloquent. Too perfect. It had to have been made up. This is wrong.

Thanks to smart phones, we have a recording studio in our pocket. Record every interview you do, then check and recheck what was actually said. Strive to get EVERY WORD AND PHRASE 100% correct in all stories, secondary coverage and captions. If you need to, double check with your subject. Create a culture of accuracy by saving all interview notes and recordings. Advisers and editors, this may mean checking notes and recordings periodically.

The ethical reporter will commit to achieving 100% accuracy in all they write and will always have access to written or recorded proof of what



This photo illustration is fantastic, but the effects applied make it obvious there has been photo manipulation. These are great for profile features or specialty spreads, but make sure these or staged photos are clearly labeled as photo illustrations. Because illustrations can encompass a wide variety of photo types, it is not always immediately obvious they are illustrations unless labeled. Photo by Delaney Barlow

was said in every interview.

5. Commit to ethical correction of photos and creation of photo illustrations.

Photos capture action as it happens. In the final editing process, making adjustments to light, contrast and crop to improve quality is encouraged. However, constructing a photo using multiple images, moving items within it, altering the content using Photoshop, staging a photo or moving items from their natural position before taking a photo must be identified as a photo illustration. Altering the content of a photo is much the same as changing a quote – it's no longer accurate. And leave using Photoshop for personal appearance edits to the fashion magazines. The job of an ethical yearbook staff is to capture the year EXACTLY as it happens.

6. Commit to understanding and following copyright laws and guidelines.

Are you committed to understanding use of copyrighted materials, using them only with permission and giving proper attribution? Some sites allow staffs to use photos of news events, but when you use them, you must include all information about who created it and where it was from in the caption. Read more at walsworthyyearbooks.com/copyright.

An ethical yearbook staff will commit to using no copyrighted material in the book without proper permission from the creator.

7. Commit to journalistic reporting.

Are you committed to being an ethical yearbook staff reporter? Know the ethical principles guiding all reporters in all media and make a staff commitment to follow them.

From the JEA Website:

The same ethical principles apply to yearbook journalism as to any other kind of media.

- Reporters should cover all sides of a story fairly and fully.
- Reporters should identify themselves as representing ^[L]_[SEP] the yearbook.
- Reporters should verify source information with someone else or some other resource.
- Reporters should avoid lurking on social media sites and should never use information gained from social media as their only resource. No information should be taken from a social media site without notification to the author of the site.

8. Commit to know the rights and responsibilities of student free speech in your state.

Are you and your staff aware of the laws regarding student press rights in your particular state? Currently, 14 states have legislation guaranteeing press freedom for student journalists. The “New Voices” movement is working to pass student press freedom legislation in other states.

From the SPLC website: New Voices is a nonpartisan student-driven grassroots effort to create state-based student free press protections and to prevent retaliation against advisers who stand up for student free press rights. It has led to student free press laws being passed in 14 states, with other administrative protections in place in Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. New Voices succeeds best with broad coalitions of supporters concerned with education, law, journalism, youth empowerment and civic engagement.

Ethical yearbook staffs know their student press protections in their state.

9. Commit to developing and following necessary ^[L]_[SEP] editorial policies.

An ethical yearbook staff will create policies to guide the production of the book which will help avoid misunderstanding and confusion with students and the school community.

Advertising. Decide what ads, if any, you will accept. Will you accept business ads or only senior tributes? Are there any businesses or organizations from which you will not accept ads? Are there any types of ads you will prohibit in your yearbook? Students have the right to set these policies for the book. They should be decided and included in your editorial policy before any questions or concerns arise.

Deaths. Decide what you will do if a student or staff member dies. We had a policy of placing a quarter page ad in the book in memory of any student or teacher who passed away. If the death occurred after the final deadline, we placed the ad in the next year's book.

Return of Yearbooks and Ads That Are Not Correct. Decide how you will handle parent complaints at the end of the year. Will you accept the return of a yearbook as long as it has not been written in? Will you refund money if an ad was not created as the client asked it to be created? Have these policies in writing and posted before school begins.

Senior Quotes. Will you allow quotes in the senior portrait section of the book? Every spring, more headaches and heartaches arise when inappropriate quotes are published. If you choose to include senior quotes, have a policy in place for how to screen them.



Make sure you capture your student body's full spectrum of diversity in the photos you take and use on your spreads. It is the ethical choice and helps increase your book sales. Photo by Jonathan Terry

An ethical yearbook staff will have policies in place that clearly inform the school community of your stance on these and other necessary issues.

10. Commit to staff collaboration and recognition.

Are you committed to creating a culture where all staff members are valued? Stress and drama may arise from working so long and hard together. Commit to working through it and treat each other with kindness and dignity. When the year is over, make every staff member (adviser included) feel valued and appreciated for their contribution to the creation of the book.

Use your colophon to recognize the contribution of every staff member and include bylines and photo credits on each spread. There's nothing like the feeling a student gets seeing

their name in print for the first time. When I first started advising, the standard was to include no photo, writing or design credits. We thought of each page as a collaborative group effort. That began to change in the 1990s, and the standard now is to provide individual credit for all student work.

An ethical yearbook staff will have a culture of collaboration and appreciation and will demonstrate the value of each member of the staff.

11. Commit to supporting and serving your school staff and community.

Are you supporting all aspects of your school community? Understand just how visible your staff is as they go about their work covering the year. Though you may have to cover things that are not always positive, you are the only record keeper for much of what happens throughout the year. Each staff member should take that responsibility to the school community seriously.

An ethical yearbook values and supports the school community in which they work as they cover the people and events of the school.

12. Commit to financial responsibility.

Staffs need to be aware of how many books must be sold and how much fundraising is needed to ensure the revenue raised matches or exceeds the yearbook cost. The goal is always a book that runs in the black and stays on budget. Your Walsworth rep can help with numbers.

Although most yearbook funds are collected electronically, if cash is collected, procedures should be in place so no one person is ever responsible for handling that money alone. Avoid creating tempting situations for your staff and leave no room for anyone to accuse you of financial misconduct.

Take time as a staff to discuss these issues and make these commitments. We, as scholastic journalists, can lead the way in always doing what is ethical and morally correct and what is best for our staff and our school community