

Laurier Brantford's Ethical Reporting Guidelines for Digital Media and Journalism Students

Adapted with permission from Ryerson University's Rules of Conduct for Students and Journalists

[Wilfrid Laurier University's Student Code of Conduct and Discipline](#) governs both academic and non-academic behaviour, and all students must be familiar with it. In addition, because the coursework of students in Digital Media and Journalism classes is considered professional skills development as opposed to research, as outlined in a [Tri-Council Policy Statement interpretation by the Secretariat on Research Ethics on behalf of the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics](#), the Digital Media and Journalism program enforces guidelines that require students to model their reporting and writing for course assignments on the best traditions of journalism. In 2011, the faculty of the Digital Media and Journalism program approved a set of ethical reporting guidelines that will become part of the syllabus of every Digital Media and Journalism course with reporting assignments. Students must read and abide by the guidelines.

Accuracy of Facts

Accuracy is the first and most important value for reporting. Every reporter, and therefore every Digital Media and Journalism student, is responsible for ensuring total accuracy in every story, including every class assignment, regardless of size or scope. Facts include the correct spelling of names, correct job titles, ages, dates and every other detail in a story. Accuracy is also required in direct quotes as well as all reporting of people's opinions, feelings and recollections. What people say should be represented fairly and in context.

Verifiability of Facts

Every fact reported in every story must be verifiable; nothing should be guessed at or deduced, unless this is clear to the audience. Not only must the student stand ready to provide verification of each fact, but the audience should, as a general rule, be able to evaluate the reliability of the information. Unless otherwise instructed, for all assignments, students are required to provide lists of sources (whether live or documentary) for verification purposes. Instructors may, without notice to the student, contact sources to verify the accuracy of any facts. Inaccuracy or unverifiability in any statement may result in a failing grade for the assignment.

Fairness and Diversity in Reporting

Students should seek to understand and represent the diversity of their community in their reporting and recognize that unofficial sources can provide valid, often under-reported, perspectives and information. They should treat their sources in a respectful and professional manner, recognizing their own cultural values and avoiding imposing those values on their sources. Students should present a contextualized range of facts, opinions and sources (both official and unofficial) in their work as a whole and avoid stereotyping.

The Reporter-Source Relationship

When students contact sources for any story assignment, they should identify themselves as Laurier Brantford Digital Media and Journalism students. The student should say what the interview is for: normally, it's best to say that it is for a class assignment but that there is a possibility of later publication or broadcast. (If you don't indicate that the information could end up in print or on the air, then you will have to secure the subject's permission if you later decide to make a submission for publication or broadcast.) Students must be certain that the source is aware of, and reasonably able to judge, the possible consequences of being quoted or otherwise represented in the news media. If there is a question about this (for instance, when children or adults with mental disabilities are involved), students should consult with their instructors and proceed on a case-by-case basis. Sources should also be informed that they may be contacted by an instructor or another student for fact-checking purposes.

If a student interviews or reports on a friend, relative, employer, former teacher or anyone else with whom there's a relationship that could lead to conflict of interest, the student should always consult the assigning instructor before going ahead, and, if permission is granted, this relationship should be identified in the resulting story.

Departures from this policy will result in disciplinary action normally including a failing grade for the assignment at the discretion of the instructor.

Fabrication

Students will be held responsible for any inaccuracies in their work, whether intentional or merely careless. But fabrication -- the making up of information -- is the most serious form of academic and journalistic dishonesty. Nothing justifies it. In journalism, it destroys the public's faith that what is presented is accurate reportage; at Laurier Brantford, it is a serious offense against the standards of the Digital Media and Journalism program and the university's Student Code of Conduct and Discipline.

As set out in the Student Code of Conduct and Discipline, penalties for fabrication are levied by the instructor after a determination of academic misconduct has been made. The penalty may include a failure on the assignment and/or course, suspension from the program and/or the university for a period of time, expulsion from the program and/or university, cancellation or revocation of the degree and inclusion of a statement in the student's transcript pertaining to the suspension or expulsion or to the cancellation or revocation of the degree.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism occurs when one offers someone else's work as one's own. Students may not submit as their own work anything that includes, without acknowledgement:

- material copied from any other source;
- any previous work of their own;
- any work that was written or edited by anyone else or for which the student has received outside assistance (excluding help that is provided by the university, e.g., through instruction, seminars or the Writing & Study Skills Centre).

Students should also routinely distinguish between their own original research and reporting on research done by others; this should be done through a form of attribution that is appropriate to the medium for which the work is intended (e.g., footnotes or endnotes for an academic essay, a complete source list with interviewees' contact information for a piece of reporting).

Wilfrid Laurier University's Student Code Conduct and Discipline contains a strict statement of policy on plagiarism, and this policy applies to Journalism courses. But because plagiarism in journalism is especially serious, the penalties for plagiarism within the Digital Media and Journalism program may be harsher than elsewhere.

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Reporting on Children

Students should exercise caution and care when interviewing children for reporting assignments. Before interviewing children, students need to obtain permission to do so from the child's parents or guardians, ideally in writing. As per the advice of UNICEF's Ethical Guidelines for Reporting on Children (see below), "[p]ermission must be obtained in circumstances that ensure that the child and guardian are not coerced in any way and that they understand that they are part of a story that might be disseminated locally and globally. This is usually only ensured if the permission is obtained in the child's language and if the decision is made in consultation with an adult the child trusts."

Advice and Help

While there is never an excuse for cheating, students who do so often report that they felt overwhelmed by deadlines, multiple assignments or other pressures. They then find out, too late, that they have made their problems far worse by cheating. The faculty strongly advises students who are feeling challenged in this way to consult with their instructors, mentors or counsellors rather than yielding to a temptation to take a step that will have dire consequences for their academic and later careers. Students are also encouraged to learn more about issues of academic integrity and misconduct at Wilfrid Laurier University's Academic Integrity website (<http://www.wlu.ca/academicintegrity>).

Professional Ethical Guidelines

For further guidance on ethical issues, and for medium-specific advice, students are encouraged to visit the following websites:

[The Canadian Association of Journalists: Statement of Principles and Ethical Guidelines](#)

[CBC/Radio Canada: Journalistic Standards and Practices](#)

[RTNDA Canada, The Association of Electronic Journalists: Code of Ethics](#)

[Society of Professional Journalists: Code of Ethics](#)

[UNICEF: Ethical Guidelines for Reporting on Children](#)