The Reporter's Handbook

A manual of practices and procedures
for use in reporting and editing classes
at the University of Arizona School of Journalism

"If writing must be a precise form of communication,
it should be treated like a precision instrument. It should be
sharpened, and it should not be used carelessly."

-- Theodore M. Bernstein
Page One editor, The New York Times

Updated Spring 2017

"The best newsrooms are places where people live in fear of being wrong. Good journalists can't stand errors."

— Caesar Andrews, editor,
Gannett News Service, 2003

"Sticklers unite!"

— Lynne Truss, author,
"Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation"

Welcome to journalism: eyewitness to history

Newswriting is a unique form of communication. Journalistic practices have evolved over the past two centuries to meet the needs of our fast-paced, news-hungry society.

Journalism is sometimes called the first draft of history. It is designed to convey accurate, complete and unbiased information about an issue or event. Because governments and societies base many of their decisions on information collected, curated, presented and analyzed by the news media, properly trained journalists are a paramount in a healthy democracy.

Beginning students often are bewildered by a seemingly endless list of rules that govern journalistic writing. Although some may appear arbitrary, most have been driven by the need to produce detailed, accurate information under deadlines more exacting than those for nearly any other occupation.

Most editors – and indeed most of the public – believe that sloppy writing means sloppy thinking. Students will find it essential to learn and apply the rules found in this booklet and in The Associated Press Stylebook. These rules will apply to every reporting, editing, broadcast and multimedia class in the School of Journalism.

What follows is based on the standards and practices of the School of Journalism, with style and usage drawn from The Associated Press. This is intended to highlight areas that are most frequently troublesome for students. For fuller details, see The Associated Press Stylebook, your textbook or instructor.

Faculty expectations of students________________

We provide journalism students with the theoretical and practical instruction they need to work successfully in news organizations. Our expectations include:

Professionalism

Your responsibility starts with behaving in a professional manner at all times. Good conduct in the classroom includes participating in discussions, treating other students with respect, and following the rules established by the school and your instructor.

Your behavior is especially important outside of class. While you are interviewing news sources for assignments, you are perceived as representing the School of Journalism and the university. This means arriving for interviews a little early, dressing appropriately, doing your background research in advance, listening well, and being polite even if you need to engage in adversarial questioning.

It also means meeting deadlines set by the instructor. Many instructors refuse to accept late papers, so you would earn an auto E for missing deadline. Some instructors will accept late copy, but will reduce your grade by some percentage that they determine. Make sure to read the grading standards that your syllabus contains.

Accuracy

Accuracy is paramount. Question everything. Assume nothing. To reinforce the professional nature of our classes, instructors, like all editors, are demanding perfectionists. They accept no excuses for inaccuracy, incompleteness or missed deadlines. They expect every proper name and every fact to be correct.

Some instructors take off points or drop your grade by one or two letters for any paper with a large factual, grammatical or spelling error. Some may fail the whole paper. The School of Journalism is famous for Auto E's, as they are known. This may seem harsh, but in a newsroom, a reporter who consistently violates these rules winds up unemployed.

Be especially wary of the accuracy of information found on websites. Much of what appears on social media sites is not fact but opinion and even lies. Images that look authentic may turn out to be photo composites or illustrations. Stories without attribution and sourcing may turn out to be false information masquerading as news. Information that you take from the web, including Wikipedia, must be substantiated by more traditional sources. See the AP entry under "Internet" for useful warnings, as well as the section at the end of this document.

Identifying yourself to news sources

Tell the source that you are a reporter working on an assignment for a class. Students working for the School of Journalism media class, Arizona Sonora News, should advise sources that the story could be published in Arizona news outlets, including the Daily Star or the Arizona Republic, among others.

However, do not claim to be a reporter for one of the campus news organizations or a professional news outlet. Explain what kind of information you need and how you plan to use it. Make sure you ask for your source's full name, occupation and title, and a phone number or e-mail address. You may need to contact the person again, and you may need to provide the contact information for the instructor.

Acceptable news sources

The school wants students to get experience in interviewing people they don't know. For that reason, and because of the inherent conflict of interest, instructors generally require that students not interview family members, friends, classmates, roommates, sorority sisters, bosses or fellow employees. There may be rare exceptions, but these must be discussed with and approved by your instructor *before* the interview occurs.

In-person interviews preferred

Students should conduct face-to-face interviews for all reporting assignments. Use of the phone, Facetime or Skype interviews is strictly a back-up. Professors must approve the use of email interviews in advance, and some do not permit them at all.

Turning in your assignments

Make sure that you understand how your instructor wants you to turn in your assignments. Some professors also ask you to bring a printout to class and to file into the D2L course site, where TurnItIn software is capable of identifying any potential instances of plagiarism. Other professors permit you to turn in assignments by e-mail, and some may prefer this. Use only your official university account to send them. If an assignment should go astray, the university system is capable of tracing the message. In some classes, you will create a website for multimedia portfolios, and some production classes use Google Docs so students can share editing tasks.

Recycling assignments

There is no double-dipping in the School of Journalism. You cannot use an assignment prepared for one class and submit it into another class without prior permission of both instructors. This is a violation of the academic integrity policy and could result in disciplinary action up to and including expulsion, depending on the circumstances. This prohibition also covers any work performed for the Wildcat, an internship or any other employment or extracurricular activity. If in doubt, ask.

Attendance

Attendance in journalism classes is mandatory. Unexcused absences will have a major impact on your grade, because in most cases, you will not be permitted to make up missed assignments. In most classes two or three unexcused absences could result in an administrative drop if it occurs before the drop-add deadline or an E in the class if it occurs after it.

Excused absences are granted only for valid, documented reasons (such as serious illness, jury duty, religious observance or military reserve obligation), and only if the reason makes your presence at the scheduled class time impossible. Arrangements for any make ups must be made in advance.

Note that Wildcat assignments, such as covering out-of-town Board of Regents meetings or basketball away games, are not valid reasons for missing class. These will count as one of your unexcused absences.

Any student who is not in class within 10 minutes after the start of class on the first day it meets will be dropped to make room for a student on the waiting list.

Editorializing

Coloring or slanting news stories with the reporter's own point of view is called editorializing. Even when writers have opinions or experience related to an issue, they should keep them out of the story. Print journalism rarely allows first-hand accounts of a story, using such pronouns as I, me, us, ours:

The protesters, in my opinion, were out of line.

Or: *When I interviewed the mayor, she said the protesters were out of line.*

Instead, news is written in the third person using they, their, them:

Protesters demonstrated their opposition to the city's new policy by picketing outside the mayor's office.

Opinion is permissible on newspaper or magazine editorial pages and in personal opinion columns. Even in columns that are very one-sided, most editors are careful to see that opinions do not distort the basic facts.

Because much of television news is broadcast from the scene of an event, first-person reporting is common. Even so, field reporters still should describe only what they see, and usually not how they feel about it.

The growth of social media and sponsored news sites that present only one viewpoint have blurred the line between what has been thought of as legitimate news and highly opinionated "citizen journalism" sites. Responsible journalists, however, subscribe to the same quality standards no matter what the platform.

Reporters sometimes editorialize unintentionally through their well-meaning but misguided choice of adjectives: the beloved minister, the successful meeting, the fading movie star. The best advice is to avoid adjectives and just state the facts, using nouns and verbs. Show with facts; don't tell with opinion.

As Mark Twain said: "When you catch an adjective, kill it."

Sources

Use multiple sources

Every story has at least two sides and often many more. Except for stories written from instructor-supplied fact sheets in Jour 205, no story should be based on only one source of information. The minimum number of sources for a relatively simple story is two. Complex stories written in upper-division courses require more, and sometimes many more. Check with your professor.

Identifying news sources

All sources must be identified. Rules of identification include:

- Every person you interview must be fully identified in your story. No source can remain confidential unless you get advance approval from your instructor.
- The type of interview (personal interview, phone, e-mail) should be specified: *The guest lecturer said in an interview after his remarks; the governor said, speaking by phone from Phoenix.*
- Announcements and statements distributed broadly rather than obtained in an interview must be labeled as such: *according to a news release from the university.*
- All published sources (newspapers, magazines, books) need to be identified: *The mayor demanded more funding for pothole repairs last September, the Arizona Daily Star reported at the time.*
- Most professors discourage the use of such secondary sources unless the news outlet has an exclusive, or the story refers to a historical event. Your responsibility for your classes is to do original reporting.
- All Internet information must be sourced according to the site operator. *The no-kill shelter released 87 percent of its animals to homes in the last six months, according to the Humane Society's website.*

You must provide contact information for interview sources to instructors on request. Instructors periodically will contact sources to check for accuracy.

Attribution

Attribution serves two purposes: It identifies the source of information and it gives the story credibility: *Mayor John Jacobs said*; OR, *according to the Arizona Constitution*.

Attribution is not needed for all the information in a story. There are two, and only two, instances where you never need it:

- You do not need it for well-known facts: *The sun rises in the east.*
- You do not need it for information that you yourself have witnessed as a reporter: *The crowd gathered in front of Gentle Ben's after the game.*

So what, exactly, should be attributed?

- Facts not previously established or well known
- Expert background on a subject
- Matters of opinion or judgment
- Anything controversial or likely to be disputed
- All quotes, partial quotes and paraphrased statements.

You must attribute even if you are not quoting the exact words of a source. And ideas, opinions and theories need attribution. See Academic Integrity Handbook for more.

How much attribution is enough? Provide enough to inform the public about who is saying what. In simple weather stories, attributing information once may be enough. In stories that are more complex or cover controversial topics, attribution could be necessary in every paragraph. Be particularly thorough in crime and court stories, because the facts of a case are generally disputed.

The bottom line: When in doubt, attribute.

Attribution usually is found at the end of the sentence and is set off by a comma:
He failed another style quiz, the student said.

Attribution is used at the beginning of a sentence that introduces a new speaker:
"I'm glad I won the election," she said.
Her opponent, Thomas H. White, said, "It was a hard race, but I lost fair and square."

Handling identification properly

The basic rule is that identification should enable the readers or viewers to understand the relationship of source to the story. The identification could be middle initial, age, address, job title or a combination of identifiers. In a story about a city council meeting, for example, city officials should be identified by full name and title, not, for example, by age or home address unless they are pertinent to the story.

On subsequent references, refer to men and women only by last name, or title and last name. Most publications and TV/radio newscasts do not use Mr., Mrs., Miss or Ms. On second reference to a person, use first names for anyone under the age of 15. With 16- and 17-year-olds, use the last name unless it is a light-hearted story. Use last name for anyone 18 and over.

Doctors and clergy are given titles on first reference; on subsequent reference use last name only. Professors and others with doctorates may be identified with Dr. on the first reference, according to the AP Stylebook, but make sure to include their specializations to avoid implying they are physicians. For example: *Dr. Jeannine Relly, a journalism professor, testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee.*

University students on first reference should be identified by full name, major and year in school: *Karen Aquino, a political science junior*.

Take special care in crime stories to identify people as fully as possible. Use full name, age, occupation or any other identifier that would help differentiate the accused from other persons with similar names. Victims of a crime often are not identified. This is particularly true in sexual assault cases or when they are younger than 18.

Check spelling of names with sources. Don't assume that John is always J-O-H-N or Amy is always A-M-Y.

Identification is a highly sensitive issue. Use only what is pertinent to the story. Include a person's race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or similar characterization only when it is relevant to the story. If in doubt, ask your instructor.

Job titles

If a formal title is short and precedes the name, capitalize it: Mayor Barbara Smith. Use no comma between the title and the name. Do not capitalize informal, descriptive titles, even if they come before the name.

A formal title generally is one that denotes authority, professional activity or academic activity: Dean Humberto J. Romero, Police Chief Jason W. Saunders. Other titles serve primarily as occupational descriptions: team leader Jack L. Thompson; journalism major Bianca R. Rios, movie star John Wayne.

If the title follows the name, make it lowercase and enclose it with commas: Barbara Smith, mayor, issued a statement. Also, lowercase the title if no name is given: The mayor issued a statement.

A long and unwieldy title should be set off by a comma and often should follow the name*: The president of the North American Society of Municipal Mayors, Barbara Smith; OR, Barbara Smith, president of the North American Society of Municipal Mayors.*

Handling quotations properly

Quoting a news source word for word is important for accuracy, credibility and flavor. But not all comments are worth word-for-word repetition. Reducing an hours-long event to a few paragraphs requires a mix of summarizing and quoting, summarizing and quoting.

Use quotation marks to surround the exact words of a speaker: *"I have no intention of running for another term," the mayor said.*

One of the most troubling questions in journalism is when reporters should change quotes to protect sources from inadvertent misstatements, poor grammar and derogatory words. The faculty believes students should not change direct quotations. If a direct quote is problematic, the easiest solution is to paraphrase instead.

For example, instead of quoting exactly what he said: "*Thanks to my opponent's dirty campaign, I ain't never gonna run again,"* the mayor said, you might write: *Citing his opponent's "dirty campaign," the major said he wouldn't run again.*

Make attribution as unobtrusive as possible. Generally avoid fancy synonyms for "said," such as "replied, responded, expostulated, suggested, indicated or remarked."

Also avoid words that suggest doubt, such as claimed, admitted or acknowledged. The word "said" comes after the title and the name or pronoun, unless the title is very long: she said; Lt. Gov. Edith Meta said; but, said William E. Parker, assistant superintendent for the Tucson Unified School District.

When quotes end in a question mark, no comma is needed: *"Where is she going?" Williams asked.*

Partial quotes can be used as an integral part of a sentence and should be capitalized and punctuated accordingly: *He was feeling "much too sick" to attend class, according to the e-mail.*

Contrary to most academic writing styles, in AP style all punctuation goes inside the quote: *"I have scheduled a current events quiz for next time," the instructor said.*

You can use more than one sentence within a single set of quotation marks: *"What's the use? I will never understand these style rules," she said*.

For a quote within a quote, use a single quotation mark: *"He told me he was feeling 'just lousy,'" Del Rios said.*

Remember that quotation marks come in sets of two. If you use an opening quotation mark, also include the closing one.

Getting it right

Plagiarism

The word means intentionally or knowingly representing the words or ideas of another as one's own. This is a serious problem in journalism. Public attention has been focused on several high-profile incidents recently, and public confidence in the reliability of news reports has eroded.

The School of Journalism has a zero-tolerance policy on academic cheating, including plagiarism, fabrication, or use of false or forged identification or documents, including excuses for absences. Without exception, instructors will impose major sanctions for academic integrity violations, often failing the class, or more. See the school's Academic Integrity Handbook for full details.

Crime reporting

The most important thing to remember about crime reporting is that being arrested for a crime is very different from being convicted of a crime. Many people are arrested. Relatively few are convicted or even brought to trial.

In the U.S. judicial system, a person is innocent until proven guilty. You should write: Harry Waxman was arrested on suspicion of or on charges of a crime, not that he was arrested for something, which implies guilt. Likewise, don't say accused killer or alleged killer. Say accused of the killing.

The names of sexual assault victims and juveniles (as long as they are not charged as adults) are generally not reported. Sometimes the names of witnesses are withheld if there is a risk of retaliation against them.

A felony is a serious crime. A misdemeanor is a less-serious offense. If convicted of a misdemeanor, a person may be confined to jail; if convicted of a felony, a person usually is sent to prison.

Homicide is the legal term for killing. Murder is the term for premeditated homicide. Manslaughter is homicide without premeditated intent. Do not say a person is a murderer or a victim was murdered until the accused has been convicted in court.

Innocent vs. not guilty

The AP says, "In court cases, plea situations and trials, not guilty is preferable to innocent, because it is more precise legally. (However, special care must be taken to prevent omission of the word not.) When possible, say a defendant was acquitted of criminal charges.

In the legal systems in most states, according to the AP, a burglary involves entering a building (not necessarily by breaking in) and remaining unlawfully with the intention of committing a crime. Larceny is the legal term for the wrongful taking of property. Its nonlegal equivalents are stealing or theft. Robbery in the legal sense involves the use of violence or threats in committing a larceny. Theft describes a larceny that did not involve threats or violence: You rob a person, bank, house, etc., but you steal the money or the jewels.

Be sure all statements about charges are attributed to an official source.

Use the word allege with great care to avoid making an accusation. It is a word that frequently is overused. Allege means to declare or accuse: The district attorney alleged that she took a bribe. See the AP Stylebook for further cautions.

You may be legally required to protect the identities of jurors in some states. The law forbids their identification so that no outside influences can affect the outcome of jury deliberations. During a trial, they should not be interviewed or photographed if the law forbids it. Check with your instructor on rules. Some courts forbid the use of cameras. Again, check with your instructor.

Fact-checking

Three important points need to be made regarding fact-checking:

1. Fact-checking goes beyond "cqing" names and titles, although those are important elements of the process. Fact-checking means checking the reporting and the journalistic, legal, and ethical context of every word in every sentence. Fact-checking, like other elements of reporting, should be done using primary sources, not secondary material. Fact-checking requires a very high level of critical thinking and constant application of the highest journalistic standards.
2. Fact-checking is the responsibility of everyone who sees a story, caption, photo or graphic. It starts with reporters, photographers or graphics designers, who should build into their own schedules the time to fact-check their own work before it goes to the next stage of production. Fact-checking then becomes the responsibility of every editor who handles the story, photo/video, or graphics, including the copy editor. Copy editing goes way beyond line editing for style and grammar; copy editors are the last line of defense in terms of journalistic standards and legal and ethical issues.
3. Fact-checking should be thought of as the last stage of reporting, as well as one of the stages of the editing process. Fact-checking is a reflective process that starts with the journalist going back and looking at her or his work as objectively as possible, to catch factual, contextual, legal and ethical issues, including problems with the original reporting. To think of fact-checking as some secondary process that is not part of both reporting and editing, or is not as important as other components of reporting and editing, is a fundamental mistake, which can easily lead to others.

Style and grammar guide

Here are some School of Journalism style rules that most often trouble students. See The AP Stylebook for a more comprehensive list. Note that styles vary considerably between academic and journalistic writing. Follow The AP Stylebook in all journalism classes, not the Chicago Manual or the MLA Style Guide, which are for academic research.

Academic degrees

Write the following this way:

- Bachelor of Arts degree (note capital and plural)
- bachelor's degree (note lowercase and possessive)
- Master of Arts degree
- master's degree

In general, avoid using abbreviations such as B.A. or Ph.D. Instead write out the name of the degree: John P. Jones, who has a doctorate in psychology, wrote the book.

Use lowercase for informal references to academic units, except for words that are proper names: journalism school, English department. Capitalize formal names of academic units: School of Journalism.

Active verbs, where the subject does the action, are stronger than passive verbs. You should write: Police arrested the student, rather than: The student was arrested by police.

Addresses

In general, a full street address is preferred. This includes specific home/building number, direction the street runs, street name and designation: 1891 W. Ina Road. Use city or state only when you are writing about a place outside your own community.

If the street number is given, the direction is abbreviated and capitalized: E., W., N., S. So are some street designations: Ave., St. and Blvd. Other designations: Drive, Road, Terrace, Circle, are always spelled out. Do not abbreviate the direction if no street number is given: East Lester Street. If the street is numbered, spell First through Ninth: 871 N. Fourth Ave. Use numerals and "th" or "rd" for 10 and above: 3621 E. 16th St.

Always use figures for the address number: 9 Morningside Drive.

Ages

Always use numbers for ages: A 5-year-old boy (note hyphens). The boy is 5 years old (no hyphens). The boy, 5, has a sister, 11. The woman is in her 30s (no apostrophe).

Blog

Originally the term was Web log, but it has since been shortened to blog. It does not need to be capitalized and may be used as a noun or verb. *She kept a blog. The reporter blogged updates of the basketball game.*

Capitalization

Most academic style manuals capitalize all titles and organizations in all references: *The Department moved. The Chairman called the meeting to order.* In AP style, however, the preference is to use lowercase as a general rule. In the previous example, AP would write

department and chairman in lowercase, though they can be capitalized if used as titles before names, as inBoard of Regents Chairman Greg Patterson, or the Communications Department.

Chairman and chairwoman are preferred, not chair or chairperson unless an organization uses these titles.

Its/It's. Its shows possession: *Its front tire is low.* It's is a contraction for it is or it has: *It's his car. It's been a long time.*

Lay/Lie. Lay, laying, laid are action words that require a direct object: *I will lay the book on the table.* Lie, lay, lain indicate a state of reclining along a horizontal surface: *He lies on the beach all day.* See the AP Stylebook for more detail.

Media are plural. The singular is medium.

Money

Use numerals and the dollar sign: *The book cost $23.* Never write: The book cost $23 dollars, since $ and dollars mean the same thing.

Months

They are spelled out when used alone, abbreviated when used with a date: *December is a busy month. Dec. 8 is the last day of class.* The exceptions are March, April, May, June and July, which are always spelled out. Use the year only if you are not writing about the current year. When using a month with a year, no comma is necessary. The months are spelled out: July 1999, December 2008. When using a date with a month and year, use a comma after the date and the year if the sentence continues: Sept. 10, 2003, was the wettest day on record.

Use the names of the days of the week when an upcoming event is within a week of the current day: *The meeting will be Tuesday* – for an event three days from now. Beyond the current week, use the month and date only: *The meeting will be Oct. 14* – for an event eight days from now.

Don't use both the day and the date. See The AP Stylebook for guidance.

Numbers

The basic rule is that the numerals one through nine are spelled out. For numerals 10 and above, use numbers: *Only eight students passed the current events quiz. That means 12 students failed the quiz.*

Spell out a number at the beginning of a sentence. If that becomes awkward: Nine hundred ninety-three freshmen entered college last year, rewrite the sentence: *Last year, 993 freshmen entered college.*

Write numbers in the most readily understandable way: 1,200 [note comma]; 2 million or 2.44 million, but 2,438,439 if you must be precise. Be sure your meaning is clear: The population increased to 600,000 from 500,000 is better than 500,000 to 600,000 or from 500 to 600,000; he is worth $2 million to $4 million, not $2-$4 million. Many more examples of proper usage can be found in the "numerals" listing in the AP Stylebook.

In broadcast writing, however, the numbers are spelled out in the script, for readability by the talent. So 1,000 clowns becomes ONE-THOUSAND CLOWNS in a Teleprompter script.

Percent. Use the word, not the symbol.

State names should be spelled out and not abbreviated, according to the A.P. Stylebook.
Never use the two-letter postal code abbreviations for a state name. Arizona, when used with a city name, is Arizona not AZ.

The University of Arizona
The university's style is to capitalize the T in the word "the" in its official materials, but ocal media often lowercases it. The journalism school follows the university's style, however, and capitalizes it. When abbreviating the name, use UA rather than U of A because it is shorter.

Their/there/they're
Their shows possession: *Their car is in the shop.* There refers to place: *There it is, up on the rack.* They're is a contraction of they are: *With their car out of action, they're going to have to take the bus to get there.*

There is/there are is a weak way to start a sentence, especially a lead. Rewrite the sentence.

Time and dates
Write 7 a.m., not 7:00 a.m. Never 7 a.m. o'clock. Let the verb tense show whether the action is past or future: *The meeting will be held at 2:30 p.m. Tuesday* – not next Tuesday.

Using social media to prevent errors

The journalism industry ships lemons every day, says Scott Rosenberg, co-founder of the online news site Salon.com. According to reports cited by Rosenberg, more than half of all news stories contain mistakes — and only 3 percent of those errors are ever fixed.

Each uncorrected error undermines public trust in news organizations. In one survey, only 29 percent of Americans believed that the press "get the facts right." Many mistakes are easily avoidable. What follows are suggestions for checking the accuracy of information found in any website and tips on checking on social media reports.

How to evaluate a website as a news source

This is adapted from an article by Scott Rosenberg, which originally appeared in Scott Rosenberg's Wordyard on Sept. 14, 2010.

- WHAT'S THE TOP-LEVEL DOMAIN? Is the page in question on a spammy top-level Domain? That's not always a bad sign, but it raises your alert level a bit.

- LOOK THE DOMAIN NAME UP WITH *WHOIS*. Is the registration info available or hidden? Again, lots of domain owners hide their info for privacy reasons. But sometimes the absence of a public contact at the domain level is a sign that people would rather you not look into what they're doing.

- HOW OLD OR NEW IS THE REGISTRATION? If the site just suddenly appeared out of nowhere that can be another indication of mischief afoot.

- LOOK UP THE SITE IN THE INTERNET ARCHIVE. Did it used to be something else? How has it changed over the years? Did it once reveal information that it now hides?

- LOOK AT THE SOURCE CODE. Is there anything unusual or suspicious that you can see when you "view source?" (If you're not up to this, technically, ask a friend who is.)

- CHECK OUT THE ADS. Do they seem to be the main purpose of the site? Do they relate to the content or not?

- DOES THE SITE TELL YOU WHO RUNS IT, in an about page, or a footer, or anywhere else? Is someone taking responsibility for what's being published? If so, obviously you can begin this whole investigation again with that person or company's name, if you need to dig deeper.

- IS THERE A FEEDBACK OPTION? Email address, contact form, public comments or any kind of feedback loop suggests there's someone responsible at home.

- WHAT SHAPE ARE THE COMMENTS IN? If they're full of spam it may mean that nobody's home. If people are posting critical comments and no one ever replies, that could also mean that the site owner has gone AWOL. (He might also be shy or uninterested in tangling with people.)

- IS THE CONTENT ORIGINAL AND UNIQUE? Grab a chunk of text (a sentence or so), put it in quotes, and plug it into Google to see whether there are multiple versions of the text you're reading. If so, which appears to be the original? Keep in mind that the original author might or might not be responsible for these multiple versions.

- DOES THE ARTICLE MAKE REFERENCE TO MANY SPECIFIC SOURCES OR JUST A FEW? And are the references linked? More is usually a good sign, unless they appear to be assembled by script rather than by a human hand.

- LINKS IN ARE AS IMPORTANT A CLUE AS LINKS OUT. If your hunt for links-in turns up a ton of references from dubious sites, your article may be part of a Google-gaming effort. If you see lots of inbound links from sites that seem reputable to you, that's a better sign.

- GOOGLE THE URL. Google the domain. Google the company name. Poke around if you have any doubts or questions. Then, of course, remember that every single question we've been applying here can be asked about every page Google points you to, as well.

No one of these tests, typically, is conclusive in itself. But together they constitute a kind of sniff test for the quality of any given piece of Web-borne information.

How to evaluate a tweet as a news source

Posted in TwitterJournalism by Craig Kanalley, founder of Breaking Tweets and traffic and trends editor for the online news site Huffington Post.

1. **Timestamp:** Anytime something breaks with hundreds of tweets in minutes, like a natural disaster, it's good to type various keywords and keep paging back until you find the first few tweets about the news. Unless these Tweeters are psychic, they're probably among the first to have knowledge something's up and they may have additional context depending on the story.

2. **Contextual tweets:** Immediately check the Twitter user's page for related tweets around the tweet you found. You'd be surprised how often someone posts a follow-up tweet later or precedes the 'breaking tweet' with other pertinent info. This could provide additional context for the story, but it can also help verify a person, especially if they're posting pictures or other content from the scene.

3. **Authority:** Check the Twitter user's Bio. Is this a journalist? Is it a random person off the street? Is it a prankster? How about a comedian? Check their Web site or

blog if they have one listed. See what you can learn about them here. It's important to have some idea who the Tweeter is as you assess the validity of any tweet.

4. **How many past tweets:** Be leery of new Twitter users. If it's one of their first tweets, it could be anybody starting an account and claiming to have info on a breaking story. The newer the account is, the more skeptical you have to be.

5. **What are the past tweets:** Check for context by examining the person's Twitter stream. Go back several pages and see what they normally tweet about. Do they interact with people? Check the accounts they interact with for additional background on piecing together who this person might be. If they say they're in Paris, are they talking about Paris a month ago? Are they tweeting in French? If not, why not? Evaluate the person and get a feel from them as best you can based on past tweets.

6. **Google them:** Google their Twitter name because sometimes people use a Twitter handle as their user name on other sites. See if you can find a LinkedIn page, a Facebook page and other sites that add to who these people might be. If they don't list a full name on their Twitter page, and their user name doesn't turn up much, you have reason to be more skeptical. The more information the person hides, the harder it is to know who they are. Likewise, the more open they are with info, the more likely they're legitimate.

7. **Check for related tweets:** If someone says they heard an explosion in Lahore, what are other people in Lahore tweeting about? Check that and see if anyone else is reporting this. Chances are if a series of diverse people are tweeting about it at the same exact time — and they don't appear related from looking at their accounts – something's up.

8. **Talk to them directly:** Send an @ reply. Start following them and try to send a direct message. Get a conversation going. Ask for more information and build a relationship as best you can. This will help you create a profile of this person and piece together their connection to the story.

FAQs on ethical issues facing online journalists

The following is taken from the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, developed from a 2006 conference on online journalism ethics. Full report here: https://www.poynter.org/2007/online-journalism-ethics-guidelines-from-the-conference/80445/

What do you mean by saying that principles should apply across all content?

We believe these ethical principles apply to all content, regardless of whether it's text, photos, audio, video, etc., and whether it's on the web, on a blog, in print, on broadcast, or delivered via email, podcasts or beyond.

Is the opinion of the "objective" reporter ever of value?

Absolutely. But whether that opinion should be expressed, and how it should be expressed, is a matter to be reviewed with your editor. In cases where "objective" reporters believe expressing an opinion in any forum is necessary, they should discuss the matter with their editors. Be cautious, and be transparent.

What are the risks when a reporter expresses an opinion?

For starters, it could imperil your ability to continue to report the story accurately and fairly. If you express a bias on a topic, your sources of information may change the way they respond to your inquiries, and your readers may doubt the accuracy of future stories. Your expressions of bias will not be forgotten quickly.

What are the risks of "unedited journalism" — live Web discussions, TV appearances, radio hits, etc.?

Just the nature of these other forums makes it a slippery slope for "objective" journalists. You will likely be pressed by an interviewer, a reader, etc., because they want to know your opinion. Beware: Expressing an opinion on a topic you're covering — otherwise objectively — runs the risk of compromising your reporting and/or relationship with your sources. Yes, journalists have opinions on the stories they cover, but good journalists are defined by their ability to not let their opinions interfere with their coverage of the story. They are guided by the principle of independence.

Should journalists be allowed to keep personal blogs?

Yes, but journalists who work for journalistic organizations should acknowledge that role. They should also recognize their responsibility to the organization, and review the plans for the blog with an editor, so that any potential conflicts can be discussed. It's always best to operate on the premise of "no surprises" for your editor or your organization — or your readers.

Is it ever appropriate for a reporter to write anonymously on someone else's blog or site? Is it appropriate for a reporter to operate a blog under an alias?

No. Professional journalists should not write or comment on other blogs anonymously or run an anonymous blog. Reporters are expected to own responsibility for their work, and commenting or blogging anonymously compromises that core principle. If a reporter believes that some anonymity or similar tactic is required — possibly as part of a reporting assignment or a restaurant review — the strategy should be used carefully and in consultation with an editor. And if you decide it is appropriate, consider the plan for eventual disclosure and transparency. This same rule applies to any "journalist": bloggers, editors, photographers, etc.

Do we need to differentiate between opinion blogs and news blogs?

Remember that a "blog" is only a medium. It's what you do with it that matters. News organizations should differentiate clearly between opinion blogs and news blogs. Though they may share a format, the driving force behind clear labeling is the content of the journalism, not the format. News organizations should articulate clear standards and labeling for all of their news and opinion, whether it's on a printed page or in a blog.

Can opinion journalists/bloggers do straight news reporting?

It may, at times, be impossible to avoid having commentators do straight reporting; consider the columnist or editorial writer who happens upon the scene of a breaking news story. But beware of situations where the coverage involves a topic on which the commentator has already opined. The opinions could compromise — in fact or in perception — the reporter's independence.

Again, transparency and disclosure can be effective strategies in a crucial moment.

Can a reporter who expresses opinion go back to straight, objective reporting?

An opinion journalist should be able to return to straight news reporting, though it is preferable that the reporter would not cover the same topics on which he or she previously expressed opinions.

How can you achieve the personal tone of the Web while maintaining the distance of the traditional reporter?

Many popular blogs written by journalists feature much more detail about a reporter's personal life than their work in other media. This "personalization" is OK, as long as details of their personal life don't compromise their independence (for instance, a political reporter discussing who they voted for).

Why should a reporter not show a stronger voice online than in the paper?

This is an issue that each organization will have to address. There seems to be little doubt that the Web audience at large is attracted to content with more "voice" than traditional journalism allows for, but deciding on whether and how to experiment are brand-specific questions. One problem with voice is that it often is used to mask ignorance. And the line between "strong voice" and "opinion" is tough to define. Also, a journalist's strength may not lie in "voice" as much as expertise. The Web provides opportunities for much more in-depth and interactivity; a smart journalistic organization may want to explore the "depth" strategy before resorting to "voice."

Are different tones OK for different sub-brands under one media brand?

The journalism values of a company should be reflected in all its sub-brands. Of course, requiring all sub-brands to have the same tone defeats the purpose of sub-brands. One caveat: Think twice before allowing a reporter who contributes news for one brand to offer opinion for your other brand. This is one for your editor. And, whenever in doubt, tell the readers in no uncertain terms what you're doing and why you're doing it.