

**National Scholastic Press Association
Model Code of Ethics**

Be responsible.

Be fair.

Be honest.

Be accurate.

Be independent.

Minimize harm.

Be accountable.

NSPA

nspa.studentpress.org

National Scholastic Press Association

Through education, training and recognition programs for members, the National Scholastic Press Association promotes the standards and ethics of good journalism as accepted and practiced by print, broadcast and electronic media in the United States.

Incorporated in Minnesota as a non-profit educational institution and based in Minneapolis, NSPA's high-school division and its ACP collegiate division educate and recognize student journalists, media advisers and educators across the United States and abroad. Their conventions are the nation's largest gatherings of student journalists, and their Pacemaker Awards are recognized as the Pulitzer Prizes of student journalism.

NSPA celebrates its centennial in 2021.

Introduction

Scholastic journalism best serves both students and the school community when student journalists produce free and responsible content.

Both rights and responsibilities must be balanced, and ethical prudence advances the best interests of young citizens and the school mission.

The focus of student journalists must always be aimed beyond their self-interests toward doing what is best for society. Their motivation should be driven by service rather than ego.

Another challenge for beginning journalists involves their scope of awareness. As they gain news-media experience, their competence improves, their vision broadens, and they develop a more panoramic understanding of their craft — including the ethics of journalism. As their insight expands, students become more adept at avoiding errors, misjudgments and other deficiencies caused by inexperience and an undeveloped ethical compass.

Developing a sense of ethics is essential for student journalists, who learn to distinguish right from wrong and good from bad in their work. The power of news media can be used in good or bad ways, and young journalists must be nurtured to develop the self-discipline to choose what's right and good — even when the right choice may cost something in the short run.

The term *ethics* comes from the Greek word *ethos*, which means *character*. An ethical person is a person of good character who strives to make right choices. Those right choices are self-determined by each individual. Ultimately, ethics is voluntary conduct that is self-enforced.

Although ethics is related to law, it differs from law in that law is socially determined and socially enforced. Law tells us what we can do; ethics, what we should do. What is legal may not be what is ethical. Having the right to say something doesn't make it right to say it.

Ethical choices often are not easy. Dilemmas occur when two right moral obligations conflict. For example, suppose a yearbook staff member lies to the editor about needing an extension on an important deadline. The editor comes to you, the staff member's friend, seeking confirmation of the excuse that was given. Two moral virtues collide — loyalty to a friend and commitment to truth. It is time to weigh your values.

News-media policy manuals may provide consequences for staff members who flagrantly violate the standards of ethical conduct, but a note of caution is in order. People of good intentions can disagree about ethical standards — what constitutes fair and balanced coverage, accuracy, invasion of privacy, truth and other components of an ethical code. Those who measure news media integrity must be careful not to impose their interpretation of an ethical principle as the one and only right interpretation.

In schools that practice democratic education, students have choices. Some choices may lack ethical integrity, betray the spirit of the First Amendment and fall at the very far edge of a protected freedom.

In such a case, the temptation to narrow that freedom may be great. But the temptation must be resisted.

A line will always exist between behavior protected by law and behavior that is not. If we reduce the distance to that line each time free speech is challenged, our freedoms will perpetually erode.

The challenge for educators is to inspire students to be intrinsically motivated to abide by the highest standards of ethical conduct. That goal is best accomplished when school authorities focus more on mentoring than on clout, more on collaboration than on autocratic decision-making.

The National Scholastic Press Association Model Code of Ethics for High School Journalists was created to help guide students in the direction of responsible journalism. This model code may be adopted without change or modified to meet the particular needs of a news staff.

A code of ethics should be a primary reference source for student journalists. It should be part of the curriculum and readily available not only to media staffs but also to those served by news media and those who oversee production.

Reputable conduct by student

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journalists helps secure the public trust and news media credibility. A code of ethics serves as the foundation for free and responsible student media.

NSPA Model Code of Ethics for High School Journalists

By Randy G. Swikle

1. Be responsible.

1.1 Understand that student journalists are custodians, not owners, of their news medium.

Student journalists have an inherent obligation in decision-making to consider the heritage of their news medium, the values of the school community, the tenets of the school's mission, the pedagogic concerns of school officials, and the wants and best interests of readers/listeners/viewers.

1.2 Keep yourself, the reporter, out of your content, regardless of platform.

It's not about you. It's about the readers/listeners/viewers you serve.

For the most part, student reporters and editors should not appear in the media they represent unless they are legitimate newsmakers. In those cases, the particular student journalists should have no influence on the coverage, and any conflict of interest should be disclosed.

1.3 Strive for substantive stories that produce insight, generate accountability and inspire reader interest and engagement. Do not yield to those who would suppress such insight or resist accountability.

1.4 Remember that the protections of the First Amendment were created to serve not the press but rather the people, and as a journalist, guard the people's interests above all others.

1.5 Know the legal rights of student journalists and balance those rights with ethical responsibilities. Just because you have the right to publish doesn't mean that you should.

Don't worry about being first. Worry about being right. Person first, journalist second.

1.6 Relentlessly defend the First Amendment rights of students. Relentlessly protect media advisers from recriminations brought about by their advocacy of student rights.

1.7 Demonstrate credibility and exemplify trustworthiness, reliability, dependability and integrity in and beyond journalism work. Your personal attributes affect the integrity of the news medium you work for.

1.8 In covering stories about wrongdoing and pranks, consider what readers need to know, but also consider how coverage might perpetuate or expand the misdeeds.

1.9 Do not allow vulgar or profane language and/or an image to overshadow the essence of a story, a commentary or a post. If used, it should have a compelling purpose and rationale to justify the audience's need to read/hear vulgar or profane words.

1.10 Maintain a commendable work ethic — pursuing excellence, taking initiative, keeping to task, meeting deadlines and taking care of the workplace and equipment. Inspire fellow staff members to do the same.

1.11 Cultivate respect for your adviser, fellow staffers, school officials and others. Build a bridge of communication with your administration. Create partners and never be combative. Be professional.

Nurture an effective working relationship within the staff. Keep emotions in check. Support team effort in gathering and reporting news. Be loyal in protecting the best interests of your news medium.

1.12 Exemplify effective leadership through the power of performance rather than the power of position. Express genuine interest in every staff member. Be sensitive to other points of view. Inspire teamwork and intrinsic motivation. Prioritize mentoring over clout.

1.13 Harassment, including sexual harassment and bullying, is prohibited.

Sexual harassment encompasses a range of behaviors, and bullying can take a range of forms. Learn about them, and discuss them with your staff.

Be watchful and respectful of everyone on staff, regardless of background, experience or skill level.

2. Be fair.

2.1 Begin the search for truth with a neutral mind. Do not prejudge issues or events. Wait until the facts and perspectives have been gathered and weighed.

Discover truth without letting personal biases get in the way. Teach people to live by truth by presenting information objectively in a context that reveals relevance and significance.

2.2 Write about issues, not personalities. Explore issues and controversies dispassionately and impartially. Don't go into a story with a personal agenda.

2.3 Justify coverage decisions by showing newsworthiness of story. Do not use your journalistic position to inflate your ego, favor friends or advance other personal agendas that are self-serving.

If you profile an athlete of the week,

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for example, be ready to show the criteria and objective process for selection. If you are a yearbook staffer, avoid a conflict of interest by working on spreads where you are not tempted to publish photos of yourself or of your friends.

2.4 Pursue a panoramic vision of issues and events to achieve balance and fairness. You may not know what the story really is about until the story unfolds as you research it and talk with sources.

2.5 Allow readers the opportunity to respond, engage and complain. Listen to the feedback.

Welcome diverse perspectives and particularly rebuttals to editorial positions. Appreciate all opinions, including those not in the majority.

2.6 When readers share feedback — be it through a letter to the editor or an online comment — refrain from getting in the last word. Allow opinions to be shared. However, when the reader feedback includes inaccuracies, consider a response that is both objective and impartial.

Be watchful of all online comments that may be generated, particularly those on controversial topics. In those cases, reasonable opinions should be welcomed, but attacks or threats against sources or staff members of the publication should be removed. In those cases, consider disabling the online commenting for that coverage.

2.7 Take initiative to give subjects of allegations an opportunity to respond in a timely manner. Make a serious effort to contact those subjects before going with a story in order to allow a response.

2.8 Label and clearly identify all commentary — editorials, opinion columns and personal or institutional perspectives — across platforms, including social media.

2.9 Disclose any potential conflict of interest by a journalist or news medium. For example, conflicts of interests could involve personal relationships with news subjects or sources, associations with organizations, gifts and perks, and vested interests in issues or events.

2.10 Appreciate the fact that at any given time a reporter sees only a part of what can be seen. Don't jump to conclusions.

3. Be honest.

3.1 Do not plagiarize.

Plagiarism is defined as the word-for-word duplication of another person's writing or close summarization of the work of another source without giving the source credit.

A comparable prohibition applies to the use of visuals, illustrations and graphics.

Information obtained from a published work must be independently verified before

it can be reported as a new, original story. This policy also forbids lifting verbatim paragraphs from a wire service or news report without attribution or pointing out that wire stories were used in compiling the story.

Material from online sources should be treated in the same way as if it were published in more traditional broadcast media.

Because plagiarism can significantly undermine the public trust of journalists and journalism, editors should be prepared to consider severe penalties for documented cases of plagiarism, including suspension or dismissal from the staff. Plagiarism is not only unethical, it is illegal if the material is copyright protected.

3.2 Do not fabricate any aspect of journalistic work without full disclosure.

The use of composite characters or imaginary situations or characters should not be allowed in news or feature stories. Don't use your lead to paint a vague scenario. Use reporting to fuel the writing.

A columnist may, occasionally, use such an approach in developing a piece, but it must be clear to the reader that the person or situation is fictional and that the column is commentary and not reporting.

The growth of narrative story development — the use of story-telling devices once reserved for fiction now applied to journalistic writing — works only when the storytelling is based on reporting facts. Do not mix fact and fiction. Do not embellish facts with fictional details, regardless of their significance.

3.3 Identify yourself as a reporter and do not misrepresent yourself while engaged in news media tasks.

A source deserves to know if and when a casual conversation is actually an interview. Do not misrepresent yourself by pretending to conduct an official survey for the school when in fact you are conducting it for the student news organization.

3.4 Do not tolerate dishonesty of any staff member. One dishonest act of an individual can profoundly damage the reputation of a whole news organization.

Be completely honest in reporting. Remember, half-truths can be just as egregious as outright lies.

3.5 Use anonymous sources only if there is a compelling, legal reason, and only if the information given can be verified through another, known source. When you do, stand by any promise of protecting the identity of confidential sources.

Consider a source's perspective before promising anonymity. Verify information given by an anonymous source. Be cautious in making promises. Consult editors. Take time to consider ramifications of promises. Don't be pressured.

The authority to grant confidentiality rests with the editor-in-chief, so reporters and their editors should consult with the top editor as you weigh the decision to offer confidentiality to a source. When using anonymity, the source must understand the seriousness of keeping anonymous and not compromising the story.

An anonymous source should never be revealed to the adviser, who has legal obligations to report certain student issues to administrators.

3.6 Be guarded about the credibility of sources, and confirm questionable assertions.

Do not be misled by insincere or unreliable sources. Try not to make readers guess whether a source is sincere. For example, an untruthful or embellished Q&A response can taint belief in the sincerity of other contributors.

3.7 Be cautious of using satire. Because it involves irony and sarcasm, it is often misunderstood. Because it usually involves ridicule, it could be carried to an inappropriate level in a school setting.

Because special April Fool's Day editions can damage a paper's integrity and credibility, and because they can pose a libel risk, they are strongly discouraged.

3.8 Do not electronically alter the content of news and feature photos in any way that affects the truthfulness of the subject and context of the subject or scene. If anything is altered, it must be labeled as an illustration.

Technical enhancements, such as contrast and exposure adjustments, are allowed so long as they do not create a false impression. Photo content may be altered for creative purposes as a special effect for a feature story — if the caption or credit line includes that fact and if an average reader would not mistake the photo for reality.

Strive to record original action in photos, and make sure readers are aware if a photo is staged or posed.

3.9 If using a recording device, get the interviewee's permission or make it obvious with the placement of the device that you intend to record. Know state laws regarding the legality of secretly recording private conversations.

3.10 Do not be cavalier about truth. Truth builds trust — an essential component of free and responsible media.

3.11 Know that journalistic truth must be accurate, should promote understanding and should be fair and balanced.

4. Be accurate.

4.1 Remember that accuracy is often more than just a question of getting the

facts right. Accuracy also requires putting the facts together in a context that is relevant and reveals the truth.

4.2 Be a first-hand witness whenever you can. Gather raw facts. News releases, press conferences, official statements and the like are no substitute for first-hand accounts and original investigation.

4.3 Review the story to ensure that information is presented completely and in a proper context that will not mislead the news consumer.

4.4 Know your source's history to help assess the credibility as a source. If the subject has a reputation for embellishing information, make sure to verify information with another source.

4.5 Be willing to read back quotes to check for accuracy. Sometimes a source may not be saying what the source intended in meaning.

However, do not offer the source the opportunity to prior review content. That invites the source to coerce content. Report such attempts to influence to the editor and adviser. If content is technical in nature, the editor may give the reporter permission to allow a source to review the technical components to ensure accuracy.

4.6 Record accurate minutes of student-media staff meetings that involve policy decisions and other actions that will have a lasting effect.

4.7 Verify questionnaires answered by sources. Make sure no one posed as another person. Check comments for sincerity and accuracy.

4.8 Tell not only what you know but also what you do not know. Invite a source or news consumer to fill you in on something the source knows but you don't.

4.9 Engage in fact-checking every story. Train copy editors to spot red flags and to verify questionable information.

4.10 Be cautious about information received via online sources. Not all sources are consistently credible. Verify questionable information by consulting other sources.

5. Be independent.

5.1 Recognize inherent differences between the commercial news media and the scholastic news media, and understand that the latter will always be subject to some oversight by school administrators.

Demonstrate to administrators how it is in their best interests and the school community's best interests to recognize student independence, within the parameters of law, in controlling the content of their student-produced news medium.

5.2 Work to have your student news

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medium recognized as a public forum, which will provide greater independence in controlling editorial content.

5.3 Resist prior review as a practice of administrative oversight in favor of less intrusive and more effective oversight strategies. Prior review dilutes student responsibility and puts more responsibility in the hands of administrators.

Pose this question: Should the journalism experience teach responsibility or obedience?

5.4 Hold no obligation to news sources and newsmakers. Journalists and their news media should avoid even the appearance of conflict of interest.

5.5 Accept no gifts, favors or items of value that could compromise journalistic independence, journalistic ethics or objectivity in the reporting task at hand. For example, a reporter covering a student group's food event should not partake in that portion of the event.

5.6 Declare any personal or unavoidable conflict of interest, perceived or certain, in covering stories or participating in editorial or policy decisions.

5.7 Learn state legislation regarding student-press freedom, freedom of information, open meetings and shield laws.

If your state has student press legislation, learn it, share it and promote it. If it doesn't, become part of **the New Voices campaign** to get it.

News media serve an essential function as a watchdog of government, and student journalists should not be asked to engage in any activity that is the responsibility of outside agencies, such as law enforcement, school administration and government.

Cooperation or involvement in working with these agencies should be restricted to what is required by law. Legal agencies, such as **the Student Press Law Center**, may be contacted for advice.

5.8 Avoid working for competing news media or for people, groups or organizations that the journalist covers.

5.9 Show courage and perseverance in holding school officials and other decision-makers accountable when student control of student news media is threatened. Remember, students who produce non-public forum news media still have some rights regarding content decisions.

5.10 Give no favored news treatment to advertisers or special interest groups.

5.11 Guard against participating in any school organizations or activities that would significantly create a conflict of interest.

In other words, your participation in a group will affect your perspective as a reporter, through personal perspective and/

or pressure from within the group or its coach or sponsor. Student journalists who participate in athletics and organizations should refrain from covering those groups.

Transparency is the key. Educate your staff on conflicts of interest, both apparent and perceived. All staff members should share and discuss them, and then plan any coverage accordingly.

5.12 Clearly identify all commentary, and clarify how that commentary originated. Identify and explain the source of staff editorials. Identify editorial columnists as such, and clarify on the editorial pages that columnists represent individual viewpoints, not the opinions of the editor, the staff, the adviser or the administration.

6. Minimize harm.

6.1 Look beyond the likely effects of each story, keeping alert to identify and respond to any unintended or undesirable consequences the story may hold in the shadows.

Identify options for dealing with undesirable consequences. Determine if full disclosure of information may jeopardize student welfare unnecessarily. If so, decide what can be held back without jeopardizing the public's right to know.

6.2 Report immediately to school authorities any person who threatens the safety — personal safety and/or the safety of others.

6.3 Do not put student reporters in physical danger or legal jeopardy through undercover stories. They may be unethical and may pose significant risks. Student journalists must obey the law.

For example, a student journalist, who as a minor purchases liquor illegally to show readers/listeners which stores violate the law, also self-incriminates.

Covering gang issues and other volatile topics requires close faculty supervision and safeguards to protect student welfare.

6.4 Be especially sensitive to the maturity and vulnerability of young people when gathering and reporting information. Take particular care to protect young sources from their own poor judgment when their comments can put themselves and others in jeopardy.

6.5 Do not allow sources to use a news medium in malicious ways or ways that serve self-interest above the best interests of news consumers. Be on constant guard to spot clandestine efforts to publish inappropriate messages.

6.6 Show respect and compassion for students who may be affected detrimentally by news coverage.

6.7 Be sensitive when covering stories

involving people in distress, and reject unreasonable intrusion by student media in their lives.

6.8 In preparing coverage of suicide, be especially respectful of the victim, the survivors and the community. In all forms of coverage, inform your readership or audience without sensationalizing the suicide or the manner of death. Use a reputable resource on suicide prevention to provide sidebar information on warning signs, what to do and whom to call.

Consider follow-up reporting on suicide as a public-health issue, with advice from suicide-prevention experts.

6.9 Balance the public's right to be informed with an individual's right to be let alone. Understand and respect the different privacy expectations for private citizens, for public figures and for public officials when covering issues and events.

6.10 Be cautious about identifying students accused of criminal acts or disciplinary infractions. Avoid naming minors, and check your local jurisdiction for the legal definition of a minor.

If a student is legally an adult, be ready to show a compelling reason for identifying the name. Relevancy and news value can constitute a compelling reason.

For example, if an 18-year-old student were suspended from school for drinking at a school dance, the name likely would not be used in a news story. However, if the student is the homecoming king, the news element of prominence may justify using the name.

The names of some crime victims, especially victims of sex crimes, should be protected from disclosure when prudent. Do not implicate by association. Avoid indirect or vague generalizations that could lead to identification.

7. Be accountable.

7.1 Admit mistakes and publicize prompt corrections.

An inaccuracy is not uncommon in news coverage. But an inaccuracy should never be published knowingly, and both corrections and clarifications should be acknowledged and published swiftly.

If any error is found, correct it as soon as possible, regardless of the error's source. Clarifications, though differing from corrections, should be acknowledged, explained and published in similar fashion.

In both print and digital, run corrections and clarifications in a standard location, such as an early inside page in print and a designated space on the site. Edit the digital material at its original location, with an introductory editor's note and date of the change.

A magazine or yearbook should

publish corrections similarly on their sites. They may consider publishing corrections as well through their partner news organization, such as a newspaper, which is published more frequently.

7.2 Expose unethical practices of student journalists and student news media, and make remedies.

7.3 Use press passes for admission or special privileges only in the capacity of a working journalist.

7.4 Provide news consumers with opportunities to evaluate student news media through feedback.

7.5 Be friendly and sincere in welcoming criticism and weighing grievances from news consumers.

7.6 Have dialogue with student media overseers, and be prepared to justify decisions, policies and actions.

7.7 Keep notes and recordings of interviews for an indefinite time as evidence of responsible reporting.

7.8 Hold school administrators and other student-media overseers accountable for their actions and decisions, just as they hold student journalists and student media accountable for their actions and decisions.

7.9 Use anonymous sources rarely, if at all. When sources are not given, people question the credibility not only of the source but also of the news medium.

7.10 Use the power of student media judiciously, and be prepared to provide rationale for any decisions or actions taken by news staffs.

About the author

Randy G. Swikle was adviser at Johnsburg High School (Illinois) for more than 30 years.

He was the 1999 Dow Jones Newspaper Fund National High School Journalism Teacher of the Year and winner of both the NSPA Pioneer Award and Journalism Education Association Lifetime Achievement Award.

Swikle was a frequent author and workshop presenter on scholastic press rights and ethics.

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Logan Aimone, former NSPA executive director, is now journalism adviser and teacher at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools.

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Dow Tate, journalism adviser, Shawnee Mission East High School, Overland Park, Kansas.

Mitch Eden, journalism adviser, Kirkwood High School, St. Louis, and NSPA Board of Directors.

Ron Johnson, communications director, NSPA/ACP, and former adviser at Indiana, Kansas State and Fort Hays State (Kan.) universities.

Suggestions for further reading

Journalism Education Association Adviser Code of Ethics

“Media Ethics Today,” 2015,
Jane Kirtley and **Chris Ison**, former board members of NSPA/ACP.

“Media Ethics: Issues & Cases,” 2013,
Philip Patterson and **Lee Wilkins**.

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