



Rural Reporting Plunge **Reporting Handbook**



Project website for instructions and submitting materials

Questions or problems along the way?
Contact Prof. Lisa Waananen Jones at 763-242-8095.

“Kid, how would you like the biggest classroom in the world?”

— Edward R. Murrow, recruiting a young teacher to become a journalist after WWII

More than anything, the Rural Reporting Plunge is about going beyond your comfort zone — both personally and geographically — to do and see something you’ve never done or seen before. It is more about exploration than work. But you *will* be working as a journalist: asking questions, listening attentively, verifying facts and accurately representing what you see and learn. Some of you have extensive journalism experience, and some of you are just getting started. Either way, please review this handbook for ways to approach your reporting tasks. Some of you will feel welcomed and comfortable in your towns, and some of you may feel like people aren’t thrilled you’re there. Go anywhere with an open mind and genuine curiosity, and stories will find you.

In longform journalism, people talk about “gathering string” — the idea that you are constantly collecting bits of stories and following threads that might not lead anywhere now, but might tie together or turn into complete stories later. Professional journalists sometimes follow a story for years or even decades before it reaches the right time to publish. Your efforts don’t need to pay off immediately to be worthwhile.

That said, please meet your deadlines. Document your journey and follow through with stories to build trust and credibility. Many people are excited to see what you find out and create.

CODE of ETHICS

The SPJ Code of Ethics is a professional standard for how journalists should handle ethics situations that come up when reporting and publishing. The following is a summary of the four main principles. The full code is available online.



SEEK TRUTH AND REPORT IT

Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

- Take responsibility for the accuracy of their work. Verify information before releasing it. Use original sources whenever possible.
- Provide context. Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.
- Identify sources clearly. The public is entitled to as much information as possible to judge the reliability and motivations of sources.
- Support the open and civil exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear.
- Avoid stereotyping. Journalists should examine the ways their values and experiences may shape their reporting.
- Never deliberately distort facts or context, including visual information.
- Never plagiarize. Always attribute.

MINIMIZE HARM

Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect.

- Balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort.
- Consider cultural differences in approach and treatment.

ACT INDEPENDENTLY

The highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public.

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and avoid political and other outside activities.

BE ACCOUNTABLE AND TRANSPARENT

Ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions.

- Encourage a civil dialogue with the public about journalistic practices, coverage and news content.
- Acknowledge mistakes and correct them promptly and prominently. Explain corrections and clarifications carefully and clearly.

Reporting Checklist

Seek consent.

- Always identify yourself as a journalist: “Hi, I’m [your name], I’m here as a journalist from Washington State University.”
- Make it clear whether you are conducting an interview or not. Are you just looking for information? Or are you planning to quote someone?
- It’s legal to take news photos in any public place, but it’s good practice to ask if people will be identifiable in your photos. There’s no legal difference between taking photos of children vs. adults, but it’s more important to get permission ahead of time before photographing children.
- It is always best to ask for media access in semi-public spaces like schools, high school sports events, private businesses, etc. Find out who is in charge. They are allowed to tell you no, so it’s up to you to be persuasive.
- Washington is a “two-party consent” state, which means you need permission from everyone involved before recording private conversations. (Idaho is not, but it’s still best to ask.)

Always confirm full names and contact information.

- It is OK to use someone’s name the way they prefer it (“Sue” rather than “Suzanne” etc.), but it is good practice to still find out a person’s full legal name. Middle initials aren’t necessary unless the person prefers it.
- Ask for a person’s age and where they live. Don’t assume they live in the town where you met them.
- It is always OK to blame your editor/professor if people are reluctant: “I hope it’s not rude to ask your age, but my editor just requires it.” (It’s true, you are required to ask.)

- Get the name of the dog! This is an old reporting adage, but it's also good advice: Ask about the names of any pets or animals, and spell them correctly. It adds detail to your story and shows you care.
- Always double-check. People appreciate accuracy and they want you to get it right.

□ Follow up with sources.

- Always end interviews by asking people if there is anything else you should know, or anything else they want to tell you.
- Give sources your contact information in case they want to get in touch later.
- Be honest about what you know about whether a story will be published: Many stories will be published on the project website, and some might also be published in student media or professional media. It's OK to say you don't know yet.
- Don't make promises you don't fully intend to keep. If you tell someone you'll email them when the story is published, you better do that.

□ Know your rights.

- Newsgathering activities in the United States are broadly protected by the First Amendment. As a student journalist, you are a journalist with First Amendment protections.
- Many people, including law enforcement, don't know media law and may mistakenly believe perfectly legal activities are not allowed. But it's best to avoid getting into arguments about it unless the confrontation is necessary.
- Under no circumstances can anyone, including law enforcement, tell you to erase photos/video or destroy notes that you've already captured.

Solutions Journalism is a reporting approach that focuses on *responses* or *solutions* to social problems. People often perceive news as negative and depressing — focused on problems — or as unserious “puff” pieces and features that don’t take on important social issues. Solutions journalism is a model for rigorous, in-depth reporting that helps your audience feel informed and empowered to take action.

Solutions journalism is promoted by the Solutions Journalism Network, which says all solutions stories have four components:

- 1. Response to a problem.** The story explains a social issue and focuses on one way people are responding to it. Look for people who are **taking action** instead of just talking about an issue. What are they doing?
- 2. Evidence that it works.** Solutions stories aren’t just about interesting ideas or things that *could* work; there should be evidence it actually works. Most issues are complex, so a response doesn’t need to *solve* a problem to make a difference. What are the goals? How do people know it’s working?
- 3. Limitations of the response.** Every program, plan or solution runs up against limitations. The story should include an honest assessment of limits.
- 4. Insights that could be applied elsewhere.** If it’s a completely unique response that works in one place but could never be replicated, that’s a neat feature but not a solutions story. There should be lessons or connections beyond the one example. What can other communities learn from this?

“I do think that, today in particular, people need journalism — not feel-good news, but rigorous reporting — that helps them see pathways to a better future. The news can be so overwhelming. More and more people are avoiding it. We need to balance news about problems and possibilities so that people can engage with reality with some sense of agency. Otherwise, they tune out, or deny it, or fall prey to misinformation.” — David Bornstein

Why do solutions journalism?

It empowers people. When people give up hope, they are less likely to take action. Whether it’s a global issue like climate change or a local issue like preserving a historic building, people are more likely to stay engaged and get involved if it seems like solutions are possible.

It helps build public trust in journalism. Especially in rural and marginalized communities, outside journalists often show up only when something bad happens. By asking about how people are taking on problems, you can talk about serious issues in a more respectful and holistic way.



Murrow College alumni offered tips on Twitter

Go in without any specific or narrow story idea in mind, just spend those first hours being completely present in the moment and get to know the people who live and work and raise families there. Be curious and kind, and you will see that energy come back to you! **Sydney Brown @sydneyreenebk**

Follow what's interesting to you. Get to know the people. Ask them questions about themselves even if it won't make the final cut. A lot of folks love a chance to share their story if they feel you genuinely care about it and aren't JUST asking because of an assignment/work. **Rachel Sun @Rachel_M_Sun**

Be comfortable with so-called awkward pauses. That lapse in talking just gives people more time to think about what to say next. It may be an effective way to get your interview subject to dig deeper! **Sherry Nebel @SherBer2**

Step out of your comfort zone. Be empathetic, not patronizing. Remember to thank the people you interview. **Cheri Brennan @clbrenpr**

If you're looking for opinions from local residents a barber shop or hair salon is a great place to start. Spend time with people before and after your actual interview it's when you get the best stuff. Don't be afraid to challenge/ask follow up about where people got info. **Glen Beeby @GlenBeebyNews**