



RYERSON UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM

Guidelines for student reporters

... and a request to the Ryerson community

This document is directed to Journalism students on assignment and to members of the Ryerson community who are approached for interviews.

It is intended to enhance understanding of the School of Journalism, its publications, its students and the practice of journalism in an academic program. We hope it will help promote an atmosphere of mutual respect on campus.

The guidelines and suggestions are followed by a short explanatory essay on journalism, the School and reporter-source relationships.

Guidelines for student reporters

Student journalists are working journalists. They enjoy the same rights as their colleagues in other news media. They also have the same responsibility to act fairly, honestly and with sensitivity to their sources and their audience.

- Do as much background research as you can before starting on interviews.
- If possible, try to make an appointment by e-mail or phone.
- Do your best to find the right source, not someone who won't be fully informed.
- Always identify yourself as a journalist. Say which publication you're working for, or state the nature of your class assignment.
- Briefly explain your story, making clear *what* you need and *when* you need it.
- Don't demand interviews or information. Ask nicely. Be way more polite than you think is required, especially if you're showing up unannounced. (You can never be too polite.)
- Sources are giving you their time, so respect their deadlines and schedules.
- Don't go into an interview with a fixed agenda. Do go prepared, so you don't waste your sources' time or your own.
- Ask open-ended questions. Don't put words in your source's mouth.
- Determined pursuit of a story is part of journalism, but insensitivity and reckless disregard for privacy destroy trust. Exercise good judgment. Don't attempt to film in the Student Counselling Centre or the Student Financial Assistance office.
- Children cannot be interviewed or photographed without the permission of their parents or guardians, so the Early Learning Centre is off limits. Period.
- If you can, tell your sources where and when your story will be published or aired.

A request to the Ryerson community

The School extends its thanks in advance to Ryerson faculty, administration, staff and students for their co-operation with student journalists. If you are asked for interviews, comments or access to information, please remember:

- Deadlines are often daily, assigned in the morning and due in the mid to late afternoon. That's why reporters act as though it is urgent. To them, it is.
- Interviews can take as little as 10 minutes.
- Any reply is useful and better than "not available for comment." The courtesy of returned phone calls is deeply appreciated.
- Sometimes reporters cannot make an appointment and may show up without one. They may need only a minute or two.
- E-mail replies are not good substitutes for interviews, as tone, nuance and follow-up questions are often lost. However, they are better than "no comment."
- Recommend someone else if you cannot be interviewed.
- If you promise to do an interview, please don't cancel. If you must, please give advance warning so another source can be contacted.
- If you believe interviews are taking up too much time in your department or area, designate someone to comment on issues.
- Please don't impose barriers to journalism students that would not be imposed on others. Ryerson is a public institution; all citizens and all journalists enjoy the right of access to public space and information.
- Student journalists are not "out to get" anyone. However, they are encouraged to be persistent and to make sure they understand the story well enough to explain it to others. If they ask probing questions about events or policies, it isn't personal.
- An interview is your opportunity to add your side to the story.
- No one's perfect. Acknowledging an error or slip-up and promising to rectify it promptly is usually more productive than fudging or avoiding comment.
- Expect to be quoted accurately and fairly. Do *not* expect editorial control of the story.
- Don't talk down to reporters. Treat student reporters with the same respect you would like them to show you.
- Please feel free to engage with the editors, reporters and instructors in the student newsrooms. Journalism students working for the School's news media are engaged in

experiential learning activities. Part of this experience involves dealing with the public and audiences. Therefore, please contact the student reporters and editors directly if you have:

- news to offer,
- complaints about student-produced news media,
- or compliments.

Some avenues for communication with the student-run media:

For the Ryersonian, sonian@ryerson.ca.

For the Ryerson Review of Journalism, reynolds@ryerson.ca.

If you aren't satisfied, call the supervising instructor, who should be listed on the masthead or contact page for the website or the chair of the School:

chair.journalism@ryerson.ca

You may also find it useful to connect with the newsrooms via their twitter feeds:

The Ryersonian: @theyersonian

Ryerson Review of Journalism: @ryersonreview

Background: Journalism and journalists at Ryerson

Introduction

The School of Journalism is one of Ryerson's oldest academic units. Its graduates are renowned for the energy, technique and intellectual discipline they bring to their craft. Its faculty members are veteran journalists with a strong commitment to teaching, scholarship and the well-being of their university. The School has been a leader in journalism curriculum development, being among the first to introduce such elements as media ethics and diversity into its program.

Besides delivering a quality education in journalism, the School has been a chronicler of Ryerson affairs for more than half a century. In publications such as the Ryersonian and RyersOnline, journalism students help other students, faculty, staff and friends of Ryerson keep up with the news that affects them and their university. In work for these publications and in class assignments, they learn the techniques of news reporting, editing and production and discover the breadth of expertise on academic and community affairs that exists at Ryerson. Their tools range from pens and notebooks to television cameras and the sophisticated software of a modern news website. Their sources, as often as not, are members of the Ryerson community.

One of the most important aspects of the journalist's craft is the nurturing of relationships with sources – people who are interviewed because of their knowledge and understanding about news events. Ryerson journalism students spend considerable time learning best practices for approaching and interviewing sources. They enjoy many fruitful relationships with Ryerson administrators, staff and faculty members. The School is grateful to those who generously contribute their time and knowledge in interviews so we can all understand each other better.

Perhaps inevitably, misunderstandings and disagreements arise over the purpose, conduct and outcome of student reporting. These can lead community members to decline to be interviewed, or lead student journalists to attempt to conduct interviews in inappropriate circumstances. At other times, interviews may begin on a cordial note but end badly after unforeseen issues develop. The School hopes that by circulating information about journalism at Ryerson we will keep misunderstandings to a minimum.

Reporters and sources

On or off campus, journalists in Canada enjoy broad freedom to pursue news stories. There are no formal requirements such as licences for entry to the craft. Journalists are free to publish as they please subject to restrictions on defamation, contempt, pornography, hate speech and certain types of broadcast expression. Their physical movement on private property may be restricted by the laws of trespassing and breaking and entering. But a journalist circulating on public property, such as the generally accessible portion of a public institution, is unlikely to be violating any laws unless s/he is creating a disturbance or causing public mischief. Reporters can refuse to disclose the names of their sources under some

circumstances, but do not enjoy as much protection from court sanction in this area as their colleagues in the United States. U.S. freedom-of-information laws are also more favourable to journalists than similar laws in Canada.

No one is under any obligation to speak to a reporter unless it is part of his/her job description. Freedom of expression, protected by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, includes the freedom to remain silent. However, over the course of a normal day in Canada hundreds of people answer journalists' questions of their own free will. Their motives might include courtesy, gregariousness, self-promotion, a sense of public duty, a desire to forestall or correct inaccuracy, or a desire to see the story told from a particular point of view. The encouragement of news reporting and the protection of scope for journalistic activity are generally held to be essential ingredients of democratic rule. When citizens agree to be interviewed and act as sources for journalists they are acknowledging, implicitly or explicitly, that journalism is part of the lifeblood of any community.

Good journalists know it is essential to win and retain the trust of their sources and audiences. They try to consult several sources in preparing their reports. They maintain a faithful record of what they are told. They strive for accuracy and correct mistakes promptly. They use a variety of verification techniques before publishing. They keep the needs and interests of their audience paramount and do not allow themselves to be suborned by private interests. These principles are emphasized repeatedly to students in the School of Journalism's programs.

How we work

In order to give students hands-on experience in the planning and execution of real-life journalistic projects, the School operates several publications.

- **The Ryersonian** newspaper appears weekly and is produced by final-year graduate and undergraduate students who have chosen the intense experience of working in community newsroom. They are divided into four groups, each of which spends half of one semester on this activity. Members of the Senior Reporting class and other journalism students also produce stories and photos for the newspaper.

Students in the newsroom produce television **newscasts**, including original news and feature reports, which are now available on the web. The website at **ryersonian.ca** also features webcast and other videos, daily online news, features and multimedia.

- Two issues of the award-winning **Ryerson Review of Journalism** appear at the end of the winter semester, produced by students specializing in magazine editing and production. The Review is the only magazine exclusively devoted to looking critically at Canadian news media and their performance.

As a matter of principle, the School believes that a news organization serves its audience best when its editorial staff functions autonomously. It seeks to adhere to this principle in its news operations. Therefore, while the School's Chair is the publisher of all its publications and is ultimately responsible for them, the Chair normally has no detailed knowledge of articles in preparation and does not seek to influence their content. The publications are editorially

independent and opinions expressed in them do not necessarily reflect the views of the School, its administration, its faculty members or indeed all of its students.

Finally, Journalism students often work for other media in paid employment, on course internships or as volunteers. These include commercial or alternative media and other campus media such as the Eyeopener, an independent campus weekly; the Free Press, published by Continuing Education students; radio station CKLN and the feminist magazine McClung's. They may contact members of the Ryerson community for interviews while working for these organizations.

(Approved by the Journalism School Council, October 4, 2007)