



National
Scholastic
Press
Association

Model Code of Ethics

FOR HIGH SCHOOL JOURNALISTS

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INTRODUCTION

Scholastic journalism best serves learners and the school community when students produce free and responsible news media by balancing rights and responsibilities, applying ethical prudence and advancing 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 gratification.

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, misjudgment 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 why she needs 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 NSPA 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 journalists helps secure the public trust and news media credibility. A code of ethics serves as the foundation for free and responsible student media.

SEVEN KEY ETHICS POINTS

1 BE RESPONSIBLE.

2 BE FAIR.

3 BE HONEST.

4 BE ACCURATE.

5 BE INDEPENDENT.

6 MINIMIZE HARM.

7 BE ACCOUNTABLE.

NSPA CODE OF ETHICS FOR HIGH SCHOOL JOURNALISTS

1 BE RESPONSIBLE.

- (1.1) Understand that student journalists are custodians, not owners, of their news medium, and they 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 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 print. 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 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. Having the

right to say something doesn't make it right to say it.

- (1.6) Defend relentlessly the First Amendment rights of students. Protect relentlessly 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) Be careful in covering stories about wrongdoing not to perpetuate misdeeds. Printing a photograph of malicious graffiti expands the vandal's canvas.
- (1.9) Do not allow vulgar or profane language to overshadow the essence of a story. If used, have compelling purpose and rationale to justify the audience's need to read/hear vulgar or profane words. Consider alternatives to using profanity. For example, words may be partially obscured or bleeped. Do not use profanity in opinion articles, such as editorials, columns and letters to the editor.
- (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. 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) Know when to show restraint in pursuing stories. For example, a spontaneous demonstration in the cafeteria by three students protesting the in-school suspension of a friend may receive notoriety, but its news value likely is insignificant. Furthermore, coverage of the incident may bolster the participants and embolden others to disrupt the cafeteria too.
- (1.13) 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.
- ## 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) Explore controversial issues 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 position with the paper to inflate your ego, favor friends, or advance other personal agendas that are self-serving. If you profile an "athlete of the week," 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
- (2.4) Pursue a panoramic vision of issues and events to achieve balance and fairness. You may not know what the story really is until the story unfolds as you research it and talk with sources.
- (2.5) Welcome diverse perspectives and particularly rebuttals to editorial positions.
- (2.6) Refrain from "getting in the last word" by attaching an editor's note to a letter to the editor. In rare circumstances, a clarification note may be justified.
- (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 or otherwise clearly identify editorials, opinion columns and personal or institutional perspectives.
- (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 graphics. Information obtained from a published work must be independently

choose photos of yourself or of your friends for publication.

verified before it can be reported as a new, original story. This policy also forbids lifting verbatim paragraphs from a wire service without attribution or pointing out that wire stories were used in compiling the story. Material that is published on the Internet 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 journalism work without full disclosure. The use of composite characters or imaginary situations or characters will not be allowed in news or feature stories. 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 (storytelling devices) means that reporters and editors should be especially careful to not mix fact and fiction, and not embellish fact 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. For example, a source deserves to know if he is engaged in casual conversation with a student or more guarded conversation with a reporter. For another example, don't misrepresent yourself by pretending to conduct an official survey for the school when in fact you are conducting it for the student newspaper.

(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) Stand by promises, including protecting the identity of confidential sources. Consider sources' motives 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.

(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 reader guess whether a source is sincere. For example, an untruthful or embellished Q&A response can taint belief in the sincerity of other contributors as well.

(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. 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 set up or posed.

(3.9) If using a recording device, get 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 conversation.

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

(3.11) Know "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 story to make sure information is presented completely and in proper context that will not mislead the news consumer.

(4.4) Know your subject's history to help measure his 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 he really means.

(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 he knows but you don't.

(4.9) Engage in fact-checking every story. Train copyreaders to spot red flags and to verify questionable information.

(4.10) Be cautious about information received via the Internet. Not all sources are consistently credible, including sites such as Wikipedia, YouTube, blogs, and Facebook. Verify questionable information by consulting other sources.

5 BE INDEPENDENT.

(5.1) Recognize inherent differences between the professional news media and the student news media, and understand that the latter will always be subject to some oversight by school administrators. Show 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 news medium.

(5.2) Work to have your student news 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. Should the journalism experience teach responsibility or obedience?

- (5.4) Hold no obligation to news sources and newsmakers. Journalists and news media should avoid even the appearance of conflict of interest.
- (5.5) Accept no gifts, favors or things of value that could compromise journalistic independence, journalistic ethics or objectivity in the reporting task at hand. For example, a reporter covering a Spanish Club buffet event should not put his or her note pad and camera down to partake in 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 laws regarding freedom of information, open meetings and shield laws. 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 the work of these agencies should be restricted to what is required by law. Legal agencies, such as the Student Press Law Center in Virginia, 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. Journalists particularly should avoid holding office in student government, or they should be prepared to recuse themselves in either journalism or government forums when decision-making could pose a conflict of interest.

- (5.12) Do not use a byline for editorials that represent the opinions of the news medium.

6 MINIMIZE HARM.

- (6.1) Look beyond the likely impacts 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 of himself or others.
- (6.3) Choose an option less offensive than self-censorship when it is prudent to do so. For example, the son of a secretary accused of embezzling from the student activity fund may be in distress when learning the student paper will cover the story. Tapping the school counselor rather than engaging in self-censorship is a better remedy to help the son deal with his fear of humiliation.
- (6.4) Do not put student reporters in legal jeopardy or physical danger. Undercover stories may be unethical and may pose significant risks. Student journalists must obey the law. For example, a minor student who illegally purchases liquor to show readers/listeners which stores violate the law also incriminates himself. Covering gang issues and other volatile top-

ics require close faculty supervision and safeguards to protect student welfare.

- (6.5) 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.

- (6.6) 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 publish inappropriate messages.

- (6.7) Show respect and compassion for students who may be affected detrimentally by news coverage.

- (6.8) Be sensitive when covering stories involving people in distress, and reject unreasonable intrusion by student media in their lives.

- (6.9) Balance the public's right to be informed with an individual's right to be let alone.

- (6.10) Understand and respect the different privacy expectations for private citizens, public figures and public officials when covering issues and events.

- (6.11) Be cautious about identifying students accused of criminal acts or disciplinary infractions. Avoid naming minors. (Check local jurisdiction for 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 attending the homecoming dance drunk, 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. For example, do not say "a school secretary was arrested and charged with" The reader could suspect any school secretary.

7 BE ACCOUNTABLE.

- (7.1) Admit mistakes and publicize prompt corrections.
- (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 media consumers with opportunities to evaluate student news media.
- (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 the power of student media judiciously, and be prepared to provide rationale for any decisions or actions taken by news staffs.
- (7.10) Use anonymous sources only if there is a compelling reason and only if the information given can be verified through another, known source. When sources are not given, people may question the credibility not only of the source but also of the news medium.

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Randy G. Swikle was the 1999 Dow Jones Newspaper Fund National High School Journalism Teacher of the Year, and has received the NSPA Pioneer Award and JEA Lifetime Achievement Award. He taught and advised publications in Johnsburg, Ill., for 34 years. Johnsburg High School received national First Amendment recognition four times. Swikle is a frequent author and workshop presenter on scholastic press rights issues and ethics.

The NSPA Model Code of Ethics for High School Journalists was edited by Logan Aimone, NSPA executive director.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR
FURTHER READING**

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