

INTEGRITY

Journalists frequently face situations that test their **integrity**, that quality of possessing an inner sense of knowing right from wrong and adhering to high moral principles or professional standards. Often journalists have to decide the honorable way to handle a source, or the right way to deal with information they get from a source.

Suppose you agree to keep confidential a source who supplies you some good information. Back at the office, however, your editor says the information cannot run without attribution. Do you go back to the source and ask that person to go on the record? Do you publish the source and explain later that it was the boss's decision? Your natural instinct is probably to go back to the source and ask that person to go on the record because that's the right thing to do. Your integrity is guiding your decision making.

What about the information from your source? Suppose you see a few facts that you question. Do you run the information anyway because you got it from an on the record source? Do you take the time to verify those facts that raised questions for you? Verifying facts, no matter who presents them, is always a good idea.

Some reporters say that their reputation is the most important professional asset they have. Reputable reporters always try to do the right thing. They don't misrepresent themselves or break the law to get a story. They treat their colleagues, the public and their sources—the people from whom they get information—fairly and respectfully.

Journalists who act with integrity are honest in their reporting, and they are honest with readers and viewers about where they get their information. This principle of honesty is the reason many news organizations discourage or ban the use of **anonymous sources** except in extraordinary cases. Anonymous sources are sources who don't want to be named. News organizations now encourage **transparency**, which means writing into the story where the information came from and allowing the public to decide for itself whether to believe the story.

Imagine you are a reporter for your high school newspaper and you find out from the principal's son, a fellow student, that his mother will be moved to another high school at the end of the semester. Because the son was not supposed to tell anyone this news, he wants to be anonymous, or unnamed in the story. He says you should call him "a source close to the principal."

That would not be permitted by many news organizations. However, a good reporter may still go after the story by trying to get the information **on the record**, meaning that the source understands that his or her name will be published. Some ways to do that would be:

(1) Directly ask the principal if she is leaving at semester's end, or

(2) ask the superintendent of schools if the principal will be moved. If the information comes from one of those credible, named, transparent sources, the truth of the story is verified and readers can see where it originated.

F.Y.I.

Companies such as Gannett, the largest newspaper company in the United States, have created their own ethics policies. Every year, Gannett asks all of its employees to sign a document saying they understand the policy.

F.Y.I.

Provide each student with a copy of the student-written Code of Ethics for your school's journalists. Have each student sign the Code of Ethics at a short class ceremony.



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Why should reputable reporters always try to do the right thing?

THINK CRITICALLY THROUGH VISUALS

For reporters, their reputation may be their most valuable professional asset. Therefore, they must live and work with integrity.