

What Are Ethics in Journalism?

Journalistic ethics are the common values that guide reporters. They lay out both the aspirations and obligations that journalists, editors, and others working in the field should follow to execute their work responsibly.

Journalism ethics have evolved over time. Most news organizations have their own written codes of ethics, as do professional membership bodies. If a professional journalist or news organization transgresses these ethical standards, they will lose credibility.

What Are the Standard Ethical Principles for Journalists?

There are several key ethical standards that appear across global news organizations. At the highest level, they call on journalists to seek the truth, act in the public interest, and minimize harm.

- **Honesty.** Journalists have an obligation to seek out the truth and report it as accurately as possible. This requires diligence: this means making every effort to seek out all the facts relevant to a story. Journalists should also corroborate any information with multiple sources.
- **Independence.** Journalists should avoid taking political sides and should not act on behalf of special interest groups. Any political affiliations or financial investments that might constitute a conflict of interest with the subject they are writing about should be declared to editors and readers. Some organizations characterize this principle as “objectivity,” while others, especially non-profit civic journalism projects, reject this term, as they position themselves explicitly on the side of public interest.
- **Fairness.** In addition to being independent, journalists should show impartiality and balance in their reporting. Most news stories have more than one side, and journalists should capture this. That said, they should not place two different perspectives on equal footing where one is unsupported by evidence. The exception to the impartiality rule is opinion writing, as well as “gonzo” journalism and creative nonfiction.
- **Public accountability.** News organizations should listen to their audience. To enable the public to hold them accountable, journalists should write under their own bylines and accept responsibility for their words. When news outlets publish factual errors, they need to issue a correction.
- **Harm minimization.** Not every fact that can be published should be published. If the amount of harm that could come to private individuals—

particularly children—as a result of disclosure exceeds the public good that would come of it, then news outlets might choose not to publish the story. This is less of a consideration when it comes to public figures. It is huge, however, in matters of national security, where lives could be on the line.

- **Avoiding libel.** This is a legal as well as a moral imperative for journalists. Journalists cannot print false statements that damage a person's reputation. In most jurisdictions, true statements cannot be libelous, so journalists can protect themselves by rigorously checking facts.
- **Proper attribution.** Journalists must never plagiarise. If they use information from another media outlet or journalist, they need to attribute it to them.

What Does Ethical Journalism Look Like in Practice?

It is easy to agree on the principles of ethical journalism, but applying them in real life is harder. Because the goal to reveal the truth can sometimes clash with the duty to limit harm, it is up to journalists and editors to choose how to act.

For example, journalist Bob Woodward, famous for breaking the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, goes to great lengths to demonstrate he has no political affiliations. He does not even show partiality towards news networks, giving interviews to news media on both ends of the political spectrum. He doesn't vote in presidential elections in order to send the message that he is “in the middle of the road.”