

Guide for Journalism Majors

A college degree in journalism provides a student with the skills and the insight to research and deliver current information to audiences in a variety of media. Journalists learn to use traditional storytelling techniques to relate news and information through print, radio, television, film, and online media.

Journalism majors develop the ability to mine interview subjects for valuable data that can push a story forward. At the same time, students learn important skills in ethics and research that prevent them from disrupting their communities with false or misleading information.

Many journalism students put their [social science degrees](#) to use in the professional newsrooms of television networks, radio stations, and daily newspapers. Other journalism majors graduate to roles in private industry, where they help companies use the tools of the news media to effectively tell their stories and communicate with their customers.

Table of Contents

Trends for Journalism Careers

Professional journalism is at an interesting crossroads. Though the public thirst for new information seems insatiable, news organizations must strain their budgets to hire enough journalists to compete with each other. Professional news organizations rely on trained journalists to rigorously check facts and dispel rumors, but they face competition from amateur information sources like blogs.

Because broadcast and print journalism jobs require significant dedication, a growing number of journalism students use their skills in less stressful corporate settings. For media relations specialists, a journalism degree offers the opportunity to understand how to frame up corporate agendas in a manner that makes for appealing, front-page news.

Likewise, many large companies employ journalism majors in their crisis management divisions. With such attention focused on recent corporate scandals, multinational corporations benefit from specialists who can keep rumors from spreading while putting forth a friendly face for an embattled business.

As smaller companies beef up their media relations departments and as more people move to smaller communities, today's journalism majors should enjoy steady demand in the employment marketplace for years to come.

Career Education in Journalism

Online degree programs have made it easier than ever for prospective journalists to train with some of the industry's best teachers without leaving your own home. Busy professionals who want to shift careers or add a deep understanding of the media can enroll in part-time journalism degree programs. Busy parents who want to build a new income stream by writing, editing, and reporting can develop those skills without sacrificing their family commitments.

Because journalists often thrive by developing a specialty, prospective students should think about the kinds of electives that they can enjoy during their degree programs. Colleges and universities that offer opportunities to study popular niches like criminal justice, technology, law, and business can provide journalism students with advantages on the job market after graduation.

Diplomas, Certificates, and Associate Degrees in Journalism

A growing number of colleges and universities now offer short certificate courses in journalism to help business professionals understand how the media cover stories and to open up news gathering to curious amateurs. Prospective journalists who completed their undergraduate study in another field can enroll in associate degree programs to complement their life experience with the core skills for a new career in reporting or editing.

Bachelor's Degrees in Journalism

A bachelor's degree in journalism mixes industry-specific courses with broad exposure to the arts and humanities. Therefore, students emerge from their degree programs as well-rounded individuals who can make authoritative comments about the world around them. Students enroll in broad journalism courses, which can include news editing, media writing, reporting, and ethics.

Depending on their specializations, journalism students can also enroll in some highly focused media classes. Television journalists learn how to operate cameras and complex editing equipment. Radio journalists develop the ability to tell stories using sound. Print journalists spend a significant amount of time writing articles for mock publications or for campus newspapers. All journalism students invest time and energy to develop their speech, their writing, and even their personal appearance. Many journalism schools have integrated vocal coaching, conflict resolution, and even wardrobe and makeup design into their curricula.

Along with their journalism courses, students learn about the causes and effects of major human events in

history classes. Many journalism majors benefit from the insight they gain into government from their political science classes. Language courses provide students with the ability to gain information from sources around the world. Literature classes show students the importance of telling good stories and provide a context with which they can evaluate the significance of their reports.

What Can You Do With a College Major in Journalism?

While many who choose to pursue journalism degrees hope to become television, newspaper, or magazine reporters, there are a variety additional careers available to those with this type of training.

Journalism Career Paths

Editor

Editors are responsible for the overall quality and content of work provided by writers and reporters. Editors often start their shifts by working with assistants to assign stories to their stable of contributors. As journalists check in with their managing editors, the editors suggest new leads and help shape story ideas. In the meantime, they liaise with sales managers who want to make sure that advertisers can expect quality audiences for the work. Before publication, editors review submitted work, making changes as necessary. Editors may also contribute their own work to newspapers or magazines.

Newscaster

Broadcast newscasters use a variety of sources to relay the day's events to radio listeners and television viewers. In smaller news organizations, newscasters work as editors, assembling programming from network sources and locally produced content. In larger newsrooms, newscasters work closely with teams of journalists and present a coherent set of stories during tightly planned broadcasts.

News Analyst

Analysts advise editors and journalists about the "big picture" implications of stories as part of larger trends. Analysts help editors shape the content of a news program or a newspaper by weighing audience interest in a particular story with the media's responsibility to inform the public about the ramifications of current events. In limited cases, analysts pen columns and appear on the air to share their insight directly with the public or to educate audience members about the significance of events.

Program Director

In broadcast news operations, program directors serve a role similar to the editor in chief of a daily newspaper. They shape the overall content of a broadcast, as well as its look and feel. Program directors coach on-air talent to help them look and sound more polished. Program directors of all-news or news-talk radio stations must monitor the effectiveness of locally produced content as well as network feeds. By balancing listener interest with federally mandated civic duties, program directors strive to capture large audiences with compelling stories.

Public Relations Specialist

Publicists help individuals and companies work with journalists to present the most positive public images to customers. Many public relations specialists use their journalism training to understand how to frame up corporate initiatives in ways that make appealing stories in newspapers, in magazines, and on news broadcasts. In crisis situations, public relations specialists use their training to present themselves as calm, collected, polished voices for their companies. This way, company leaders can manage crisis situations without allowing members of the press the opportunity to speculate about events or outcomes.

Reporter

Journalists who work on the front lines of news gathering either take assignments from their editors or work on regular "beats." Reporters follow up leads, conduct interviews, and produce research that can be written into stories by staff writers and editors back at the newsroom. In broadcast news operations, many reporters now deliver their findings directly to audiences, often via remote broadcast from the locations of news events.



Preparing for Journalism Career Opportunities

Major advances in media technology have put more and more professional journalism tools into the hands of citizens and students. High school students who think they may be interested in a career as a journalist can write and report for campus newspapers and online journals. Other professionals can write for industry journals or local publications.

Journalism is a demanding field that requires significant personal and professional commitments. Therefore, prospective students should take the time to interview professionals in their area about local and regional industry trends. Many newspapers and some radio stations offer training and outreach

programs to high school students. A growing number of cable television companies offer media production training as part of their government-mandated community service initiatives. All these steps can help a potential student decide whether a career in journalism is the right choice.

Skills of Successful Journalism Professionals

Over the course of their degree programs, journalism majors develop a set of core skills that will serve them well no matter what specialty they enter. Those skills include:

- **Accurate research skills.** Professional journalists make and break their reputations on the quality of their research. Journalism majors learn a powerful technique, called triangulation, that assures their audiences will receive only factual reports instead of unverified rumors. Journalists learn to track down leads and verify information quickly, especially since audiences reward news outlets that consistently break new stories first. Cutting corners by running stories without proper fact checking can lead to major mistakes and career meltdowns.
- **Strong writing skills.** Regardless of whether they work in print or broadcast media, journalism majors spend a great deal of time in their degree programs learning how to tell complete stories that engage audiences. By sharpening their writing skills, journalists learn how to add an extra dimension to their stories that sets their work apart from bland headline tickers. Journalists with exceptional writing skills often work on book projects while still covering their usual beats for their employers.
- **Understanding of laws and ethics.** Journalism majors receive significant training in law and ethics for two major reasons. First, a sharp journalist can spot legal transgressions and ethical violations that most people overlook. Those glimpses into the underside of legitimate operations can launch significant investigations that can lead to major shifts in politics and business.

Second, journalism students learn to appreciate the consequences of fabricating sources and publishing inaccurate articles. Likewise, they learn how to separate their editorial work from commercial influences of their outlets. Because journalists so often call attention to the failings of others, they must do so from a moral and ethical high ground to maintain their credibility.

- **Powerful oral presentation skills.** Naturally, broadcast journalism professionals spend a significant portion of their degree programs learning how to present their stories effectively on radio or on television. However, all journalism majors must learn how to present their stories verbally, even when they work for a print organization.

Journalists and researchers must be able to speak loudly and clearly during heated press conferences. Many print journalists must pitch ideas to groups of editors at story conferences each morning. And an increasing number of newspapers ask their print journalists to appear on radio and television news reports to boost the profiles of their publications.

- **Interview skills and techniques.** Unlike historians, who can do most of their research online or in the stacks of university libraries, journalists rely on conversations for the bulk of their stories. Journalism students develop the ability to probe their interviewees for key pieces of information. The best journalists develop powerful interpersonal skills that make their sources feel comfortable revealing sensitive information, especially under duress.
- **Accurate record keeping skills.** Journalists maintain a centuries-old tradition of holding each other accountable for the information that they include in their reports. Therefore, journalism students learn how to catalog and index their interviews and other sources for future reference. Note taking and transcription are powerful tools that can prevent journalists from misquoting sources. Large news organizations usually rely on third-party fact checkers to eliminate unintentional errors from raw research and limit company exposure to libel lawsuits.
- **Computer and technology skills.** Today's journalism majors must learn to research and deliver their stories using a variety of technologies that were unavailable to their predecessors only a decade or two ago. Journalism students learn to use e-mail and word processors to prepare their stories. Print journalists learn how to use specialized database and publishing tools to submit their work to editors for printing. Radio and television journalists learn how to edit footage and record narration to create compelling news packages on tight deadlines.

Certification and Licensure

Although journalists do not require specific licenses from the state or federal governments to practice their craft, employers rely on the published works of journalists to determine their qualifications for open positions. Therefore, journalism students should begin keeping a clippings file or a portfolio of their best work as early in their career as possible, usually while still enrolled in their degree programs.

Journalists often earn their jobs by establishing professional reputations with editors and audiences. In addition, many journalists join a number of professional advocacy and networking organizations. Despite the high level of competition for open positions, journalists often maintain collegial relationships with their peers. In journalism, today's competitor might become tomorrow's editor.

Reporters who work on crime or political beats may have to register for official press credentials from law

enforcement organization or from government agencies. Depending on the level of access to be granted, journalists may have to undergo background checks that can include investigations into their personal lives as well as their business dealings. Though these vetting procedures may seem intrusive, they insure that only legitimate journalists who follow industry standards for ethics and professional behavior gain access to sensitive and sometimes dangerous situations.

Professional Associations for Journalists

- [American Society of Newspaper Editors](#)
- [Association for Women in Communications](#)
- [National Association of Black Journalists](#)
- [Radio and Television News Directors Association](#)
- [Society of Professional Journalists](#)