

THE DISCIPLINE OF VERIFICATION

The Principles of Journalism guide many professionals in their ethical dilemmas with sources, publishers and topics they cover. As we guide high school journalists through the basics, it's important to keep these principles in mind. While your students may not deal with pushy advertisers, gifts from sources or having to keep their CEO in check, they can utilize these principles every day.

“Journalism’s essence is a discipline of verification.”

It's incredibly easy to send our students to a computer screen for facts and figures about a relevant story, but Wikipedia isn't the shaky source I'm most concerned with. Many times, those being interviewed feel important, which may inflate the ego and push a few lies from their tongue. While these may be self-esteem boosting fibs, sometimes lies get out of hand.

Nevertheless, students must be prepared for whatever comes their way in an interview. While being prepared and knowledgeable about the subject going in will help, there is nothing to stop less-than-factual information from entering the interview. The best way to protect your students, yourself and the credibility of your publication is to equip your students with digital recorders.

Understandably, buying a digital recorder for every student in a classroom or on staff is an unreasonable expense, not to mention the costs each year to replace inevitably broken ones. However, most of your students have iPhones, Androids or something similar. Each of these houses a built-in recorder, as well as other free recorder apps available. Encourage your students to explore those apps, find one they are comfortable with and make sure each interview is recorded and saved for decent amount of time.

Many schools have new policies banning phone use during school hours, which may present a problem for your students. However, speak with the principal about the use of these devices and ensure that your students don't abuse that privilege. This is a privilege given to guarantee honest reporting, so that verifying information from correct transcriptions is possible, as well as having a definite record of the interview if issues should appear after the article is published.

It may feel silly explaining to students that they need to record and transcribe every word of an interview, whether it is five minutes or three hours, but it has saved countless students the stress and humiliation of a teacher or important figure questioning and berating them about quotes that were published. If something dishonest was published due to a quote from the interviewee, that recorded interview serves as proof that your reporters are credible and responsible when handling interviews. Without it, it is your word against theirs.

To keep high school journalism alive, uncensored and thriving, credibility is key. Making sure your students and publication remain credible through verification and responsibility when it comes to interviews is critical.

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