



# How to Report on Campus

Student journalism fills a gap that no outside outlet can. Local papers rarely cover what happens inside your dining hall, in your classrooms, or at your student government meetings. But those stories matter — they affect how much you pay in tuition, what kinds of activities your campus funds, and how your community sees itself.

## Where to Find Stories

**Campus meetings** — Student government minutes might look dull, but buried inside are clues about money allocation, new initiatives, or political fights. Trustees and budget committees often make decisions quietly that have a ripple effect across the entire student body. *If no one reports them, those decisions pass unnoticed.*

**Budgets and money** — When your school raises tuition, cuts departments, or renovates a building, someone chose to prioritize that. Learn to follow money trails: contracts with food vendors, athletics deals, or donations from alumni.

**Student organizations** — These often show campus tensions in microcosm. Two orgs clash over funding, or an election turns nasty, or a cultural group pushes for recognition. Those stories show how power, identity, and resources are distributed among students.

**Administration and faculty** — Changes are another thread. A new dean or department head usually comes with new policies and values. Retirements or resignations sometimes suppress larger conflicts. Your job is to connect the dots between personnel shifts and campus life.

**Events and crises** — Protests, visiting speakers — can seem flashy, but the real story is often what comes before and after. Why did students feel compelled to protest? Who invited that controversial speaker? What changes followed the incident?

**Reporter's Habit** — Always carry a notebook (physical or digital). Write down anything odd or unexplained: a rumor, a half-sentence from a professor, a flyer you don't recognize. Most great stories begin with "that doesn't make sense."

## Building Sources and Relationships

Good stories don't come from Google searches — they come from people. Sources are the lifeblood of reporting.

- **Professors** can provide expert context. A political science professor can help interpret a board's governance structure. A history professor might explain how a current debate echoes past controversies.
- **Staff** are often overlooked, but they are deeply valuable. Custodians know where renovations are happening. Dining workers hear student complaints every day. Administrative assistants know how decisions flow through offices.
- **Students** offer the pulse of campus life. Seek voices outside your immediate circle. Engage with athletes, activists, international students, and those in less visible leadership positions.
- **Alumni** can demonstrate how things have changed — or not. They often carry institutional memories that administrators would prefer to be forgotten.

### How to build trust:

- **Introduce yourself clearly as a reporter**, even if your publication is small. Transparency builds credibility.
- **Show up more than once.** People notice you when you consistently attend events and meetings.
- **Keep promises.** If you offer anonymity or off-the-record protection, honor it without fail.
- **Respect people's time.** Ask prepared questions, don't waste interviews with things you could have Googled.

**Pro Tip: Stay in touch even when you don't need a quote.** Send a thank-you email after interviews. Check in at the start of a new semester. The best sources are built over months.

## Objectivity vs. Advocacy

**The tension:** Students often feel the urge to fight for change while also trying to report fairly on it. Pretending to be “neutral” isn’t realistic, but abandoning fairness destroys your credibility.

How to handle it:

- **Always start with facts.** Who made the decision? When? What’s the documented effect?
- **Let evidence do most of the work.** Instead of saying, “The administration doesn’t care about transparency,” show that meeting minutes were withheld or emails went unanswered.
- **Separate reporting from opinion.** If you wish to argue, consider writing an op-ed and clearly labeling it. Mixing genres can confuse readers and weaken your work.
- **Fair doesn’t mean “both sides.”** If one side spreads misinformation, you’re not required to give them equal weight—fair means allowing everyone to respond and be represented accurately.

**Scenario:** You personally oppose a tuition hike. In your reporting, you continue to quote administrators explaining their reasoning, detail the amount of money being shifted, and present student reactions. Then, you can write a separate column about your stance.

## Ethics on Campus

Credibility is your most valuable currency. Lose it once, and it's nearly impossible to earn back. Ethics aren't abstract — they come up daily in student reporting.

- **Quotes:** Don't clean quotes until they sound like you wrote them. Respect people's actual words. Minor grammar corrections are fine; rewriting is not.
- **Anonymity:** Grant it only when real risks exist (safety, retaliation, harassment). Always explain to readers why anonymity was given. Overusing it makes your reporting look weak.
- **Consent:** Always ask before recording. If you're covering sensitive topics like sexual assault, mental health, or immigration status, explain clearly how their words will be used.
- **Accuracy:** Never publish rumors. Verify with documents, emails, or multiple witnesses. If you make a mistake, issue a visible correction — not a quiet, stealth edit.
- **Conflicts of Interest:** Don't cover your own fraternity, your roommate's club, or your professor's research if you're their student. Pass those stories to another report.

### ***Ethical Scenarios:***

- **A dean says something "off the record."** What does that mean? You must clarify before they continue. (Generally: you can't publish it, but you can use it to guide questions elsewhere.)
- **A friend asks you to pull their quote.** You shouldn't. If it was on the record and fairly represented, it stays.
- **A story is "common knowledge," but you can't verify it.** Leave it out until you can. Publishing without confirmation undermines everything else you write.

## Tools and Techniques

- **Note-taking:** Always date your notes. At meetings, use initials for speakers. Jot down direct quotes as much as possible.
- **Recording:** Ask first. Back up audio files immediately. Never rely on memory alone.
- **Fact-checking:** Reread every line. Ask yourself: *Could I defend this fact if challenged?*
- **Deadlines:** Consistency is key. Whether your paper is daily, weekly, or monthly, readers learn to trust when you show up regularly.

*Bonus tools for student reporters:*

- **Google Drive** for shared notes and drafts.
- **Otter.ai** or other transcription apps (but check accuracy).
- **Canva** or free design tools for graphics.
- **A shared newsroom calendar** with all known campus meetings and events.

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