

TIMELY TIPS

Photography

Photo Ethics in Practice

OBJECTIVE

Students will understand overarching photojournalism ethics guidelines from major scholastic press associations and apply them to real editing scenarios before drafting a written staff policy on ethical photojournalism and AI use.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- List of photo editing/AI scenarios (provided by adviser or projected)
- Whiteboard or butcher paper
- Sticky notes (3-5 per student)
- Writing utensils
- Laptops/tablets with access to a shared document for drafting the final policy

PART 1

INTRODUCTION (10 MINUTES)

Begin by asking students:

- What is the difference between editing a photo and manipulating a photo?
- If no one notices an edit, does it still matter?
- Would you trust a news source that altered images?

Explain that **organizations like JEA, NSPA and CSPA set ethical standards for student journalists** – and photo contests enforce those standards strictly.

Present these overarching principles shared across JEA, NSPA and CSPA:

- 1. Journalism photos must tell the truth.**
- 2. Do not add, remove, move or fabricate elements in a journalistic photo.**
- 3. Cropping is allowed, but it must not distort context or meaning.**
- 4. Technical corrections (exposure, white balance, minor color correction, sharpening) are acceptable if they reflect what the eye saw.**
- 5. AI tools cannot be used to generate, replace or alter visual content in journalistic images.**

PART 2

ETHICS SCENARIO WORKSHOP (25 MINUTES)

Divide students into small groups. Explain that each group will evaluate editing scenarios using the scholastic press guidelines just discussed.

Read out or project scenarios such as:

- Cropping out a losing player's emotional reaction
- Removing a distracting water bottle from the sideline
- Increasing saturation dramatically on a snow photo
- AI sharpening a slightly blurry wrestling image
- Removing a referee from a football photo
- Combining two photos to create a better action moment
- Using generative fill to extend a gym background
- Adjusting white balance in a hockey arena

For each scenario, groups must discuss and decide:

1. Does this follow scholastic press guidelines?
2. Does it alter content or change context?
3. Would this be acceptable in a yearbook?
4. Would this pass a contest judge's review?
5. Why or why not?

PART 2

CONTINUED

After 15-20 minutes, bring the class back together and discuss the most debated scenarios. Ask:

- Which edits felt like gray areas?
- Why do small changes sometimes create big ethical problems?
- Why might contest rules be stricter than classroom standards?

PART 3

STAFF PHOTOJOURNALISM POLICY CREATION (20 MINUTES)

Transition by saying:

“Now that we understand national standards, it’s time to define how our staff will uphold them.”

Brainstorming (5 minutes)

- Have each student write 3-5 statements on sticky notes answering:
 - What edits should always be allowed?
 - What edits should never be allowed?
 - How should our staff handle AI tools?
- Post sticky notes on the board and group similar ideas together.

Small Group Drafting (10 minutes)

- Divide students into small groups and assign each group one focus area:
 1. Allowed Editing Practices
 2. Prohibited Editing Practices
 3. AI & Emerging Technology
 4. Why Ethics Matter to Our Staff
- Each group drafts 3-5 clear policy statements based on the brainstormed ideas. Statements should be direct and specific, for example:
 - We will not add, remove or alter content in journalistic photos.
 - We will use only technical corrections that reflect reality.
 - AI may only be used for minor technical adjustments and never to change content.
 - We value credibility over aesthetics.
- Have groups record their draft statements on the board or in a shared document.

Present (5 minutes)

- Each group presents its draft statements.
- As a class, refine wording and combine statements into one unified Staff Photojournalism Ethics Policy.

PART 4

WRAP-UP (5 MINUTES)

Bring the class together and reflect: Why is it important that we created this policy ourselves? How will this protect our credibility as journalists?

Next steps:

- Staff editors refine the draft into a polished document.
- Add the finalized policy to the staff handbook.
- Post a printed copy near editing stations.
- Have all staff members sign it as a commitment to ethical journalism.