

# A Question of Journalism Ethics & Truth

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## Journalism – English Language Arts, Social Studies

### Overview & Purpose

Journalists inform the public about important and interesting issues and events. This is meaningful work that can bring much personal satisfaction to those who do it well. But while they do their jobs, journalists also want to *act ethically*, according to professional standards of fairness. An ethical journalist is, above everything else, *truthful*.

Being truthful is an active process that requires journalists to be accurate with facts and quotes (known as *literal truth*), putting those facts in a clear and sensible context (known as *contextual truth*), and being honest with sources about how their information will be presented (*procedural truth*).

Many journalists base their ethical decisions on the approach of philosopher John Stuart Mill, whose guiding principle can be summarized this way: do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. But sometimes, serving the greater good of the community can mean hurting an individual member of that community. As explained in the ethics code of the Society of Professional Journalists, an ethical journalist should avoid unnecessary harm to others while serving the community's need and desire for useful information.

Below are two situations in which you can help a student journalist figure out the correct path.

### State Common Core Curriculum Standards

[www.isbe.net](http://www.isbe.net) or [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)

This lesson applies the State Common Core Standards for English Language Arts, Social Studies and Social and Emotional Learning, Grades 9-12. Teachers are aligning their teaching and curriculum with these new federal and state learning performance standards to produce a common achievement outcome for all students. *Scroll down to bottom of lesson plan for individual standards and their relevance to this lesson.*

### Teach Option 1

#### Ethics Case Study – Damage to School Pride

Luiza Lopez is a junior at Herbert Hoover High School in Chicago. She's also the news editor for the Hoover *Roundup*, the school's weekly newspaper.

Luiza writes an article for *The Roundup's* website, and the upcoming print edition of the newspaper, about some vandalism that took place over the weekend in the school gym. Someone broke into the school over the weekend by smashing a window in one of the first-floor boy's bathrooms from the outside. Graffiti was drawn along one wall, and the floor, of the basketball court. A glass case with some of the school's athletic trophies was smashed, and the trophy for last year's conference basketball championship is now missing. The principal estimates that the cleanup will cost around \$5,000.

Luiza writes her article for the online edition of *The Roundup*, and then posts it. She also finishes a draft of the article for next week's print edition, which she'll hold until later in the week in case there are any information updates. She's just about to go home for the day when she gets a text message from a good

friend, Samantha, who's just read Luiza's online article. Samantha says that she knows who carried out the vandalism. Luiza texts back, asking who it was. Samantha replies that she had promised not to tell, but there might be some clues on Facebook: hint hint.

Checking her friend's Facebook site, Luiza sees an exchange between Samantha and a third student, who she knows as Samantha's boyfriend, in which veiled references to the vandalism are made – before anyone who hadn't been involved could possibly have known about it. Samantha's boyfriend graduated from Hoover last June.

Luiza knows that she has important information, but she is also troubled by what she sees. She waits until that evening before calling Samantha. But Samantha now has second thoughts – she doesn't want to talk about it.

"You can't say anything about this," Samantha says, very agitated. "Those posts are private! I shouldn't have said anything to you about them. My boyfriend could get in serious trouble."

Luiza knows that part of what Samantha said is not correct – Facebook wall posts aren't private – but the other part, about her boyfriend getting in trouble, is certainly right. Luiza doesn't want to argue with her friend. She feels stuck. She sees later that Samantha's incriminating Facebook wall posts have been removed. Luiza's journalistic instinct is telling her that this information is certainly enough to be the center of a follow-up article. Granted, friendships are important, but vandalism costs money to repair, and it certainly hurts the school's environment. What should Luiza do?

## Discussion

### Questions for Students to Consider:

- Q - What is the position of each person in this situation?
- Q - What are the expectations that Luiza's editors and readers have about her work?
- Q - What public good can result if Luiza writes another article with the information she now has?
- Q - What **private** hurt can result if Luiza goes ahead with her article?
- Q - Will the **public**, or the community, be hurt in any way if she simply looks the other way this time?
- Q – Can you distinguish the components of *literal*, *contextual* and *procedural* truth in this situation?
- Q - Can the information about the vandalism be put in front of the community, or any portion of it, without hurting Luiza's friendship with Samantha?

### Notes for Teachers

Our democratic society is based on all of us having access to a full "marketplace of ideas" and information – this is what distinguishes us from nations with less freedom. Journalists are an essential part of this process: they put information in front of the public. One way or another, information that has clear public value should be released.

But without context and attention to presentation, information can hurt unnecessarily. So young journalists should always consider the form their information will take. Is there a way to present the information that will protect individuals from unnecessary harm? The best solutions to ethical dilemmas actively and equally consider both sides of the issue: "How and why is this information valuable to the public, **and** how can we avoid inflicting unnecessary pain as we present the information?"

*About this specific ethical situation ...* Help your students understand Luiza’s conflict between her loyalty to her friend and her desire to be a good journalist. Luiza’s editors and her readers expect her to be truthful and to give them important information. How do your students think Luiza’s readers would react if Luiza was known to be withholding information about a crime that hurt the school?

If Luiza writes an article with the information she now has, the community – students, teachers, administrators, parents – will know that someone has been held accountable for an act that hurt the school. Failing to report this means a crime goes unpunished. But students should understand what Luiza is risking: potential harm to her friendship with Samantha. Samantha might believe that Luiza has betrayed her trust.

*This is the key question: Can the information about the vandalism be put in front of the community, or any portion of it, without hurting the friendship? What can your students suggest?*

Possible Resolution: The information about the vandalism can’t be kept quiet. It’s a crime. The school environment has been damaged. The key question for the students is the last one: *is there a way to put the information forward without damaging the friendship?* If both sides are completely honest with each other – Samantha recognizing Luiza’s responsibilities, and Luiza respecting Samantha’s feelings – then the answer should be yes.

How could this happen? The ideal situation would be for the perpetrator to come forward himself, with an offer to make amends. This doesn’t seem likely, although if Luiza is particularly persuasive, she might explain this to Samantha. Perhaps Samantha herself could make a strong effort. Another possible answer is to publish the information but not naming the source. That could generate more ethical questions -- when is it appropriate for a journalist to keep a source's name private? This is usually avoided in journalism because information that’s not clearly sourced can be considered as less authoritative.

### **Assessment**

*How could your students’ answers to this ethical dilemma be evaluated?* The students can be divided into two- or three-person teams. Have them write their answers to the discussion questions, with particular emphasis on their answers to the final question. Solutions can be presented orally in class discussion. A similar exercise can be applied to the Teach Option 2.

### **Teach Option 2**

#### **Ethics Case Study – Truth in the Blogosphere**

Sam Alonso is a senior at Jimmy Carter High School in Chicago. He also writes a blog for the high school student newspaper’s website. Sam’s been active at the school during his four years – he’s joined a few clubs and was on the track team for two years – so his blog comments and jokes have an inside perspective about life at Carter High. It’s popular, and he regularly gets texts and e-mail from students responding to his blog items.

One of Sam’s recent blog comments – about the different standards that some of the teachers have for earning “A” grades – generates an exchange of texts with another senior, Christopher Benson. Sam and Christopher had the same teacher for junior year, U.S. history with Dorothy Hendricks, who is not one of the better-liked teachers at Carter. Sam enjoys his status as a blogger with a following, but he also knows Christopher, and moves quickly to a level of personal back-and-forth chatter.

“Maybe she’d be more popular if she’d give a few more A’s,” Sam texts.

“Maybe she’d be more popular if she’d lose 40 pounds,” Christopher answers.

“I don’t think that would help,” Sam texts. “She’s too mean.”

“You’re right – she needs personality replacement surgery,” Christopher replies.

“LOL,” Sam writes.

“She’s fat and ugly, nobody likes her, and they don’t think she’s fair,” replies Christopher, encouraged by Sam’s response. “No wonder people cheat on her tests.”

Christopher’s last post makes Sam stop and think.

*Can Sam write on his blog that students think Ms. Hendricks is ugly and annoying? Would you? It’s apparently true that some students think so, and being truthful is one of the most important jobs of journalists. But Sam may have encouraged Christopher’s insults with his own relaxed tone, so – does he bear some responsibility for the insults? Could this be a form of bullying? Could this be called adult bullying?*

*And another serious matter . . . can Sam write in his blog that students are cheating on Ms. Hendricks’ tests? Why or why not? Do you have enough verification for this charge?*

The dialogue continues:

“How do U know about the cheating?” Sam writes to Christopher.

“My brother took her class three years ago,” Christopher answers.

“So?”

“He said some students figured out a way to signal answers back and forth during the final.”

Sam doesn’t reply.

“My brother didn’t do it,” Christopher adds. “But he knows people who did. They said that’s how they passed the class.”

## **Discussion**

### **Questions for Students to Consider:**

Q - What is the position of each person in this situation?

Q - What are the expectations that Sam’s readers have about his work?

Q - What public good can result if Sam writes a blog item about the negative comments regarding Ms. Hendricks?

Q - What **hurt** can result if Sam writes that item?

Q - What public good can result if Sam writes a blog item about the rumors that students cheated on Ms. Hendricks’ final exam?

Q - What **hurt** can result if Sam goes ahead with his blog comments?

Q - Will the **public**, or the community, be hurt in any way if Sam decides not to write anything?

Q – Can you distinguish the *literal* truth, *contextual* truth and *procedural* truth in this situation?

Q - Would anything convince you that the information about possible cheating is ready to be put in front of Sam’s readers?

Q - What could be done with Christopher’s information besides publishing it on Sam’s blog?

### Notes for Teachers

This is an example of personal hurt outweighing the potential public good of information. The insulting comments about the teacher may reflect the views of more than a few students, but they’re not worth publishing. The public value of such comments is minimal – just as insulting comments about another student would contribute next-to-nothing to the marketplace of ideas. Insulting comments about a teacher or student probably say more about the person doing the posting than they do about the person being insulted. Do your students agree with that? Why or why not?

Additionally, the texts about possible cheating aren’t ready for publication, either. A couple of text messages do not represent the kind of verification that journalists normally seek. Journalists are interested in rumors because they may reflect commonly held beliefs, but rumors need confirmation – from school officials, from other students. Sam shouldn’t let this go, however – the possibility of widespread cheating is potentially an interesting article. He should look for confirmation.

### Assessment

*How could your students’ answers to this ethical dilemma be evaluated?* As with the first Case Study, the students can be divided into two or three-person teams. Have them write their answers to the discussion questions. Solutions can be presented orally in class discussion.

### Other Sources for Journalism Ethics Lesson Plans

Media Ethics, The Writing Lab & The OWL at Purdue and Purdue University,  
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/735/03/>

American Society of News Editors (ASNE), Journalism Lesson Plans Archive, sponsored by ASNE,  
[http://www.hsj.org/modules/lesson\\_plans/archive](http://www.hsj.org/modules/lesson_plans/archive), select ethics.

Stony Brook University, Center for News Literacy, Stony Brook, NY, Teacher Training & Resources,  
<http://www.centerfornewsliteracy.org/classifications/resources/page/2/>

### State Common Core Standards

[www.isbe.net](http://www.isbe.net) or [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)

#### Links Lesson Plan 7, News Literacy: A Question of Ethics & Truth

This lesson applies and reinforces the following selected Common Core Curriculum Standards for English Language Arts, Social Studies and Social and Emotional Learning, Grades 9-12. Teachers are aligning their teaching and curriculum with these new federal and state performance standards to produce a common achievement outcome for all students. To find other common core standards that may apply to this lesson, visit [www.isbe.net](http://www.isbe.net) or [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

### Grades 9-10

#### English Language Arts

### **Reading for Informational Text**

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
2. Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
3. Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and connections drawn between them.
4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).
5. Analyze in detail how an author’s ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs or larger portions of a text (e.g., a section or chapter).
6. Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.
7. Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person’s life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.
8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

### **Writing – Text Types and Purpose**

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
  1. a. Introduce precise claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that establishes clear relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.
  1. b. Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly, supplying evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience’s knowledge level and concerns.
  1. c. Use words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.
  1. d. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.
  1. e. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

### **Production and Distribution of Writing**

6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology’s capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

### **Research to Build and Present Knowledge**

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
8. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.
9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection and research.
  9. b. Apply *grades 9–10 Reading standards* to literary nonfiction (e.g., “Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning”).

## **Social and Emotional Learning Standards Early High School**

### **Goal 2 - Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.**

Standard A: Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.

A.4a. Analyze similarities and differences between one's own and others' perspectives.

A.4b. Use conversation skills to understand others' feelings and perspectives.

Standard B: Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.

B.4a. Analyze the origins and negative effects of stereotyping and prejudice.

B.4b. Demonstrate respect for individuals from different social and cultural groups.

### **Goal 3 - Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.**

Standard A: Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.

A.4a. Demonstrate personal responsibility in making ethical decisions.

A.4b. Evaluate how social norms and the expectations of authority influence personal decisions and actions.

## **Grades 11-12 English Language Arts**

### **Reading for Informational Text**

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.
3. Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines *faction* in *Federalist* No. 10).
5. Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.
6. Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.
7. Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.
8. Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning (e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g., *The Federalist*, presidential addresses).

### **Writing - Text Types and Purpose**

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

1. a. Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

1. b. Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience’s knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases.

1. c. Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.

1. d. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

1. e. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

### **Production and Distribution of Writing**

6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

### **Research to Build and Present Knowledge**

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, to demonstrate understanding of the subject under investigation.

8. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and over reliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection and research.

9. b. Apply *grades 11–12 Reading standards* to literary nonfiction (e.g., “Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning [e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court Case majority opinions and dissents] and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy [e.g., *The Federalist*, presidential addresses]”).

### **Social and Emotional Learning Standards**

#### **Late High School**

#### **Goal 2 - Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.**

Standard A: Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.

Standard A.5a. Demonstrate how to express understanding of those who hold different opinions.

A.5b. Demonstrate ways to express empathy for others.

Standard B: Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.



- B.5a. Evaluate strategies for being respectful of others and opposing stereotyping and prejudice.
- B.5b. Evaluate how advocacy for the rights of others contributes to the common good.

**Goal 3 - Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.**

Standard A: Consider ethical, safety and societal factors in making decisions.

- A.5a. Apply ethical reasoning to evaluate societal practices.
- A.5b. Examine how the norms of different societies and cultures influence their members' decisions and behaviors.

For additional Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons that relate to journalism, visit [www.lionsquest.org](http://www.lionsquest.org). *Lions Clubs International, Oak Brook, IL, has developed a set of lesson plans to teach social and emotional learning skills to teens, including listening, interviewing, questioning, communicating, researching, ethics and decision-making.*