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To the casual observer, a publication class may seem chaotic. To the trained adviser, a publication class involves a structured plan that nurtures teamwork as story ideas turn into fluent text presenting documented information.

Every journalist discovers it takes

A TOTAL PROCESS TO PRODUCE STORIES WORTH READING

Brainstorming is not an instant cure for improving story ideas. It might begin with surprises, especially if an editor-in-chief proposes, “Let’s do a spread on teenage sex.”

A wary adviser may sense an encroaching nightmare, with stories pasted from the Internet, sentences that begin with “Most teenagers today,” unfocused coverage, sensational visuals, anonymous sources, angry parents, threats of lawsuits and messages from administrators requesting the adviser’s presence in the office.

The student editor may regard such a spread as spice to offset a bland diet of boring stories: class elections, campus cleanup campaigns, the colors for winter formal, a new tardy policy and standardized test scores.

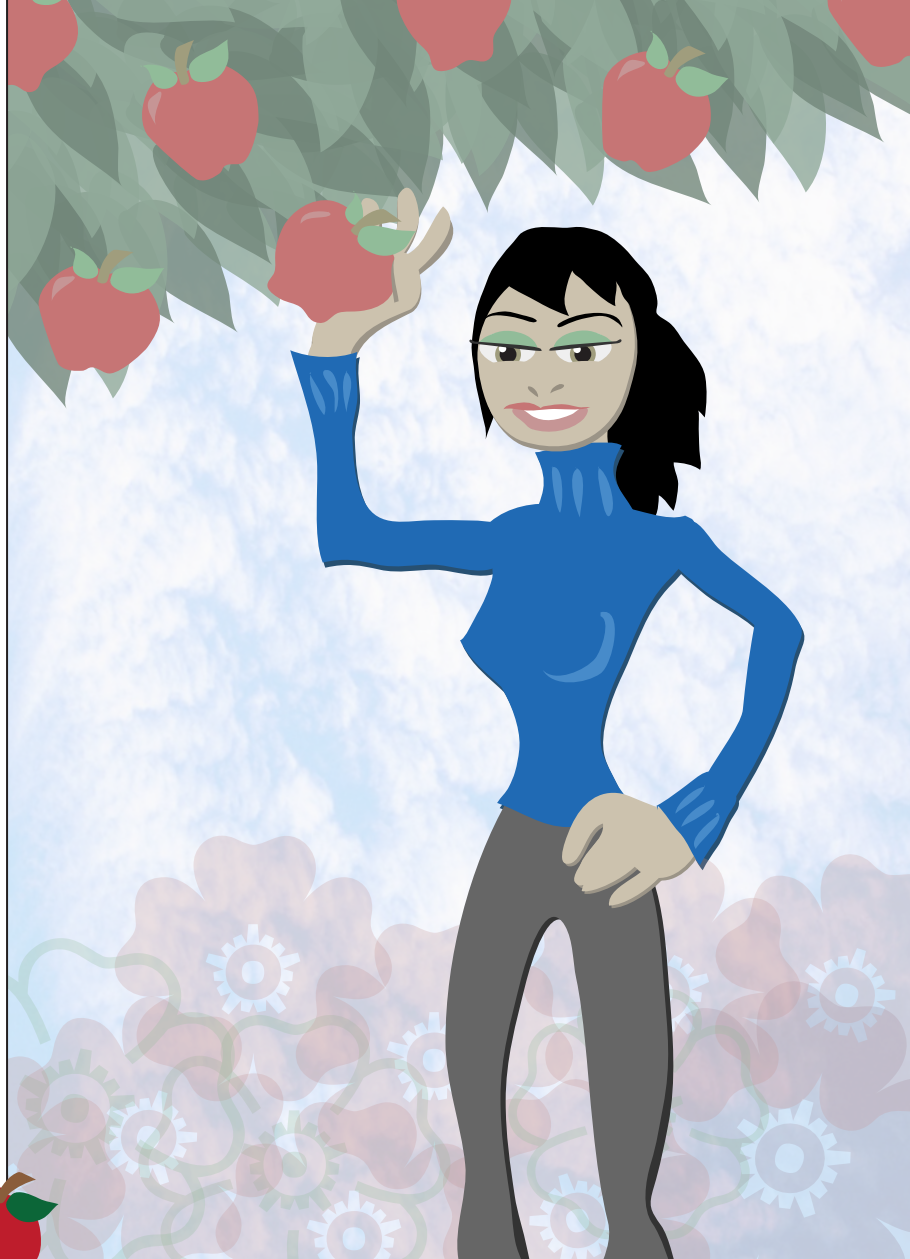
It is possible, though, for the student press to write well about any of these topics, but the staff usually struggles throughout the whole production cycle when assignments ignore pertinent story ideas.

However, student control over the content of the student press is core to their ownership of the press. The California Education Code, for instance, specifies, “Student editors of official school publications shall be responsible for assigning and editing the news, editorial and feature content” within certain limitations while the adviser is responsible “to supervise the production of the student staff” and “to maintain professional standards of English and journalism” (California Education Code 48907).

State and district laws vary, but the philosophy remains the same: Advisers instruct, structure, advise, support and grade, but students assign and edit the content. Students must find the interesting, relevant and important story ideas to assign, and they must have an authentic writing process to edit the news, editorial and feature content if they are to truly experience their First Amendment rights. ▶

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BY JANET EWELL • ART BY MARK McLAWHORN

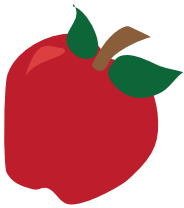


GENERATING STORY IDEAS

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If young journalists assign and edit the content of the student media, it is vital that they develop “news sense,” that is, an understanding of their community and audience and the responsibilities of the press to them as well as the core news values of proximity, timeliness, impact, prominence, unusualness, conflict and human interest that should inform their choices as they write and design their publications.

Strong story ideas are essential for producing effective media, whether a newspaper, a yearbook or a broadcast. Two methods of finding and developing stories, one based on listening to local sources and one based on reading the professional press, keep student papers stocked with strong story ideas and help students develop news sense and local angles. Both assignments begin during the first weeks of class and are repeated with minor alterations throughout the publishing year. ▶



ASSIGNMENT 1

The school newspaper is by and about the students here. Readers should be able to see, hear and taste this school.

The paper should reflect what the students are talking about, or worried about, what makes them excited and what makes them mad. The paper should cover what they are buying, what they are playing, driving and watching.

But this school is made up of a couple thousand individuals, and no two are talking and worrying about the same things.

That is where every member of the staff is needed.

Individuals must be the eyes and the ears of the publication. Staff members need to listen, especially to students they do not know well or who are different from them and their friends.

Listen in the lunch line. Listen before the bell rings in classes. Listen in the locker room and in the restrooms.

Then staff members must use their reporter notebooks to write down what people are talking about, even if they do not hear the whole conversation. Note who is talking, or describe the people talking. Do they see any signs of emotion? Note actual phrases and any details they notice.

For tomorrow, have at least three entries in the reporter's notebook. Not all of them will be great story ideas, but listening and writing them down will make each journalist a better reporter.

When the students return to class with their observations, they provoke class discussions. One staff member reports multiple complaints about the new drop-off and pick-up zones in front of the school. Another reporter mentions how long it takes to get a work permit, both solid story ideas for news in themselves.

Another observed two cross-country runners with bad colds who still plan to compete.

"Yeah, there was a wrestler in my class who —"

"Could we do something about competing sick?"

"Or injured? This senior football player is on crutches 'cause he messed up his knee and played anyway."

"Why don't we have an athletic trainer here like they do at —?"

"There was this freshman in my art class fifth period who was so excited about his first game that he couldn't work in class."

"Do we cover frosh-soph games?"

"We could do a feature on pre-game jitters and include frosh-soph and JV players."

A young staff member heard a freshman was pregnant and did not want to transfer to the school-aged mother program on a different campus.

"Can they make her transfer? Can we do a story on that?"

"If she stays, does she have to take PE?"

"Do you think she'd let you write about her?"

"Wouldn't that be giving her attention for doing something that is wrong?"

A first-year staffer reports that someone thought a friend's Betty Boop day planner was "so cute." Others

mention a Scooby Doo backpack, a Bratz lunch box used as a purse, Superman shoelaces and an original Star Wars pencil case.

Someone suggests, "We are returning to childhood treasures." Another reporter notes that freshmen rarely risk being seen with such things. Someone else mentions the freshmen who spend hours grooming themselves before school while seniors wander in at 7:59 a.m. in pajama bottoms and flip flops with a bed-head.

The story ideas flow: a feature spread on students' "childhood" belongings with short interviews and photos, an opinion column suggesting the campus needs swing sets on the junior-senior lawn so students can unwind, an article on what is cool for freshmen, for sophomores and so on, a spread on hair by class.

"We need freshmen faces and voices in the paper so they read it."

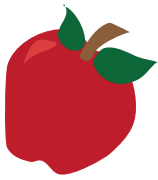
These conversations build the writing community, raise ethical and legal issues, develop a sense of the school and the publication's audience and create a powerful bank of possible stories. No idea is dismissed as worthless, and each student contributes a unique perspective. Students who might be marginalized in other classes are important here. The newer writers learn from their peers and the adviser about the paper's mission and audience.

The editors, one designated to make a list on a computer during the discussion, choose from among many story ideas based on the news values of proximity, timeliness, impact, prominence, unusualness, conflict and human interest. ►

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Individuals must be the eyes and the ears of the publication.

Staff members need to **LISTEN**, especially to students they do not know well or who are different from them and their friends.



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ASSIGNMENT 2

The professional press is the second regular source for story ideas.

To be a successful journalist, students need to read the newspaper daily. In a working newsroom, reporters pitch their ideas for enterprise stories to their editors. (An enterprise story is one initiated by reporters beyond the scope of their usual assignment.) On Fridays, you pitch your enterprise story ideas in writing to the adviser and to the editors and staff orally as time allows.

Story ideas are articles from other publications that contain the kernel of an idea for our publication.

Clip the story, and summarize the article in three or four sentences to reveal an intelligent reading of the story.

Present an angle specifically for our school. If you have clipped a story about a female surfer winning at the OP Pro Surf Contest, a weak story idea might be: "We could write an article on female skateboarders." A strong story idea would be: "I know two girls who skate at the ramps at the Quaker church on Magnolia."

You have established proximity, unusualness and human interest. If the girls struggled to be allowed to skate with the guys, then you have the added element of conflict. Mention these values as you pitch your story.

While staff members pitch their stories, others add information or suggest other angles as they did when discussing campus story ideas.

In response to an article about the 35th anniversary of Title IX, someone asks, "When did our school start to change? Will softball be 35 years old this spring?"

"We could use pictures from old yearbooks. And Ms. Jackson was an athlete here a long time ago."

"History makes valuable background, but retrospective pieces can be boring."

"My mom went to school here. I wonder if we have any female athletes who are now parents of second generation female athletes."

"Maybe one from before Title IX? Or would that be too far back?"

"How would we find the athlete and her mom to profile?"

"We may have Title IX, but things still aren't equal. Football still gets more money than all the girls' sports."

"That's because it makes more money for the school. Besides, some schools have female football players."

"How could we research which teams receive more financial support and which ones make more

money?"

"The cheer outfits are almost a thousand dollars for each girl."

"Cheer isn't a sport."

"Yes it is. All football players toss is a football. Cheerleaders toss other cheerleaders."

"Yeah, one girl on JV dislocated her shoulder."

"That would make a great spread — how athletic cheer has become."

"We'd need a news peg, like cheer competitions. When are those?"

"Which sports have the most injuries? Football?"

The story ideas may travel far from the article about Title IX, which may be stale by the time the story idea is brought into class, but the article has promoted discussion of high-school sports as business, politics and public health as well as an awareness of gender issues. In addition, the discussion refocused where the staff looks for sports stories.

Students love to write their opinions. Their first reaction to many story ideas is to propose an opinion piece. Some editors require a solid, objective, news story or a feature story on the issue before the staff writes an opinion piece. The requirement creates better-researched, better-written opinion pieces and increases the paper's credibility. ▶

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STATUS OF THE STAFF

Place the Staff Tasks list below on the wall or on an overhead so staff members can identify their own tasks for the day. Another goal is to help editors and the teacher monitor each staff member's progress during each production cycle — a process that requires reflection from the staff after publication.

Recording the status of the staff each day during workshops keeps students on task. Never should a journalism class

be a "kick-back" period with stories hurriedly written hours before publication without benefit of response and editorial review.

In each workshop period, perhaps after a mini-lesson, student editors or the teacher asks the students to identify their tasks for the day by using the codes on the Staff Tasks overhead transparency or wall chart. By recording their answer and perhaps a brief note on a matrix, it is easy to see what work each student should be doing and to see their progress through the writing and publishing process. Recording their daily status takes less than two minutes once the students become familiar with it.

By directing and charting their own progress through multiple steps of the writing process, students learn to research well, to use the resources of their writing community and, best of all, to meet deadlines.

Staff Tasks

- Pre Writing research plans, doing preliminary research, designing surveys
- I..... Interviewing
- WD... Writing a draft
- R..... Responding, either giving or receiving readers' response
- C..... Writer's conference with an editor
- RW ... Rewriting, final editing before submission to editor
- O..... Other, including advertising, copy editing, graphic design and fact checking



NURTURING STORY DEVELOPMENT

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EVERY SUCCESSFUL STUDENT JOURNALISM PROGRAM uses a version of a writers' workshop, with instruction sandwiched into the production cycle. Lessons on the First Amendment; on student press law, including copyright, libel and privacy laws; on media ethics; on news values; on editing and leadership skills and on layout and design vie for time with the need to produce each issue.

Publishing — and wanting to be read — helps focus the staff on the concerns and the interests of their audience as well as on the validity of their research, of their clarity and of their accuracy as well as on writing essentials. Students know their audience loses interest quickly when the writing is irrelevant, muddy or disorganized while adults may read their work critically.

But it is not the norm for high-school students to be able to manage their time and maintain their focus for days or weeks with only instruction and motivation to direct them. An adviser needs the juggling ability of a circus performer, the sensitive ear of a piano tuner and the organizational skill of a Roman general to allow students to control the content of the student media.

Nancie Atwell, writing in her book *In the Middle*, explained that after Donald Graves visited her classroom, he asked, "Do you know what makes you such a good writing teacher?"

Atwell anticipated praise for her commitment, her sensitivity or her intelligence. Instead, he said, "You're so damned organized" (Atwell 54). The lesson: Structure and accountability are essential for journalism advisers whose students create published work, often closely scrutinized published work, even though it appears to emerge out of a flurry of adolescent chaos.

Structures built into the writers' workshop can provide this accountability during production cycles. These include checking the status of the staff, checking the progress of stories through the multiple and recursive steps in the writing process, facilitating responding sessions and requiring reflection from the staff after publication.

The teacher may read drafts but definitely should avoid grading them at each step. It is the student editors who are responsible for content of the student media though the adviser may counsel with the editors about how to redirect students who struggle. Advisers should also be available to answer questions, to support the editors and sometimes to provide direct instruction. Rarely does an adviser step into the work in process without an invitation from the editor or writer. ►

PROMOTING THOUGHTFUL RESPONSE

AS WITH ANY OTHER HIGHER-LEVEL SKILL, the responding process will not be mastered in one session.

Model the process frequently with the entire class.

Though students are expected to work closely with their editors, they are not required to accept all their peers' suggestions. They do not need to rebut or to convince their responders. They need to listen.

The most powerful method of teaching responding is to ask for the adviser to ask for response to his or her writing. Student response can direct powerful changes in proficient writers' work, and students will realize that response is an essential part of every writer's process.

In response sessions, writers often learn that they need to do more research. Editors may assign new deadlines for the next revision. The adviser may review the next draft, read the work quickly and again share concerns with the editors or present a mini-lesson to the staff.

Once content is strong, additional response focuses on the clarity of the language and the extent to which it is engaging. A passive sentence, "The certificates were awarded Monday," may signal a need to refocus the writing on the honorees or may reveal a lack of information. Who awarded the certificates and who received them?

Response is not solely for novice writers. The more ambitious the piece of writing, the more response and revision it needs. The strongest writers, when they "fall in love with a story," may seek the adviser's response as an experienced reader and writer. The conversation is then between two writers. These adviser-student discussions are different from a conversation among students who want to know if their work is "good enough."

The recursive process allows students whose English language skills are rather weak to produce strong content. Students still enrolled in English Language Development classes are able to become strong staff members.

Timid first-year students and students from the resource program will see their names in their first bylines by "buddy writing" with more experienced writers. At first they may contribute little beyond research, but older writers tend to be generous with the "baby journalists" as long as the novices are responsible and keep trying. Indeed, giving a hand to someone coming up behind is a basic value in professional journalism.

Writers seek copy editing before they submit the story to the editor, again with a copy to the adviser. If the



submitted story raises ethical or legal issues or has not followed the tenets of reliable journalism or appropriate English, the adviser should go to the section editor and express the concern. The editor may decide to hold the story until it can be done well. If concerns remain, the adviser may go to the editor-in-chief.

On rare occasions the adviser or editors may need to call a meeting of the editorial board — all the student leaders — and explain the concerns in terms of journalistic principles. At some point, the adviser may need to ask, "Is this the mountain you want to die on?"

But unless the story is legally obscene, libelous

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THE PROCESS IN A NUTSHELL

PREPARE

The success of the article depends on the effort put in at the prewriting stage. Brainstorm. Outline. Report. Research.

DRAFT

Concentrate on explaining and on supporting ideas. Think through what you know and how you can convey that to the reader. Don't worry about grammar, spelling, punctuation or style at this point.

POLISH

Rewriting and editing are the keys to being effective. Think deeply about the reader. Make each sentence concise and fact check for accuracy. Edit for grammar, spelling, punctuation and style.

EVALUATE

Solicit input after the stories are published and learn how to improve your writing. Publish corrections/clarifications in a timely fashion. Critical and complimentary letters to the editor are an indication of what stories had an impact.

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or "presents material which so incites students as to create a clear and present danger of the commission of unlawful acts on school premises or the violation of lawful school regulations, or the substantial disruption of the orderly operation of the school" (California Education Code 48907), any censorship on the adviser's part would be government censorship.

The adviser works for the government. The adviser may need to remind the students of what they have learned and then walk away and let them decide.

In these circumstances, students have a strong record of making sound decisions.

What about poorly written stories, misspelled names, inaccurate scores or poorly sourced stories?

Unlike in English classes, the adviser should never mention grades as a story criterion. Instead, the standard should be communication standards: thorough reporting, thoughtful editing and clear and colorful communication. Always the goal is to publish something worth reading, helpful for the readers and appropriate for the audience. ▶

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RESEARCH METHODS

Responding is the heart of the writing process and key to any successful publishing process. In journalism it is crucial. Everything that is published reflects on everyone on staff so responding is the students' (not the adviser's) opportunity to praise, question and make suggestions. During response sessions, students push for accuracy and raise ethical questions as well as comment on the prose.

But there is nothing natural about asking others to critique your writing. And responding well to others is a skill that develops with practice. The adviser must model, nurture and require responding. For example, it often means biting the tongue when reading the first words of stories, by both novices and veterans.

Responding is different from proofreading, which comes later in the writing process. Proofreading focuses on what is on the written page while responding is best done orally though responders work best with a copy of the article in their hands.

Though responding will eventually become second nature to the young writers, at first the adviser will need to establish a set formula. Divide the class into response groups of three or four students, preferably led by an editor or experienced writer, each group forming a small circle. Each student should have a copy of the work receiving response.

1. The writer reads the paper aloud.

The writer may mark what "does not sound right." Writers learn many things as they read their work aloud. Good journalistic writing flows easily as fluent, everyday speech.

The responders may mark their copy to remind themselves of points they will mention. However, responding does require writing constructive notes or questions on another's writing, not copy editing.

Response, as done by professional writers, is almost always oral. Even when it is done via the Internet, it mimics oral response.

2. Responders identify the work's strengths.

Writers need to know what they do well. Praise helps the writers accept later suggestions and reinforces strong writing skills.

The adviser may wish to suggest types of positive response based on the conventions of the type of writing: reviews, news, feature, columns, opinion, editorials, sports or informational graphics.

If the responders cannot find anything to praise, they can say, "I hear you saying that." Learning what the reader understands when they read is also helpful.

3. The writer asks questions, especially about how to focus a story or how to strengthen a presentation.

The adviser may wish to suggest possible questions, again based on the form of writing.

Beginning writers, still unaware of their audience, often ask fewer and less powerful questions than proficient writers. However, they learn by listening to the thoughtful responses of others.

4. Finally, responders give helpful suggestions.

They reflect a concern for how all students, not merely those in honors classes, will understand the piece. "I understand what you mean when you say ..., but wouldn't it be clearer if you wrote something like"

By using reader response methods, advisers endorse and promote teamwork from ideas to the final product.



EVALUATING STORY IMPACT ▶

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AFTER EACH EDITION students write reflective letters describing their strengths, the areas in which they need to grow and their contribution to the edition. They discuss the quality of their research, writing and revision and their many roles on the staff. They evaluate how well they managed their time and how well they met deadlines. Editors discuss their leadership skills as well.

More important than the reflective letter is the read-around following each edition. Students are required to read every word of the publication the day it arrives and to prepare to make at least one specific positive evaluation and one specific suggestion for improvement in three areas: layout/design, copy editing/accuracy and writing quality.

Each student highlights a copy of the paper and writes comments during the discussion. First-year writers speak first, and senior editors speak last. The process allows each staff member to learn from one another.

Early in the year students need to be reminded frequently that they are examining the product, not the people, that the published work reflects the work of all the staff and that no response is expected from the person whose name is on the story or the section.

Once the staff has become comfortable with the format, the adviser may ask for more detailed literary and journalistic analysis of the edition, usually concentrating on a topic that has been taught since the last production cycle:

- What are the three strongest verbs used in leads in this edition?
- Which three leads would you rewrite first to sharpen the focus of the story?
- Which stories could be enhanced with additional reporting beyond our campus?
- What information should have been pulled out and used in a sidebar to make the presentation more effective?
- Which are the strongest headlines and why are they strong?
- Circle the forms of the verb to be used in the section in which you are published.
- Find instances of a verb plus adjective combinations that could have been replaced by a stronger verb.

The adviser generally is silent except perhaps to ask the editors how to adjust the procedures or the production cycle to avoid a problem in the future.

Students soon develop higher standards than an adviser could ever impose, and they work to meet those expectations with each succeeding edition.

If advisers help the students develop news sense, if they guide students through closely structured writing workshops and if students reflect on their work, young journalists will take ownership of their own writing, strive for excellence and experience the perils and joys of the First Amendment firsthand. No other teaching experience provides such joys and challenges. ■

RESEARCH PLANS

Editors can use the writers' research plans to focus the story and to train staff writers in principles of ethical and balanced reporting.

Because journalism ethics demand multiple sources and frequent fact checking, students should provide their editor and adviser with their research plan so the staff member and the editor responsible have agreed on the direction and scope of the story.

As the editors and adviser review research plans, the adviser may see the need for mini-lessons on balanced coverage, multiple sources, interviewing and ethics. In addition, the adviser may coach editors on what needs to happen in their writing conferences with their staff writers.

The adviser will want to see rough drafts primarily to ensure that students meet their deadlines. Students print copies for themselves, the adviser, their editor and perhaps three more for the rest of their responding group.

They continue to ask questions such as the following:

- What do I already know about this?
- Where can I go to verify what I have heard?
- What background information do I need?
- Where else can I go for expert information, locally or online?
- Who (plural) will I interview for this story?
- What specific questions will I ask in each interview?
- What follow-up questions can I predict?
- Who else should I interview? Where else can I go for background?
- What form am I writing? (News, feature, staff editorial, column?)

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