

LEARNING MADE EASY



Journalism

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Learn how to verify
facts online and in print

Know your rights as a
journalist and reporter

Write compelling and
factual articles

Arionne Nettles

Professor of Journalism



Journalism

by Arionne Nettles

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand

Journalism For Dummies®

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Introduction

Journalism is more than just a form of storytelling. It's how we hold powerful people accountable, how we engage the public, and how we share information with the masses. Like the famed Ida B. Wells once said, "The people must know before they can act, and there is no educator to compare with the press."

This idea has been true since the industry's inception. But even as this premise remains, *how* to do journalism is something that is ever-changing. Journalism is an extremely wide-ranging industry, with evolution happening quickly in every single part of it.

That's why this book exists. Whether you're a college student studying journalism, a recent grad looking for or starting your first journalism job, or a freelance writer wanting to hone your journalism skills, this book is for you.

About This Book

This book is a guide that explores journalistic standards and practices, as well as how journalists are currently expanding these measures. This is not a journalism book of the past, telling you how to think, how to act, and how to work. Instead, it explores how we've tackled big journalistic issues in the past and how people handle them today, while also discussing the promise of journalism as being the bedrock of democracy.

That may seem like an exaggeration, but I don't believe it is. The core of journalism is truth, accuracy, and fairness. And when I became a journalist, it was because I wanted to be committed to these foundational practices while working to grow them.

I wrote this book to equip you with the same knowledge. It's the book I wish I'd had when I was navigating the industry early on.

Within this book, you may note that some web addresses break across two lines of text. If you're reading this book in print and want to visit one of these web pages, simply key in the web address exactly as it's noted in the text, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist. If you're reading this as an e-book, you've got it easy — just click the web address to be taken directly to the web page.

Foolish Assumptions

When writing this book, I made some assumptions about you:

- » **You may be a college student studying journalism or considering a career in journalism.** There is a lot to remember when it comes to this field. You just need a guide to help you reference what you're learning.
- » **You may be a recent graduate, either looking for or working in your first journalism job.** The world of journalism is expansive and still growing. You can use this book to stay on top of trends as you build your career.
- » **You may be a freelance writer interested in honing your journalism skills.** I initially started as a freelance writer before going back to school for journalism and, for years, there was a lot I didn't know. This book can help you keep up with what's going on in newsrooms and help you seek out opportunities.

Icons Used in This Book

This book includes icons in the margins that help to highlight information that is especially important — information I don't want you to miss.



TIP

Anything marked by the Tip icon helps you do these something better. Many of these tips are ones that I personally use and have been given by my own teachers, mentors, and editors.



REMEMBER

There's a lot to remember when it comes to how journalists do this work. The Remember icon indicates something you'll want to commit to memory.



WARNING

The Warning icons identifies anything that could be potentially problematic or make your work more difficult.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

When I delve into technical topics, I mark them with the Technical Stuff icon. If you're short on time, you can safely skip anything marked with this icon without missing the essentials.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the information in this book, you get access to even more help and information online at Dummies.com. Check out this book's Cheat Sheet for a checklist of items to keep in your reporting bag, info on what to expect at a press conference, tips on how to decipher (and write) a press release, and tips for how to use your smartphone while reporting. Just go to www.dummies.com and type **Journalism For Dummies Cheat Sheet** in the Search box.

You can also find a story-planning template that you can download and use to assemble the information you need to write any story. Go to www.dummies.com/go/journalismfd to download it.

Where to Go from Here

This book has a ton of information, but it isn't linear. You can start anywhere. If you want an understanding of how the public takes in the information journalists produce, head to Chapter 3. For a great primer on story formats, turn to Chapter 4. To look

at how ethics comes into play in journalists' work, check out Chapter 10. For suggestions on using your journalism skills in other related fields, head to Chapter 18.

For even more journalism information, recent lectures and presentations, and other helpful resources, you can also visit me online at <http://professorarionne.com>.

Onward!

1

Getting Started with Journalism

IN THIS PART . . .

Find out what is and isn't journalism while thinking through the ethical responsibility of the role of reporter.

Take a look at media literacy, what it is, and why it's an important part of journalism and democracy.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Getting into the field
- » Understanding your responsibility as a journalist
- » Knowing what you need to be successful

Chapter **1**

Becoming a Journalist

Journalism is better when it's filled with people of all backgrounds, living in all locations, and thinking in all kinds of ways. That's why it's so exciting that *yours* will be one of the industry's next voices.

But it's important to recognize that part of becoming a journalist does involve understanding all of the career pathways and tools to help you get your foot in the door.

In this chapter, I discuss how to start a career in journalism — including the common roadblocks many people encounter and the newer ways people are tackling them.

Exploring the Many Roads to Journalism

As a field, journalism was once seen as a trade anyone could enter. Not only could aspiring writers and broadcasters study at the university level, but they also had more opportunities to learn as apprentices on the job and in training programs created by media organizations.

In recent decades, this barrier to entry has become way higher, with many competitive roles at mainstream newsrooms going to graduates of elite journalism university programs and media entities no longer willing to train new journalists.

But now, today, we are seeing an emergence of opportunities for new journalists to join the industry — in nonprofit newsrooms, through independent work on social media, and from becoming media entrepreneurs themselves. For example, it's extremely common today to see journalists solely post coverage of events and subject matter on social media instead of on a news website. The prevalence of online and digital tools means that, with the right training, the door is open for you.

The traditional road

Generally, getting a journalism job in a mainstream U.S. media organization (a TV news station, newspaper, major magazine, or radio station) means proving to its hiring managers that you already know enough about the field to be a good addition to its newsroom. For most new journalists, that can be tough. How do you prove you can do a job you haven't yet been given the chance to do?

In the following sections, I cover ways new journalists often get noticed for these positions.

Attending journalism school

School is still one of the most traditional ways of learning journalism, building a portfolio, and making connections with those in the industry. It's not the only way, but attaining an

undergraduate or graduate degree is still popular. However, the cost of this route is high and it isn't always financially viable.

Participating in campus media

Many journalists get their first real experience working on stories for their campus newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and TV stations. Here, they have the benefit of covering events and happenings at a place extremely familiar to them, guided by student editors who remember what it's like to be brand-new at reporting stories. Journalists working at these media organizations must be students, but they don't necessarily have to be part of the institution's journalism program because the organization's student editors generally train reporters themselves.

Doing internships and fellowships

These types of roles are often journalists' first professional newsroom experiences. Internships are often three to six months in length and are for current students and those who have graduated within the past year. Fellowships are generally for journalists with little to no experience and can be about a year long. There are also special fellowships that seek to help journalists from underrepresented groups, as well as fellowships that train journalists in a certain area in order to increase the number of journalists working in that area. Examples include fellowships for students from historically Black colleges and other minority-serving institutions and fellowships for science reporting.



TIP

Many fellowships are for recent graduates, but that's not always the case. Some fellowships are created for other people in need of experience, such as career-changers. So, even if you're not sure you're an ideal fit, apply anyway!

Joining journalism organizations

If you ask many people in journalism what has been their best medium for meeting and staying in touch with other journalists over the years, they'll likely mention one of several professional affinity organizations. Many will also mention how an organization helped them land their first role and how they're committed to helping new journalists do the same. The

networking that these groups can provide is second to none, and it's common for people to attend at least one annual conference per year.



TIP

Some journalism organizations were specifically created to support underrepresented groups, including the following:

- » **Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA):**
www.aaja.org
- » **Association of LGBTQ+ Journalists (NLGJA):** www.nlgja.org
- » **National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ):**
<https://nabjonline.org>
- » **National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ):**
<https://nahj.org>

Other organizations are focused on certain areas of journalism:

- » **Association of Health Care Journalists (AHCJ):** <https://healthjournalism.org>
- » **Investigative Reporters & Editors (IRE):** www.ire.org
- » **Online News Association (ONA):** <https://journalists.org>
- » **Public Media Journalists Association (PMJA):** www.pmja.org



TIP

Be sure to check with each organization to see if there are local chapters near you. The national organizations provide the opportunity to connect with people across the United States and often beyond, but local chapters can give you a much more personal welcome, with resources tailored to journalists in your area.

Forging new paths

The traditional routes into journalism may still remain, but that doesn't mean there aren't new ways to get in. With every new digital trend, another journalism opening emerges.

In the following sections, I offer suggestions on how to work toward getting noticed, even if you're creating your own path.

Attending a training or certificate program

There may not be as many training programs for journalists outside the traditional degree programs at universities, but there are different programs to train people for specific kinds of work. For example, broadcast institutes can teach people how to engineer and produce radio or TV shows. There are also writing certificate programs — and with the expansion and wide acceptance of online learning, this area is quickly growing.



WARNING

Be sure to vet any journalism training program, especially any that requires payment or tuition. Ask for information about people who have completed the program before and see what information you can find about the organization offering the program in the news. Are its founders seen as industry leaders? Is it a new and innovative approach to teaching or something that's tried-and-true? Make sure the investment is worth it.

Doing freelance work

The best practice you can get as a new journalist is real-world work as a freelancer. Freelance work especially helps when you don't get the opportunity to have internships or work for a student newspaper. Freelance work builds your portfolio, and you can continue to replace your work with better work as you get bigger and better opportunities — opportunities that align closer with what you want to do. It's most likely that this work will be digital or online compared to print, TV, or radio.

When I was first transitioning into journalism from working in another field, I quickly realized I needed a portfolio of work. I started taking very low-paying work just to get experience (because I had none at all) and then started to raise the caliber of assignments I would take as I got better and better, swapping out the older work in my portfolio for new and better work to share.

Connecting with other journalists

Staying connected with other journalists is the best way to find freelance work, stay up-to-date with the industry, and get career advice. Facebook, Slack, Google Groups — anywhere people gather online you're likely to find journalism groups. Many of these groups exist specifically to help journalists with certain focuses, like those who are freelance magazine writers, or journalists with certain life experiences, like those who are parents.

Because people spend hours running them, some of these groups may have small subscription fees, but most are generally free. Even the paid groups often have scholarships or sliding-scale options to help them be even more affordable because the goal is often to help journalists get work.



TIP

I've found that spending a couple of dollars a month for a subscription is usually a financial benefit for me as a freelancer in the long run. It's extremely difficult to scour the internet and social media sites and then pull together opportunities to share with other journalists, so I greatly appreciate the work that goes into it. But also, even if I tried, I usually wouldn't be able to find all the opportunities that are best for me. If I get at least one good assignment from one of those groups, then the investment more than paid for itself.

Understanding the Responsibility of a Journalist

Being a journalist is a huge deal — not just for those of us who get to do the work we want to do, but for the communities and individuals whose stories we have the honor of telling.

This line of work is an enormous responsibility. When a journalist publishes a story, it becomes part of recorded history. Think about how you would research an event that happened decades ago. You'd likely look through news coverage and try to see if you could get as many details as possible. In that case, you're trusting that the information you're seeing is factual. That's

because the journalists who were there are your eyes and ears. What they reported gets you as close as possible to being there. So, you're hoping — and trusting — they did everything they could to get it right.

Similarly, *we* are the chroniclers of our time. That's why we try so hard to be truthful, accurate, and fair in our reporting. People are trusting us and relying on our work.

Regardless of what kind of journalism we practice or what medium we work in, we all have the same charge.

Being truthful

Being truthful in journalism means more than just not lying. It means ensuring that we aren't intentionally — or unintentionally — misleading our audience.



TIP

Here are some basic ways to start thinking about how truth can show itself in your work.

- » **Ensure the headlines you're using are not misleading or missing content.** With so much happening in our world, many people only read the headlines of stories. They take in the headline and assume that it's a true summary of what the rest of the story is about. That's why clickbait headlines — those that are written cleverly just to get people to click on them — are untruthful. When you write a headline that is misleading, you are *not* being truthful.
- » **Lay out information in a way that doesn't change the story's meaning.** Structuring stories is both a skill and an art. There are some rules around what works for different types of stories, but it really does take practice to ensure that we aren't accidentally misconstruing the truth in the order and word choice we use.
- » **Choose images that best reflect the story's content.** Photos, video stills, and other illustrations tell a lot about what a story will be about. Although you can be unintentionally misleading in a variety of ways, making an error is most likely when you're using stock images. For example, in

a story that examines a new health-care procedure, think about the issues of truthfulness with the following photos:

- A photo of people smiling tells audiences that the procedure is a good one. But what if the procedure is new and hasn't yet been proven?
- A photo of people looking upset says to audiences that the procedure is bad or dangerous. This photo could cause people to fear the procedure before examining the facts.
- A close-up photo of someone preparing to get a vaccine shows no faces and doesn't make a strong editorial statement.

Being accurate

Accuracy is one of the most important tenets of journalism for a reason. People are counting on journalists to get it right. We're often cited in other people's work, too, so a mistake in a news article could lead to a mistake in a book, a research paper, or another kind of scholarship that people consume.

And today, in a digital world where breaking news is expected to be shared as soon as possible, the opportunity for mistakes in accuracy has been widened. The checks and balances that used to be in place to catch such errors are no longer present in many newsrooms, and it can feel as if everyone is in a race to get information out the fastest.



TIP

But, when it comes to accuracy, you can prevent many mistakes by slowing down and taking some extra steps:

- » **Double-check the spelling of names, places, and proper nouns.** Checking your spelling isn't just something to do as you're starting your story. It should also be a major step to complete at the end of your process, and it should be separate from any other checks such as reading for typos, for example. Going through and looking up each proper noun should be a final step all by itself to ensure no name is missed.



REMEMBER

We often talk about checking the accuracy of names in written work such as print and digital stories, but remember that it's equally as important in video and audio. You can't go back and redo some mistakes that are made in these mediums, especially, and corrections are difficult to make in a way that audiences notice them. It's also extremely embarrassing when you make these errors because the people mentioned in your story can feel as if you didn't put time and effort into a story that's about them.

- » **Do your math twice.** Even if you consider yourself a whiz at numbers, always do any math in your story at least twice. This includes calculations such as percentages, percentage point changes, and averages. Using a spreadsheet helps keep these calculations in a single place and makes it easier to go back and check that the formulas and numbers are correct.
- » **Make sure that social media posts are just as accurate as the stories themselves.** Some people are highly accurate in a story and then fail to give that same care to social media posts. Similar to headlines, people often share social media posts without clicking through to the full story, so it's really important that any information used in a social media post is correct.



TIP

When I worked at a wire service, accuracy was a top priority because not only were our stories being read by audiences, but they were being sent to other media organizations to use. When it came to social media, we had the same standards we had for any story. And before posting on social media, it was our process to have at least one other person read what you were planning to post. We did this for every single post on every single social media platform. Don't be afraid to ask for help or get a second opinion, too.

Being fair

Fairness is not always as cut-and-dried as truthfulness and accuracy because it can mean different things to different people. But what matters is checking your own moral compass and

ensuring that you're being fair to multiple sides of an issue by considering their perspectives. Be sure to do the following:

» **Check your biases.** Although some people believe in the old-school belief that journalists can be completely objective, many of us understand that we all have our own experiences and opinions, which can create biases. It's impossible to separate who we are from the work we can do. But what we can do is recognize those biases, and then, being aware of them, think through ways to ensure we aren't letting them cloud our judgment and impede our work.

» **Consider multiple sides of each issue in proportion.** When you're doing a story, especially a very newsy story, it's important to not report only on a single side. Thinking about more than one side doesn't mean that you have to give it equal weight in your final story. In the past, the journalistic standard used to be to always report "both sides" of an issue. But this "both-sidesism" can be harmful by creating a false equivalence in controversial issues, so journalists have been pushing back on this thinking and, instead, striving to put things into perspective and in proportion.



WARNING

Don't let "both-sidesism" confuse your audience and leave people unsure of what the facts are. For example, if you're reporting on climate change, some people don't believe climate change exists, but the vast majority of scientists do. Giving both of these sides equal weight in a story isn't helpful — it's just confusing. You, as the journalist, can investigate these claims yourself and lay out what you've found in your story.

» **Talk to more people than you think you need to.** It's easy to talk only to the people you need for a story. But that often means that your view of what's happening is limited. It's how you can easily be unfair to a group of people because you're only representing one particular group of people. For example, if you're doing a story on a teachers union's negotiations with the school district and you want to include what the average teacher thinks, it's important to talk to multiple teachers with different perspectives to see what their overall feelings are. Oftentimes, you may need to include the points of view of teachers who support the union's actions and those who don't.

Identifying the Essential Skills You Need

Being a journalist requires constant growth in your skillset. It's an industry of change, and it takes work to keep up. But even in this fast-changing world, some basic skills are essential to the work and are the foundation for everything we do.

Researching

Researching is what most people are familiar with from their school days. For journalists, it's often the very first step that we do when we're either looking for a story idea or trying to refine one. Research is all the work that's involved before we officially start reporting the story, and it's important because it helps us home in on where to start and how to use our time most efficiently.



TIP

Here are some tips for doing research specific to journalism:

- » **Read, watch, and listen to what's been reported already.** Some journalists argue that there are no new stories. That's because, quite often, the stories we work on are built off of what we already know about an issue, and generally, past journalism helped us learn that. Think about how a library is a great source of information. Every story we create adds to that library of knowledge, so it's good to know what's already there and where ours fits in.
- » **Lean into original documents.** There is a lot to be learned from original documents, even at this exploratory stage. Documents such as licenses, copies of forms, and so on can give you all kinds of information, and some of the best and most impactful work has come from them. For example, looking at parking ticket records can show that poor neighborhoods are being over-ticketed, or diving into public records can reveal that a city's funds are being misappropriated.
- » **Do pre-reporting.** *Pre-reporting* means talking to people and sort of interviewing them but just to learn more about a topic. It's not an official interview because you may not use anything you learn. For example, you may ask someone who just



TIP

published a new academic paper to explain its concepts. Just be transparent about what the interview is about.

The connections you make during the pre-reporting process can still be extremely beneficial in the future. The key is to be open with the person you're interviewing and let them know that you're in an exploratory phase to be respectful of their time.

Reporting

The word *reporting* is often used as a catchall for everything that journalists do for a story, especially because, when we're working on a story, we are *reporters*. But when talking about skills, *reporting* means gathering information specifically for the purpose of a story.



TIP

As you're focusing on these reporting skills, here are some tips to keep in mind:

- » **Get outside and go to places.** A big difference between researching and reporting is that reporting requires you to get out from behind a screen. It pushes you to physically be in the places you're going to be covering in your story so that you can experience them.
- » **Talk to people and ask them questions.** Going to places also helps you meet people you would otherwise never know to seek out. When you meet them, you have the opportunity to have authentic conversations with them. You can also learn so much more about what your audience thinks that can guide even more stories. See what they care about, what they want to see in their news, what they feel isn't being reported.
- » **Stay diligent.** Reporting is tough. For many of us, it can honestly be the hardest part of the process. Sometimes people don't want to talk to you. Sometimes people agree to interviews and then don't show up or stop answering your calls. There is so much that can feel beyond your control that it's easy to get frustrated. That's why it's important to know that it's all a part of the process and it's totally normal for plans to fall through.