



Getting the story

A friend of a small-town editor prided herself in knowing all the news before anybody else, and certainly before the paper published it.

Imagine the editor's delight when his paper rolled off the press and, in his presence, she picked it up, glanced at the main headline, and exclaimed before she could stop herself, "Wow! I didn't know that!"

Newspapers do not have news monopolies — not even in a small town. Even if your town lacks a radio or TV station or a competing news website, your competitors include social media and the grapevine. You want your paper and your website to scoop them all — or at least to provide the first reliable and thorough account of a big story.

So where do you find such stories? And how do you develop them?

APA reporting tips

What makes a good story?

■ A newsworthy story contains some or all of the news values on a list sometimes called TIPCUP: timeliness, impact, proximity, conflict, unusualness and prominence. A big story may contain all of these, some with great intensity.

■ **Timeliness** means the events happened recently or you have the latest developments in a continuing story.

■ **Impact** means the story affects your readers. If it affects their children or their money, for example, they are going to be intensely interested.

■ **Proximity** means the story occurs nearby, geographically or emotionally. A tornado in your town interests your readers more than one elsewhere. A local soldier injured in Afghanistan has emotional proximity.

■ **Conflict** means struggle, and every good story contains conflict. A journalist should not create conflict, but should uncover conflict that already exists. The conflict may be between nations or people, or it may be someone's struggle against obstacles to solving a problem.

■ **Unusualness:** Less-usual things are more newsworthy, which is why bad things often get more attention than things that are working as planned.

■ **Prominence** means a prominent person or institution is involved. If the mayor or biggest employer does something, it's more newsworthy than if someone else did it.

■ You could add emotion, action and sex, among other things, to the list of news values. One journalism professor's list was short: blood, women, action and big names.

Where to find story ideas

■ A publisher who thought "news" was plural asked an editor, "Are there any news?" The editor answered, "No, sir — not a single new!" The editor was mistaken. There is always news, but sometimes it's easier to see.

■ Look and listen. When something happens that might be a story, put it on your list. Whether it interests you is not the point; do you think it will interest readers?

■ Network with other people, in person and online. Attend meetings; hang out with locals. You often meet people who could tip you off about future stories. Cultivate them. Keep their cellphone numbers and email addresses.

■ Make regular calls at places where news happens: the police station, the court clerk's office, the board of education office. Systematically look through public records; don't just depend on someone to tell you what's new.

■ Be nosy. Ask questions.

■ Read and watch the news published in your own paper, by your competition, statewide, nationally and worldwide. What did you publish last week or this time last year that gives you a new story idea? Localize state and national stories by showing how they affect local people.

■ Keep an idea file for future stories. It may include published stories to follow up. When events are scheduled, put them on your calendar.

■ Write down story ideas, or you will forget them.

■ A light news day or week may be a good time to do in-depth, follow-up or feature stories.

Sources

■ Most sources will be people, whom you will name and quote. Go directly to the horse's mouth — the one who knows what's happening. In addition to people who are directly involved in the story, these sources may include authorities (people in charge), experts (people who know the subject matter but don't have a dog in this fight), spokespeople, advocates for and against, and people who will be affected in the same way your readers will be.

■ Rank-and-file people such as clerks, secretaries and middle managers can help a lot. Cultivate them.

■ Use documents, including official records and reputable internet sites, to amplify and verify what people tell you. But documents rarely tell a complete story; you need people to explain and add human interest. Look for real-life examples of what documents tell you.

■ Go to sources on all sides. Be fair. But measure what people say against the obvious or proven truth.

■ Use as many sources as it takes to make the story complete. Usually you will need at least three sources, but you may need many more.

■ Just collecting and rewriting what you've found on the internet is usually not sufficient. Add value through your original information gathering.

■ Public relations people and their news releases can be helpful, but remember that their job is to promote clients, while your job is to serve readers. Rewrite most news releases, adding information from other sources.

Working the story

■ The five W's, the H and the S — who, what, why, where, when, how, so what? — can help even the most seasoned journalist develop a story thoroughly and avoid missing something. Ask yourself those questions constantly, regarding the whole story and every piece of it.

■ Stay in touch with your editor and other people interested in the story. Ask them to suggest angles and sources and to react to your ideas.

■ Shoot photos and videos to go with the story. Also consider charts or graphics.

By the way ...

■ Journalism is a public service. You are educating readers, as well as entertaining them. You are enabling them to make better choices as citizens, voters and leaders. When people try to deny you information that your readers need, keep pushing politely and professionally. Figure out who else can give you the information.

■ Look for the person who's displeased, such as the city councilman who voted no. These people may be eager to talk. Don't let them manipulate you, but take their information and check it out.



Interviewing

When you call someone on the phone with just a question or two for a story, that's an interview. When you sit down for a long conversation containing multiple questions, that's also an interview. A journalistic interview is a structured conversation in which you learn things on behalf of your unseen audience.

A typical news story presents information from one or more people whom the reporter interviewed. Usually, you will not want to rely on a single source of information but will want to cite three or more sources in the story — which could include people interviewed, documents, and what you saw for yourself.

APA reporting tips

Before the interview

- Identify the best source available for the information you need. Ideally, your interviewee should know the information firsthand, not just be repeating what he has heard. The most convenient source is not always the best source. Being a journalist, you should be bold and contact literally anyone who knows something.

- Contact your interviewee by the best and fastest way. A phone call works well: You can get immediate feedback in the form of answers to your questions or an agreement to talk at a specified later time. You can also try email, texting, social media, or a personal visit. Different strategies work best with different people. But don't give up.

- If possible, arrange a real-time conversation face to face, on the phone or online. You can ask follow-up questions on the spot, hear the voice, see body language. Quotes will be spontaneous, not stilted.

- Do enough research to know what you need from that person. If you can Google an answer, you may not need to ask your interviewee the same factual question, although you may want to get his or her opinion.

- List tentative questions so you can start fast, steer the interview, and not miss something. In preparing, think about the five journalistic W's, the H and the S: who, what, why, where, when, how, so what? Keep in mind who your readers are and what they want and need to know. Modify questions and ask new ones as the interview proceeds.

- Use two kinds of questions: (1) Closed-ended questions ask for specific facts or maybe a yes or no. Answers are short. (2) Open-ended questions such as "Why?" and "How?" require longer answers, and they are usually more enlightening and provide better quotes.

During the interview

- Respect the person's time. Show up on schedule, and pace your interview for the time available.

- Identify yourself as a reporter, and make sure the person knows she may be quoted.

- Start the interview with a friendly tone, and warm the person up — not necessarily with chit-chat, but with easy questions that will establish rapport. Save the difficult questions for later in the interview, but don't avoid them. Push for the information you need in order to write a complete and fair story. Be firm and professional.

- Listen to the person's answers, and ask follow-up questions to clarify and get details. If he evades, pin him down. Make sure you understand what he's saying. You can't write about something you don't understand.

- Make notes. You can use pen and paper or maybe a computer. With the person's permission, you can make a video or voice recording. Make sure he knows whether you want to use the recording just for notes or intend to publish his actual voice. While recording, make notes about the times of key statements and quotes so that you can find them fast.

- Listen for good quotations — colorful or perceptive descriptions or comments. You'll need several good quotes in every story. Take those quotes down in exact words with quotation marks.

- Both facts and opinions are newsworthy. If the person doesn't express his opinions, you may want to ask, "How do you feel about that?"

- Give the person a reasonable opportunity to make his own points, even if they are not what you expected or thought you needed. But don't let him control the interview or waste time.

- Be ready to shift the focus of the interview if the person surprises you with information that's not what you were expecting but is actually more newsworthy.

- As the interview winds down, a good question is "What else do I need to know?" This tells the person that you are trying to be thorough and balanced, and he may provide unexpected information.

- Other good ending questions are "Who else should I talk to?" and "Where can I find more information?"

- Ask the person how to get back in touch if you need more information or clarification. If possible, get a cell-phone number (and keep it in case you need it later, perhaps for a different story).

- Shoot a picture or video of the person that can be published with the interview.

- Get the interviewee's correct name and title.

Writing the story

- You probably won't be reporting everything the person said; you will be using selected information and quotes, often as part of a larger story with other sources.

- Attribute the information. Usually "he said" or "she said" is the best way. You can use "added," "according to," "pointed out" and other expressions — but avoid loaded words such as "claimed," which expresses skepticism.

- Even if the interviewee is the subject of the story, quote other sources to give perspective and verification.

- Focus on the meaty and interesting parts of the interview. You do not have to print everything said.

- Write mostly in your own words, but sprinkle in good quotations, using the subject's words when they're colorful, precise or authentic. It's better to quote complete sentences, not just words and phrases.

By the way ...

- Emailing questions and answers is a poor substitute for having a conversation in person or on the phone.

- Consult your editor before agreeing to show your story to a source. The source may try to alter the story or take back something, but he also may catch errors or add information. Maybe you should show him what's attributed to him but not what others said. Your decision may depend on the type of story — for example, whether it's a feature or controversial.



APA reporting tips

Covering a meeting

When a public board such as a city council, county commission, board of education or planning commission meets, it can make decisions that affect your readers' lives and pocket-books. Even though such a meeting is (or should be) open to anyone who wants to attend, you will often find that you — the local newspaper reporter — are the only audience. Readers depend on you to represent them there, informing them about what the board does, what future actions it is considering, why, and how it will affect them.

That *why* is important. Describe for readers the deliberative process that leads up to a decision, including who said what, what options were considered, and who was for it and against it. In this way, you empower citizens to influence decision-making and to vote wisely.

At the meeting

- Arrive prepared, having read previous news stories, the meeting agenda if available, and other background information to help you understand what happens. Know who the board members are and how to spell their names.

- Arrive early. You don't want to miss anything, and not all the news takes place during the formal meeting. Introduce yourself. Talk with people. Observe and listen. Figure out who the board members are.

- During the meeting, take careful notes, including the exact words of quotable things people say. Consider making an electronic recording, but don't expect to have time to listen to the whole meeting again; instead, keep notes showing when key quotes and information happened so that you can find them quickly in the recording. If you can take better notes on a computer than with a pen and paper, you may be able to do so, but don't create a distracting noise.

- Ask to see relevant documents so that you will be as informed as the board members about what they discuss. Ask for copies of key documents, or shoot copies with your phone.

- Often an item that was discussed is more newsworthy than voting or other official action.

- If there is an audience, pay close attention to what audience members do and say. Speak with them; get names. Sometimes the audience generates more news than the board members.

- Keep asking yourself, "What does this mean to the readers — how will it affect them?" Get the details needed to answer that question. If a decision will cost them money or affect their children or their property, they will consider it big news.

- Be professional, upfront and friendly with public officials, but know and defend your rights. In most cases, they have no right to shut you out of the meeting or to ask you not to report what happens there by saying something is "off the record." If they try to exclude you, ask them why, and put their answers in your story. If you feel they are being more secretive than the law or common sense allows, tell them so. Know your legal rights. Consult your editor, who may want to call a lawyer.

- Shoot close-up photos and/or videos of people doing things or speaking during the meeting. Make several shots of each scene from different angles, then use only the best shot or shots.

After the meeting

- Stay late. When the meeting ends, you will almost always need additional information. Ask for it on the spot. Ask people why they voted as they did. Interview the dissenters, who may be eager to talk.

- Through phone calls, personal interviews and docu-

ments, obtain additional information you will need to write a complete, balanced story. For example, something may have been said in the meeting that reflects badly on a person who wasn't there. Call that person to obtain his or her side of the story. Get reactions from those who will be affected by the decisions made.

- Review and organize notes before you start writing. You could number the pages (to avoid losing the sequence), break the pages into groups, put the most important groups on top, and mark highlights and quotes.

- Consider taking additional photos and/or videos that will illustrate what took place in the meeting. If they talked about an eyesore or an intersection, for example, take a picture of it.

Writing the story

- Start with a strong lede that will grab attention, stating or alluding to the most newsworthy thing that took place during the meeting. Do not start by saying that a meeting was held or what the meeting was about; dive right into discussions and actions.

- If your lede is not self-explanatory, high in the story place a nut graf — a paragraph summarizing the most important point.

- If a lot of things happened, you may want to explain the two or three most important ones at the top of the story and conclude with bullet points about other items. Put items roughly in the order of importance (most important ones higher in the story), not chronological order.

- Sometimes a meeting is worth two or more stories on different topics covered.

- Be concise and precise: Pack a lot of information into every word and sentence.

- Write short sentences and paragraphs. Most paragraphs will be just one or two sentences.

- Use simple words, converting bureaucratic jargon like "bond issue" to familiar language like "borrowing money."

- Use quotations, and name names.

- You don't have to report everything that was done — only what's newsworthy.

- Sometimes nothing newsworthy happened, and you should write nothing or just a brief.

By the way ...

- Cultivate relationships with department heads and staff members, who often have the details you need. These include the clerk who's taking minutes of the meeting. You may find yourself comparing notes with the clerk because both of you want to be accurate.

- Every meeting is an opportunity to pick up myriad story ideas about official and unofficial community events and concerns.



Writing a news story

Once you have the information, it's time to write.

You may be on a tight deadline that requires speed, but fortunately you are not trying to write the great American novel or a college research paper. You are not trying to impress anyone with how much you know or your vocabulary, and you need not take time to form an opinion because your opinion is irrelevant to the story.

You are simply telling the story as clearly as possible, focusing on the facts that will be most interesting and relevant to readers.

APA reporting tips

Starting your story

■ The lede (lead) is the first paragraph or two. Facts are more important than clever writing. Your lede should serve readers (who always come first) but also make the story irresistible.

■ Your lede must accomplish at least four things:

✓ **Suck readers into the story** by stating specific facts that matter to them. Don't exaggerate, but make the lede as strong as the facts allow.

✓ **Give them at least a clue** as to what the story is about.

✓ **Start with strong words.** Save boring words and routine information for later. Almost never start with time: "On Tuesday, the City Council raised the sales tax ..."

✓ **Don't waste words.** The first paragraph usually should not exceed 25 or 30 words, but some good ledes are longer, some shorter. Make every word count.

■ The lede must contain information that readers probably did not already know. Don't write a first paragraph consisting entirely of background information, and don't let the lede be entirely vague. Give a juicy detail or two.

■ Within the first four paragraphs, you need a paragraph or two stating the gist of the story. Sometimes the lede fulfills this requirement. But if it does not, place this information within the first four paragraphs. This information is sometimes called the "nut graf." ("Graf" is newsroom jargon for "paragraph.")

■ After writing the story, make sure the story fulfills all the promises that the lede makes to readers.

What comes next?

■ If you have written a good lede and nut graf, writing the rest of the story will be easier.

■ Not everyone will read the story to the end, especially if the story continues (jumps) from one page to another. So put all essential facts high in the story.

■ You can use an inverted pyramid, starting with the most newsworthy facts and moving to items of less and less importance. The inverted pyramid works well for many print and online stories.

■ Another good technique, usually for a feature story, is an anecdotal lede. Begin with a short, true tale that illustrates the main point. Then make the main point clear with a nut graf. "Alice Johnson was looking forward to going to Parks Elementary School as a first-grader this fall and reuniting with kindergarten friends. Instead, she is at home, taking lessons online. ... Alice is one of 2,500 students in Lewis County public schools who cannot get together in person because of COVID-19."

■ You could organize the story by topics, addressing the most newsworthy ones first. For certain stories, chronological order may make sense.

■ Most paragraphs should contain just one or two sentences, with an occasional longer paragraph. Use short sentences. Use familiar words, preferably short. Use ac-

tion verbs, and don't use a noun when a verb can do the job. Readers should never need to read a sentence twice.

■ Use active voice, which means the subject of the sentence does the action, as in "Mayor Bill Jones criticized the protesters," not "The protesters were criticized by Mayor Bill Jones." If the story contains many words ending in "ed" and words such as "is," "are," "were" and "by," you may be using passive voice.

■ Identify everyone by a full, correctly spelled name and precise title. Use the proper names of companies and organizations. Give details. Don't assume that readers will know something; explain it. If you don't know something, Google it or ask somebody who knows. The worst thing you can do is ask around and form a consensus of people who don't really know a fact that you could look up.

■ Describe. Paint a picture. Tell a story. Make readers see, feel, hear, taste and smell. Descriptive adjectives and adverbs are good, but not those that give your opinions.

■ In fact, there is no place for the writer's opinion in a news story. The readers should not be able to tell whether you are for or against what you are writing about.

■ Attribute every opinion and all information that is not generally known and undisputed. The most common attribution word is "said," and don't hesitate to use it repeatedly. If you are reporting on something that you saw and heard yourself, make sure readers know it.

■ Use quotations — people's exact words. But don't quote at great length, and don't quote something that you can explain better yourself. A good quotation is colorful, revealing, inspiring, succinct or surprising. In most cases, put the first sentence of the quotation at the beginning of a paragraph, followed by attribution.

■ Don't end the story with essential information because some readers will never reach the end. Don't end with a summary. You could end with a quote, anecdote or fact alluding to the lede. Or you could just quit writing.

■ Don't leave holes (information gaps) in the story. Use the five W's, the H and the S: who, what, why, where, when, how, so what? Apply those questions not just to the story at large but also to every significant detail. Make sure numbers add up.

■ Trim your story mercilessly to pack the most information into the fewest words.

■ Use the computer's spelling and grammar checker, but override it when you know it's wrong.

By the way ...

■ Are you stumped about how to write your lede? Just start writing the story, and the lede may become obvious. Then place it atop the story.

■ To identify your lede, imagine that you were involved in a traffic accident and need to call your mom. Your phone has only 15 seconds of power left. When Mom answers, what are you going to tell her that she most wants to know? (Probably "I was in a wreck, but I'm OK.") That's your lede.



APA headline tips

Writing a headline

Three Englishmen Saved from Boiling Pot By Cannibal Chief, Who Was Friend at Oxford

Someone described this 1922 New York Times headline as the best ever written. It's a great headline because it tells the gist of the story using vivid details but makes the reader want to know more.

A headline deserves your best efforts because a lot of people won't read beyond it unless it lures them into the story. The biggest advantage you can have when writing the headline is a great story. But a bad headline can rob a fine story of many readers, and a great headline can bring extra readers to an ordinary story.

What's in a headline?

- The headline (or "head") is the large print at the top of the story. Your headline will often take the gist of the story from the lede or nut graf, but it should not be identical to either. (If you can't find a good headline in the lede or the nut graf, maybe the story needs more editing or rewriting.)

- A headline is almost always a complete sentence (subject and verb) but doesn't end with a period. Sometimes "is" can be omitted but understood.

- Strike a balance between telling all the juicy details and giving the reader just enough information to arouse curiosity and make him read the story.

- A story that runs both in the paper and online may need a head for each platform. The print headline must fit into a certain number of columns and lines, with no bad line breaks and lines of about equal length. The newspaper head can be a play on words that doesn't tell exactly what the story is about because the head is part of a package on the page — headline, story, photo, caption, quotes, graphics, etc. But online, the reader may first see the head alone. So an online head needs to be precise and literal. A newspaper head usually shouldn't exceed 45 characters; an online head, 70 characters.

How do you write it?

- If the headline is about a past event, use a present-tense verb — "wins," not "won"; "defends," not "defended." For future action, use the infinitive: "to open."

- Use action verbs and active voice: "Motorcycle rally rolls into town," rather than "Crowd drawn to motorcycle rally." If a verb ends in "ed" and the headline contains "by," you may be using passive voice.

- Generally, omit "a," "an" and "the." You can use a comma instead of "and." If two clauses could be complete sentences, separate them with a semicolon.

- Use single quotation marks, not double quotes. Use digits for numbers.

- Follow your paper's capitalization style. Many capitalize headlines like text, using capitals only when needed.

- Use synonyms. A synonym means about the same thing as another word, but the synonym may be longer or shorter or have the nuances that you need. A thesaurus (on paper or online) will help you find synonyms.

- Search engine optimization (SEO) means making the online headline and story attractive to search engines so that readers looking for a certain topic will land on your site. Use words that people will Google for, preferably in the first few words of the headline.

- Connect at a human level. The New York Times tried two headlines on the same story: "Mexico Searches Rubble for Signs of Life After Quake" and "Last Words of Quake Victim: 'Are My Children O.K.?' " The second drew 155% more readers.

- Advice that a Times editor gave college journalists,

based on actual responses to online headlines, included: Surprise readers; use vivid language; be conversational; be mysterious; use powerful quotations; use a revealing number; create internal tension by offering two things that seem to conflict.

- Pack eye-catching details into the head. Avoid words that you're likely to see only in headlines, such as "eye" (for "consider"), "mar," "nix," and "rap" (for "criticize").

- Be sure that the story will deliver whatever the headline promises or hints at. Don't exaggerate. Don't finalize the head until the story is complete.

- Attribute any statement that's not widely known or irrefutable. You can use the source's name and a colon, as in "Lincoln: War inevitable, victory essential."

- A careless headline can damage someone's reputation or cause legal trouble. If someone has been arrested, say "charged with," not "arrested for." The head "Grand jury convicts 87" can get you into a heap of trouble. Grand juries charge; they don't convict.

- Sometimes it's best to use a secondary head (often called a "deck") to give additional information.

- You can use a question mark at the end of a head, especially to indicate uncertainty, but don't do it often. "Governor to visit next week?" would work, but "Governor may visit next week" is better.

- If appropriate, try alliteration or puns. When Lurleen Wallace won the 1966 Alabama Democratic primary for governor without a runoff over nine opponents, The Montgomery Advertiser's headline was "It's A Lurleen Landslide!" When Alabama, thanks to quarterback Ken "Snake" Stabler, defeated Auburn 7-3 in the rain in 1967, the Advertiser headline said, "Tigers Snake-Bit in Mud."

- If you are writing the head for another writer's story, first read the story thoroughly. Later, if you need details to rewrite the headline, look back at the story.

You're not finished yet!

- Check spelling and punctuation. While correcting an error, did you mess up something else? Show the head to another person, even a non-journalist.

- Look for unintended meanings, which sometimes result from a figure of speech or an ambiguous word: "Juvenile court to try shooting defendant"; "Red tape holds up bridge"; "Kids make nutritious snacks"; "Panda mating fails; veterinarian takes over"; "Statistics show teen pregnancy drops off at age 25."

- Apply the TACT test: taste, attractiveness, clarity, truth. (Actually, we should probably put "truth" first.)

By the way ...

- To rewrite a head that fits, copy and paste the old headline, using a proportional font. Then write the new headline underneath it, matching the length.

- Don't put a frivolous headline into the newspaper's computer system. It might get published.



APA reporting tips

Laws and liability

Access to governmental records and meetings is crucial for the press to fulfill its watchdog mission and to provide the general public transparency. There are “sunshine” laws pertaining to access that shine the light of day on what government is doing and plans to do. Reporters need to understand and invoke these laws when faced with public officials who deny access to government records or meetings or court hearings.

Although freedom of the press and freedom of speech are guaranteed by the U.S. and Alabama Constitutions, there are boundaries on the exercise of those liberties established by statutes, regulations and judicial caselaw.

The following is an extremely condensed version of laws and legal boundaries applicable to reporters in Alabama.

Newsgathering laws

■ The Alabama Open Records Act allows any citizen of the state the ability to inspect and take a copy of public records. All records made or received as part of conducting public business by state agencies are open unless specifically exempted by an Alabama law.

■ The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is a federal open records act that is applicable to federal agencies.

■ Both the Open Records Act and FOIA have several exceptions. For example, juvenile criminal records, personal privacy information, medical records and tax records are exempted from disclosures by statutes.

■ Generally, the government has the burden of proving applicability of an exception. If a record is refused, always ask a custodian for the citation to a law that allows them to withhold a document you have requested.

■ The Open Meetings Act of Alabama guarantees prior notice of and access to government meetings except when an executive session is properly invoked under the statute.

■ Generally, executive sessions can be called to discuss the job performance of non-managerial public employees; to hear complaints against individuals or entities; and to hold discussions with their attorneys about pending litigation, security plans, criminal investigations, and negotiations to buy or sell property. Public entities cannot take votes in executive sessions.

■ Advance public notice is required for meetings. Depending on the agency, this can mean posting on the secretary of state’s legal notices website, or for local governments it could mean posting a notice on the agency door. You need to inquire from those agencies you cover when and where they publish notices of their meetings.

■ Court trials and hearings concerning adults are also generally open to the public. Juvenile and some family court proceedings are generally not open to the public or press. However, for security purposes not all areas of the courthouse are public.

■ Documents filed in Alabama courts are generally open to public inspection. However, like cases, juvenile records and divorce records are examples of exceptions to the general rules. Judges may seal particular records in some limited cases.

Potential civil liability

■ The First Amendment prohibits the government (not private individuals) from abridging freedom of the press. A government agency cannot use prior restraint to stop you from publishing unless it would present a clear and present danger of immediate harm to the public.

■ You can be held responsible for what you publish af-

ter the fact. Publication of a false and defamatory statement of fact concerning a person or company is called libel. A “defamatory” statement is one that hurts the public reputation of the subject.

■ A person or company can sue the author or publisher of false defamatory statements for compensatory and punitive damages. Private persons who file a libel suit need only show the libel was negligently published. Public persons or officials must prove the libel was published with malice, which means the author knew or should have known the statement was false but published anyway.

■ Truth is an absolute defense to a libel suit. If your published facts are true, you will usually not be sued or, if you are sued, you should win the case. Getting your facts straight is essential if what you are writing will hurt the subject’s reputation.

■ Alabama law protects reporters who accurately print reports of public meetings or records. To overcome such protections, the party suing must prove the author knew or should have known the publication was false.

■ Do not ignore written demands to retract false information. To file a libel case and seek punitive damages, Alabama law requires the “victim” to send a written demand for retraction before filing suit. If you receive one, you should contact a lawyer or the APA Legal Hotline to discuss whether to give a retraction. If a retraction is properly made, a “victim” cannot recover punitive damages.

■ Do not invade the privacy of individuals. The law does not allow the press to intrude upon the privacy of persons without their consent. Publishing truthful but embarrassing facts or images concerning persons who had a reasonable expectation the facts or images would remain private can constitute an invasion of privacy. Information already in the public domain is safe to publish.

■ Write your own copy. There are federal and state laws that protect authors from having their work copied. Copyright laws allow the authors to sue for money damages when others copy their work. You can use small excerpts from copyrighted materials in news articles or book reviews, for example. But plagiarism can lead to legal liability for a copyright violation.

■ Do not trespass on private property. Trespass is entering a building or going onto private property without the consent of the owner. When covering events, try to stay in the public right of way or behind police lines. Take pictures while on public property. Do not go into houses or onto private property when the police or fire department invites you because they do not own the property. If you find yourself on private property, leave when the owner asks you to leave.

*When in doubt about your rights or liability, call or email the APA Legal Hotline for legal advice: **334-206-3100** or **APAHotline@rushtonstakely.com***



Press ethics

What you *can* publish without legal liability is not necessarily what you *should* publish. Ethical reporters should be accurate and fair.

The following are excerpts from the Code of Ethics published by the Alabama Press Association and the Society of Professional Journalists.

APA reporting tips

- Seek the truth and report it.
- Accuracy, truth and impartiality must be applied to all elements of news coverage, headlines, images and cutlines.
- Verify information before publishing. Use original sources when possible.
- Do not let deadlines interfere with accuracy.
- Do not make promises to sources you cannot keep. Consider their motives before promising anonymity. Limit protecting sources to those who face danger, retribution, or other harm.
- Diligently seek out the subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing.
- Avoid undercover or surreptitious methods of gathering information unless open methods will not yield information vital to the public.
- Recognize a special obligation to serve as a watchdog over public affairs and government.
- Label advocacy and commentary to distinguish it from news. Distinguish news from advertising.
- Never deliberately distort facts or images. Clearly label illustrations.
- Never plagiarize. Always attribute.
- Show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage. Use heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles, victims of sex crimes, and sources who are inexperienced or unable to give consent.
- Avoid conflicts of interest. Do not accept gifts, favors, fees, free travel or special treatment that may compromise your integrity or impartiality.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money. Do not pay for access to news.
- All persons expect fair and impartial treatment at the hands of the press.
- Balance a suspect's right to a fair trial with the public's right to know. Consider the implications of identifying criminal suspects before they face legal charges.
- It is a reporter's responsibility to inform and educate the public so that citizens can more rationally and effectively solve problems.
- Protect the people's right to know the activities of their government and guard zealously against encroachment or infringement by government restraint or censorship.
- Realize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than public figures or others who seek power. Weigh the consequences of publishing personal information.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or other special interests, and resist external pressure to influence coverage.
- Acknowledge mistakes and correct them promptly and prominently. Explain corrections clearly.
- Abide by the same set of high standards you expect government officials to meet.