Scenario 1:

As the treasurer of the math team, you know a lot about math. In fact, the math teacher in charge of the organization is your favorite teacher of all time. However, in your treasurer duties of reconciling the books, you find some discrepancies in some of the accounting practices — one is a withdrawal of $600. You notice a few small $20 deposits.

When you question the sponsor, she tells you she needed a small loan because she needed new car tires. She states she's already paid $140 from what she borrowed. As you leave, you meet the principal and police liaison officer at the door. While snooping outside her door, you hear a discussion concerning questions of math team finances. As you leave, you witness your teacher being arrested.

Thankfully, you're also the news editor. You want to get the scoop, so you immediately start writing a news story about the event.

Is there a legal problem? Any ethical concerns?

*Yes, because you are close to the teacher you have a conflict of interest. Someone else on the publication can write the story.*

*Additionally, get the police report and find out what was she arrested for.*

*Also, because you are the club treasurer, you could be asked about the fund as well.*

Scenario 2:

You’ve been assigned to do a review on a local spa. The spa owner offers to give you every service offered for a favorable review, which includes a massage, facial, manicure and pedicure. What do you do?

Is there a legal problem? Any ethical concerns?

*Ethical concerns — telling the truth. If you take the spa owner up on the offer, you are biased from the start. Decline the offer. You may even ask another reporter to take your place, so there is not a perceived conflict of interest.*

Scenario 3:

You hear the local grocery store has had multiple citations concerning health violations. Intrigued, you decide to go “undercover” for your local news organization. You’ve been writing for them for the last year. You earn $20 per story. Because it’s such a huge scoop, the news organization has offered to give you $100 for the story. On the application, you skip the section that asks about previous employment.

Is there a legal problem? Any ethical concerns?

*You lied on your application, which is unethical and could have legal ramifications. The grocery store could sue you (and could win) for any wages it has paid at minimum.*

*Instead, submit the FOI request through the health department. Find out for yourself what the health officials have found.*

Scenario 4:

During the parent band booster meeting at your house, you hear one of the parents talk about school issues. Immediately, you grab your voice recorder and slyly place it under the couch. After everyone leaves, you replay the tape. You have a treasure trove of information — including allegations the soccer coach regularly curses out players. You opt to put together an online piece complete with audio from your undercover tape and story informing others of the allegations.

Is there a legal problem? Any ethical concerns?

In many states, it is illegal to tape someone without their knowledge. Ethically, you shouldn’t do this either. Any information obtained through this method should be discarded. Another reporter should contact sources about the possible leads, but the information is tainted because it was unethically obtained.

Scenario 5:

The last fall play was terrible. One of the costumes ripped mid-show, a prop gave a student a concussion, and several actors had written cues for their lines on their arms. You write a scathing, but truthful review of the play.

Is there a legal problem? Any ethical concerns?

*Check your policies. Journalism advisers often disagree on this one. One thought from Scholastic Journalism is that students should refrain from publishing scathing reviews. Their reasoning is the possibility of students never auditioning and acting again.*

*Others argue students on stage should be able to take criticism.*

*If you approach this with a green light approach, students instead could write a story about students’ most embarrassing moments on the stage. This would still cover the fiasco, but allow student actors to tell the story instead. (And you may end up with a better story.)*

Scenario 6:

It’s late on deadline night — you need to have your broadcast segment finished in less than an hour. The video coverage you were going to use of students sleeping in class has vanished. You opt to grab everyone you can and shoot some blurry footage of students sleeping in your classroom. You ask your teacher to pretend to teach the class.

Is there a legal problem? Any ethical concerns?

*Unless this is clearly labeled as a photo illustration, you are ethically lying to your reader and potentially putting your teacher at risk if he or she can be identified.*

Scenario 7:

You’re the business manager for your publications. You realize that you have the perfect way to sell ads: You sell coverage space. A new local beanbag chair business has opened across from school. You go in and tell the owner that if she places an ad, you’ll make sure the publication covers the new business in the next issue.

Is there a legal problem? Any ethical concerns?

*Ethically, students should not sell coverage — or promise coverage — to businesses to get advertising. If possible, keep the business and editorial aspects of the publication separate.*

Scenario 8:

On the way to school you notice several emergency vehicles with their lights flashing at a three-car accident. Since you have your camera, you opt to stop and take hundreds of photos at the scene. The students survived, but one unidentified middle aged person did not survive.

Your have the following types of shots:

• Several photos of the emergency personnel pulling people out of cars.

• An up-close photo of a blood soaked student being pulled from the car.

• Photos of the multiple emergency vehicles.

Would you cover this event? How would you do so? What if no students were involved in the crash?

Is there a legal problem? Any ethical concerns?

*If you opt to cover the event, examine this using the ethical norms of the area you reside. If you opt to cover the event, you may want to use the photos of the emergency vehicles.*

Scenario 9:

On a recent field trip to the local zoo, three students were arrested for shoplifting. You have a great story — including quotes from other students seeing them get arrested and you obtained the official police report. All the students were freshmen in high school. You’ve found out the identity of these students because you witnessed all three arrests. The police filed charges in the juvenile system. None of the arrested students have returned your repeated calls.

You want to include the names, but the editor is a bit hesitant because her best friend’s sister was involved. Your final draft has the names of the arrested students.

Is there a legal problem? Any ethical concerns?

*Most news agencies withhold the names of minors unless they are tried as adults, however, this is an ethical decision and not a legal one. The editor should step away from weighing in on the scenario, however. The person has a conflict of interest.*