

Think First

JEA
press rights
commission

Free expression
through
responsible
journalism

10 Tips for Covering Controversial Subjects

Decide why you want to cover a subject. Is the subject simply sensational and a hook to get your readers to pick up the paper, or do you have an angle that is relevant to your school community? Remember all stories should have a local tie-in.

- Link to the Elements of Journalism

Anticipate reaction and be sure you are prepared to deal with it. Be sure your students can logically defend why a story is important or needs to be told in your community. When writing about sources potentially in embarrassing situations, ask yourself, “How would I feel if the story were about me?”

- Will reporters be able to anticipate questions? Issues?
- Can reporters show perspective and background? Is the local situation similar to others? Locally? Regionally? Nationally? Historically?
- Does the story have local faces for personalization, yet is linkable to a bigger issue?

Make sure you have reliable sources on all sides of the issues. You must interview and cite local experts and professionals relevant to your story. Avoid just using only anecdotal stories or opinions short on hard facts. Be prepared to provide background and perspective from all these viewpoints.

- Link to ethical questions about who are stakeholders
- Can information be documented visually?

Avoid anonymous sources. But, if you decide you must protect someone’s privacy, only the student writer and an editor should know the names. Even involving your adviser could have legal ramifications. Again, make sure your source(s) is reliable.

- Link to rules about use of anonymous sources

Protect your sources. When writing stories about students in unique circumstances or in potentially embarrassing situations, interview parents or guardians — not for permission, but as part of the story.

- Know how shield laws might protect your reporters – or not
- Take steps to protect your notes and unused information from being confiscated

Make sure the staff or your editorial board contributes and discusses the story and follows the story throughout the writing and editing process. When many people look over a story, it’s more likely someone may anticipate potential problems or discover errors in facts or logic.

- This is all part of the coaching process, from idea to completion
- But, make sure information being discussed is kept private. What happens in the staffroom stays in the staffroom

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Check your facts. Just because a source gives you a “fact,” don’t take it at face value. Authenticate facts with at least one other source. Give the development and writing of your story enough time for all of the facts to become clear and you have all the facts.

- Journalism today is fast becoming a profession of verification and synthesis
- Observe, research and inform
- Be transparent with all your sources

Adhere to professional standards. Take into account your community’s standards and mores as well as your role in telling the truth while minimizing harm.

- Links to SPJ and other codes of ethics
- Know your community; know its factions, but remember your duty to truth, accuracy, completeness and thoroughness

Just because you may legally print a story doesn’t mean you should. Your right to tell a story must always be balanced with the rights of the individuals you cover and the public’s right and need to know.

If you have concerns with the story in any part of the writing process, get a second opinion. Consult a professional journalist, the Student Press Law Center, or another experienced journalism adviser through the JEA Listserv.

- Know what is protected speech and what is not
- Know where to go to get legal advice