**THE KNOX STUDENT WRITERS GUIDE**

Hello reporters new and old! In the TKS writers guide you will find almost everything you need to know about writing a news story. It may be long, but all this information is invaluable, and you should familiarize yourself with it.

# *Ethics Code (Again)*

The Knox Student Ethics Statement

As the only print news source at Knox College run entirely by students, The Knox Student has a special responsibility to the student body to deliver solid stories about important issues and events at the college, local, national and international levels. TKS strives for accuracy, fairness and independence in all reporting and promises to uphold these principles by:

1. seeking information on a topic from a variety of sources that represent both congruent and competing perspectives;

2. checking facts wherever possible and never intentionally distorting them;

3. writing headlines and subheadlines that do not misconstrue, oversimplify or take information out of context;

4. always identifying an original collection of hard data (as with surveying the public), the circumstances under which it was done and any factors present that may affect the accuracy of results;

5. never plagiarizing;

6. giving accused persons or entities the opportunity to respond to allegations;

7. attempting to contact a source in multiple ways before declaring him or her unreachable for comment or unresponsive to requests for information;

8. identifying sources in all instances except when a source's safety is in jeopardy, a source is not authorized to comment or other especially grave circumstances are present, and always disclosing the reason(s) for granting anonymity;

9. avoiding clandestine methods of collecting information, including undercover work, except when the information in question is crucially important to public knowledge and cannot be obtained through more open methods, and always disclosing when such methods were used;

10. avoiding stereotyping by appearance, race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, gender identification, sexual orientation, disability, economic or social status, political views or religion;

11. distinguishing between news and commentary in a visible and clearly obvious manner;

12. never producing advertising or advocacy masked news;

13. maintaining objectivity in all news reporting, carefully considering assignments where the ability to be objective could be compromised, and disclosing when a conflict of interest could be perceived to exist;

14. never assigning reporters stories in which a club, organization or other groups to which they belong/invested interest, and, in the case of editors, giving the responsibility for editorial decision-making for material in which a club, organization or other groups to which they belong has a vested interest to another editor;

15. never editing news photos or videos so as to distort or misrepresent content, and always identifying photo illustrations or stock images as such;

16. always explaining complicated concepts and jargon as fully as possible;

17. always disclosing when mistakes were made and rectifying them as soon as possible, realizing that the fault for reporting inaccurate information ultimately rests with the journalist, not the source;

18. never taking quotations out of context or shortening them in a way that distorts their meaning;

19. choosing whenever possible, when a crucial source cannot be met with until after a deadline, to delay a story's publication rather than print it without the source's information;

20. allowing for the expression of a variety of viewpoints, even those whom the journalist or the public may find offensive or otherwise repugnant;

21. refusing special treatment, gifts or favors from any person or entity;

22. denying favored treatment to advertisers and special interests; and

23. holding those with power accountable for their words and deeds, regardless of whether or not the person or entity in question holds any power, direct or indirect, over TKS, its content, its staff or its funding.

# *10 Things you should know about writing news stories*

1. Always use the inverted pyramid format - that is, unless another format works (more on that later).
2. Start with the lead of the story. What's the first thing you would tell your best friend or your mom or your significant other about the story? That's a good hint at what the lead could be. Try several if you're not sure what would make a reader want to read the story.
3. You've heard of the 5 W's and H - Who, What, Where, When, Why and How and add one more to those - So What? Why does this matter to me, the reader, today? What is the impact of the story? Include the answers to those questions.
4. Just the facts, please. Your opinion doesn't belong in a news story. There is no “I” in news.
5. Put people in your story - people doing things, saying things, having opinions, helping you tell the story.
6. Show and tell: Put details in your story - use your senses. Observe what's going on around you and let the reader see it through your words. Use active voice and strong verbs.
7. "If your mother says she loves you, check it out." - that was the slogan of the old City News Bureau in Chicago. Never assume anything's right - double-check all facts.
8. Take good notes. Learn a shorthand or develop your own. It's fine to use a tape recorder in situations where it's legal, but it can be cumbersome to go back and transcribe or find a quote you're looking for, especially when you're on deadline. Practice note-taking if you're unaccustomed to it.
9. Yes, use the web for research, but be careful. Not everything on it is true. And it's easy to - inadvertently or not-plagiarize material you didn't write. There's a wealth of material in the library, too, that might be helpful.
10. Use your curiosity to gather ideas for stories. What do you see around you that you're curious about? What are people you know talking about? Other ways to get ideas: From your editor, from your beat and public records, from other media, from a national or statewide story, from readers' suggestions, from just walking around and being observant. Keep a list or tickler file.

Sue Deans 9/17/2007

# *Our sections*

TKS has six sections that stories can be under.

## News

News is pretty self explanatory. This is for strictly factual reporting about things that are happening on campus, this can be events or trends, but no opinions are allowed in this category.

## Mosaic

Mosaic is our arts section. Sometimes this includes some news about new galleries or shows being put on. Sometimes it is a review of a gallery or a show. Anything related to the arts goes here. So that’s fine art, theater, dance, etc.

## Discourse

Discourse is our opinions section. Feel free to write an opinion about anything you like! Anyone can submit an opinion to the discourse section.

## Columns

Columns is a rather complex category. It is for articles that are based in fact but include some opinion. The most common type of column is when a writer reports on a phenomenon and then makes their own meaning out of it. This could be giving advice about a certain subject they are knowledgeable about, or simply ruminating on a topic that has lots of factual background, but they include some editorializing in the piece. If you are not sure if your piece is a column or discourse, ask! Something important to note though, is if you are going to write a column or discourse, you should do it intentionally. An article you meant to be news should not be switched to the columns section just because you find you have strong opinions about it.

## Sports

Sports is sports! Any news that is about sports goes in this section.

## People of Knox

People of Knox is our profiles section. If you write a profile about a faculty member, staff member, or student, it will go in this section.

# *First Steps*

The first step in writing a story is of course, figuring out what story you want to write. There are a couple ways to do this. Editors will likely come to meetings with a few story ideas already. At meetings we will do what we call “budgeting” which is where we make a list of potential topics to write about. If you have an idea you are particularly interested in, claim it! If you are not moved to write about anything in particular, an editor will assign a story they feel is important to you.

A few things to consider when thinking of story ideas. Oftentimes we don’t want stories about stuff that “might happen,” we want stuff that is happening. “President thinking about doing something” is not half as interesting as “President did a thing”.

We want stories from as many perspectives as possible. Think about what voices may not be in the newsroom, how can we represent those stories as well? You are a student, what do you think is important for other students to know and be aware of?

Once you have a story, the editors will likely give some suggestions on how to get started. If you need more help, schedule a meeting with an editor! They will be more than happy to help you figure it out.

Tips From TKS Alumn Sam Lisec:

* Stories about crime/food/heath are always of interest. What services are being added or taken away?
* Break up large issues into a several small stories, each with their own angle.
* Take advantage of perennial meetings/reports. But use them as jumping off points.
* The newspaper should be a mirror to its community. What is everyone talking about? Get the record straight.

# *Interviews*

The first thing you should do when you are assigned a story is think about who you should interview first. Our editors will most likely include some names for people you can reach out to regarding your story. Interviews can be daunting at first, but they’re essential to any piece of journalism you’ll write, as they provide personal experience, anecdotes, ideas, opinions, and more. Don’t stress too much!

## CONTACTING SOURCES

If you can, contact your sources as soon as you get your assignment. This will give your source enough time to get back to you to set an appointment time, hopefully early on in the week. Email is usually the best way to contact a source initially. In your email, be courteous and respectful; making a good first impression is super important!

Your email should make clear who you are, why you’re contacting the person, and how they can arrange a time to meet with you. Here’s an example:

*Dear Professor X [*or often I use a simple *Hello,]*

*My name is Connor, and I’m a writer for TKS. I’m currently working on a story about your proposal to increase the number of writing-intensive courses required for graduation and was hoping to talk to you sometime this week about it in more detail. If you’re able and willing, please let me know a time and place that works for you.  Tuesday afternoons or Wednesday mornings work best for me, but I can also fit in some other times.*

*Best,*

*Connor Wood [*Or, since my full name is in my signature, just *Connor]*

If it’s not obvious why you’re contacting someone, be sure to explain why you think they can help you. (Feel free to mention who referred you to that person if applicable.) Sometimes a source will suggest a specific time to meet; other times, they will give you a day and ask you to pick a time and a place that works. Faculty and staff offices are good places to conduct interviews, while the Gizmo, Taylor Lounge or any of the other student lounges on campus work well for students. If it’s a sensitive or possibly very long interview, you can use the Pub Office, just let a senior staff member know and we can open it up for you. Occasionally, a source may want to meet with you off-campus in a coffee shop or somewhere similar; please be accommodating. If a source suggests a time that does not work for you (e.g. you have class or work), explain politely that you have another commitment and suggest another time.

Try your best to never interview anyone over email. Having a source send you written quotes allows them to tweak them to “perfection,” which often results in canned, boring quotes. Moreover, an interview should be a candid, in-the-moment conversation, which cannot happen over email. Phone or zoom interviews are a great option as well.

If the source does not want to meet and is only willing to give you a written statement over email, you *must* include in the story that the information or quote was given to you via email. Similarly, if an interview is conducted over the phone, please mention it. For example: “...” Smith said in a phone interview with TKS. Or, Smith wrote in an email to TKS, “...” Ask an editor if you’re unsure.

Generally, block out a half hour in your schedule for an interview, anything longer will be difficult to review. Interviews are often closer to fifteen minutes. Don’t worry if your interview turns out to not be super long, that doesn’t mean you didn’t get great information from them!

### *What should I do if I don’t hear back from a source?*

If it has been two days and you still have not heard from the source, go ahead and email them again, mentioning that you had done so earlier in the week and wanted to make sure that your message hadn’t gotten buried in his/her inbox. If you still do not receive a reply, try to get a hold of the source’s phone number ([www.knox.edu/directory](http://www.knox.edu/directory)). If you can find out where their office is, go find them directly. You can always set up an interview in person, even if it seems more uncomfortable.

If the source doesn’t return your call, or you can’t obtain his/her phone number, and they’ve declined comment in person or you could not find them, **only then** may you declare the source unreachable for comment. Please inform your section editor should this situation occur.

### *What should I do if a source doesn’t want to talk to me?*

Use your best judgment. If the source is crucial to your story, you may explain to them that the story will be incomplete without the information with which they can provide you, or you may note that they “declined to comment.” If you reasonably believe you can obtain what you need from someone else, thank the source for their time and move on. If, on the other hand, the source requests that you not do the story, inform your section editor immediately.

### *What should I do if a source can’t meet with me before my deadline?*

Inform your section editor. They may extend your deadline and ask you to go ahead and schedule an interview, or they might suggest another source.

## PREPARING QUESTIONS

Before your interview, make sure you are as prepared as possible. Demonstrate that you’ve taken the time to investigate the issue a little bit on your own, and your source will respect you that much more. More importantly, it will give you more control over the interview and the direction of your story.

When writing interview questions, think about why you’re interviewing this person and what information you hope they can provide you. Write down 3-5 questions that you definitely want answered, with the most important at the top of the list. You will have to improvise based on the answers you get, but having these core questions will help keep you on track. Don’t be afraid to let them ramble on a little bit, however, because you may find information that’s important but you did not think about asking for.

## RECORDING INTERVIEWS

Always record your interviews! This allows us to print accurate quotations and cross reference if a source claims they were misquoted. While there are plenty of cheap recorders available to buy, you can easily download a Voice Recorder app for free and use it on your phone. Make sure to transfer the recordings to your computer afterward and periodically delete them so you don’t run out of recording space in the middle of a future interview. Remember: **you should still take notes during the interview!** Doing this will make your story better, and will help you remember what points you thought were important during the interview.

### *What if my source doesn’t want me to record the interview?*

Begin by explaining why we record interviews—namely, that they allow us to ensure that quotes are accurate. This is usually a rather persuasive argument, as people tend to like the idea of not being misquoted. Sometimes seeing the recorder makes a source uncomfortable; in this case, putting the recorder in your lap, behind a napkin dispenser, etc. can be helpful.  If, however, a source is insistent that the interview not be recorded, stow your recorder, write quickly, and transcribe your notes into longhand *as soon as possible* after the interview. If you’re not sure exactly what a source said, throw that quotation out. This is obviously not an ideal situation, but we want to be accommodating to our sources. They are doing us a favor by agreeing to an interview, so we should allow them to set the terms of the encounter…up to a point. Which brings us to…

## IN THE INTERVIEW

Successful interviewing begins with a successful first impression. You want to show them that you’re taking the situation seriously—as you should! While you don’t need to dress up, make sure you look clean and professional. Greet your source with a smile and a handshake (unless you can already tell that will be super awkward).

### *When to get there*

Always be at your interview five minutes early. This allows you to accommodate for the possibility that they’re early, too, and give you enough time to set up your notebook and review your questions. If you don’t know where you’re going, allow yourself extra time to get there. Being late isn’t an excuse, and it’ll make a bad impression on you and TKS! If you don’t know where somebody’s office is, you can look in the directory or simply ask them for directions via email (or ask a senior staff member).

If a source is late, wait at least 15 minutes. Sometimes people get held up and are trying their best to make it over. You can email them to let them know where you are, in case they can’t find you or they just forgot. It can be hard to find people in the Gizmo, so if you are worried about that, get there early and let them know where you are sitting or some other way of recognizing you. If 20 minutes passes, it’s probably safe to call it a day, but email them to reschedule! Don’t blame them for missing in the email, 99% of the time they have a good reason for missing, so give them the benefit of the doubt.

### *How to start*

You should always start your interview by asking your source how to spell their name, what year they are, and what pronouns they use (If they are a professor, replace their year with their title). These three pieces of information will all be in the paper, and if we get one wrong, it can be very bad for us and embarrassing for them.

A great first question to start with is “Tell me about \_\_\_.” Open-ended questions let the source talk more, and let you know what they think is most important. Additional questions will then follow from here. Be sure to cover the 5 W’s (who, what, when, where, and why) but add another: so what? We’re not just gathering information for the sake of spitting it back out, we want to know why we (the readers, the Knox community, etc.) should care.

Remember, you’re there to interview *them*, not the other way around: so let them talk! Don’t interrupt your source, don’t dive into a personal story in the middle of your interview, etc. You can show that you’re listening in a million different ways, and always ask follow up questions, but no need to start a whole conversation!  Sometimes it will help to open up to your source, however, so don’t avoid talking about yourself too rigidly. You are working with the source, and especially as you develop relationships with repeat sources, it’s natural your interviews will become more conversational.

If you plan to use the recorded interview for a radio piece, do your best not to add any noise to the quotations. Many a good radio quote has been ruined by the interview saying “mhm” while the source is talking. Find a different way to reassure them you are listening.

### *“Off the record” information*

Sometimes, a source will ask to go off the record. This means that you cannot print the information the source is about to give you. There are two primary reasons a source might do this:

1. to provide you with information that will aid your understanding of a story, but which the source does not want in print (such as their personal opinion on an issue, which differs from their public position thereon)

2. to provide you with information the source is not in a position to officially give you (such as a student who works in the Office of Communications and thus knows the inner workings of the department but is not supposed to tell you about them)

If a source goes off the record, pause your recorder and put your pen down. This is the best way to ensure that off-the-record information doesn’t find its way into your story, which can become a sticky situation. It may not always be clear when you are back “on” the record, so be sure to ask. If a source says something off the record that would be particularly useful to you (an exceptionally eloquent quotation, for instance—this has happened), you can politely ask if that specific piece of information can be on the record.

### *How to conclude*

Before ending the interview, ask your source if they have anything else to add. Often, this will result in useful leads on who else to talk to, gems of quotations, and a sense of what exactly the source feels is most important. These quotes are often especially great for ending quotes when you write your story.

You can always finish with, “If I have any more questions, is it okay to reach out to you again?” Most sources will say yes, but it will put your mind at ease if you do need to shoot them a quick email later.

## FREQUENTLY ENCOUNTERED FRUSTRATING INTERVIEW SITUATIONS

### *My source isn’t very talkative.*

Some people naturally need a little prompting to get them to say much. If your source falls into this category, asking for specifics can be helpful. Questions like “Give me an example” or “Set the scene for me” will encourage your source to go deeper.

### *My source is speaking in generalities.*

The same strategies you use for an untalkative person can also work for people who don’t naturally give very many specifics. Simply following an answer with “such as?” can sometimes be enough.

### *My source is dodging my questions.*

If you notice that a source didn’t actually answer the question you asked, try rephrasing it. Be persistent; if you allow a source to dodge a question, they will likely continue to do so for future questions. If you’ve already rephrased the question and they still haven’t answered, simply ask the question again. Be persistent. You can also circle back around to it a couple questions later. Unless, of course, the source has already explained to you that they can’t answer that question.

One trick to use is to create silence after a source dodges a question. Take your time writing down what the source just said; if you don’t have anything to write, write anything you want in order to create enough of an awkward pause that the source will want to fill it. Silence implies that you feel the source should have more to say—and they usually will after it becomes clear that you’re waiting for them to continue.

### *My source wants to see a copy of my story before it is published.*

**No. No, no, no, a thousand times no**. A source seeing the story before it goes live means that they have the chance to backtrack on things they said. The act alone of them seeing it means that the integrity of the story has been compromised. Explain to your source that TKS, like all newspapers, has a policy that does not allow sources to see stories until they are published. If they don’t like that, say that you will refer them to the EIC and they will take care of it!

### *I didn’t get all of the information I needed during the interview/I need additional clarification.*

It’s okay, it happens. In this situation, please contact your source again and explain that you have an additional question. If it’s a simple, uncontroversial question (e.g. “Did you graduate in 1992?” or “Did you say that the facility will cost $10,000 or $12,000?”), it can be answered over email; if it’s anything more complicated than that, you will need to speak with the source either over the phone or in person.

## INTERVIEWING USING THE SAWATSKY METHOD

Canadian investigative reporter John Sawatsky trains investigative journalists on how to conduct interviews. In his view, reporters engage in too much baiting, accusing and ambushing; they make too many statements and express too much opinion. Reporters who go into interviews prepared merely to ask neutral, open-ended questions get the best stuff.

Reporter Susan Paterno wrote about Sawatsky's methods in a piece that ran in the American Journalism Review in October 2000. Some of his suggestions, according to her story:

* Avoid making a statement during an interview.
* Avoid asking a question a source can answer with yes or no.
* Sound conversational, but never engage in conversation.
* Try for open-ended, neutral questions that begin with what." For instance, instead of asking Sarah. Ferguson, "Is it hard being a duchess?" ask, "What's like being a duchess?" Instead of asking Ronald Reagan, "Were you scared when you were shot?" ask, "What's it like to be shot?" Resist the temptation to converse, sympathize and add value or meaning to questions. Use short, neutral questions that repeat the source's own words. If the source makes a judgment - for example, "Brian can be excessive at times" follow up with: "What do you mean, excessive?"

Other tips

Three basic questions that even experienced reporters seldom ask often enough:

1. What does that mean?
2. Can you give me an example?
3. Has that ever happened before? (Or, How often does that happen? How do you know that?)

### *Allow for silence.*

A key to interviewing is allowing periods of silence to stretch a little. People are uncomfortable with it and will talk just to fill up the space. Sometimes if you just let silence hang, the source will expand on what he/she just said because he/she can't stand the silence.

### *Ask throw-away questions.*

It's handy to keep a few throw-away questions" ready. Questions you don't really need the answers to for your story or don't care about or have asked before, or whatever. Toss those out when you want to have a minute to focus on jotting notes about the environment, body language, etc., so that you don't need to pay a lot of attention to the answer.

### *Prepare.*

To ask good questions you must be prepared to ask good questions. That means, whenever possible, doing research on the subject and coming up with initial questions before the interview; understanding how much time you'll have to ask the questions; having an idea of the environment in which your interview will be conducted; and identifying your `tough questions and setting up other ways to ask them when and if the subject dodges.

### *Get quirky*

Questions like "What happened then?" are fine if you're after plot. Questions like "So, Senator, this $3 million appropriation will go directly into your wife's bank account?" are fine if you're after the kill. But if you're after character, the quirky, random and apparently irrelevant can work wonders.

## TIPS FROM TKS ALUMN SAM LISEC

### *Source Work:*

* Introduce yourself to people and identify who you will check-in with on a daily, weekly or yearly basis. It takes time to build relationships but it’s worth it.
* Persistence is key. Don’t give up if someone does not respond right away. The earlier you reach out the better.
* DO NOT get in the habit of only reporting from official sources — i.e, Knox staff and faculty.

### *Good questions:*

* The internal: “What were you feeling” or “What was going through your head at the time?”
* Timeline: When did this start? Where are we now? What’s next?
* Get the before and after: What has changed? Why is this important?
* When given vague statements, ask for specifics. Can they quantify it? People are experts on what they have witnessed and experienced.

### *Was your question answered?*

* Some people, particularly official sources, are very good at making you feel like you don’t need to ask the question you need to ask – Follow-up: Sometimes you need to ask the same question three or four times before you get it answered.
* Make sure you understand their answer – Re-state it back to them: “So I’m hearing you say… Would it be fair to say… Just so I make sure I don’t get anything wrong… Just so I know how to explain it to others…?”

### *Taking field notes*

* DO NOT try to write down everything your interviewee is saying in real time – Your notes will turn out jumbled and useless, and you will be less focused on creating good follow-up questions during the interview.
* Use a wrist watch and punctuate your notes with time stamps – Record when you asked a question or when main ideas surfaced in your interview so you have a road map you can easily reference later while writing.

### *Get Art*

* Even if you’re not a photographer, taking a shitty photo will make your story 10x more likely to be read than if your story has no photos at all.
* Always aim for: photos with people in them.
* Also aim for: context.
* You can get creative!

### *Juggling/Streamlining*

* Set multiple stories into motion, then prioritize who gets back to you first, what story you can work on right now.
* As you are reporting, constantly ask yourself: Could I easily/confidently write up what is happening right now?
* Write the story in your head as much as you can while in the field. Try not to divide the reporting and writing process into two separate things.
* You want to walk away from your interviews with deliverables: things you know you can write. Don’t go wide with your questions until you have the basic questions answered.

### *Discomfort in the field*

* Cold-calling, canvassing and knocking on strangers’ doors can feel unnatural and come more easily to some than others.
* You have to be a bit confrontational/shameless. Which is great for speaking truth to power, but bad when you have to ask vulnerable people for information.
* Usually, the question that is most uncomfortable to ask is the one you need answered most.
* “The story is the thing.” (Lucia Berlin) – meaning, the story is the most important thing, so always focus on that

# *Writing your story*

*Before starting to write, make sure…*

…you’ve reviewed your notes from your interviews.

…you’ve transcribed the parts of your interviews that you need, based on your notes.

…you’ve collected any information you need from Internet sources, etc.

Putting together  a straight news story is a relatively formulaic process, so once you learn it, writing articles will be a breeze. The two most difficult things for new writers to figure out are a) how to write in a journalistic style and b) how to begin a story.

### *Some tips from TKS Alumn Sam Lisec:*

* Don’t be so attached to writing the story linearly. Stab at the parts you know need to be included first. Write the concrete details before getting mired in the more sensitive/complex parts.
* Take little swings, over and over, until you’ve got a sentence you like, a toehold into the story
* The subsection is your best friend for long stories.

## JOURNALISTIC STYLE

Readers of newspapers are often skimming. That’s why you need to put the most interesting information on TOP, so they keep reading! Journalists write stories according to the *inverted pyramid format*: the most important information, or “foundation” of your story, should come first, followed by increasingly less important information. At the same time, however, your story needs to be a complete package, not just a series of statements ordered from most to least important.

### *Tips from Sam*

Don’t overthink it!

* Imagine you’re swinging a tennis racket. You’ll hit the ball with a lot more power if you swing with a loose arm instead of a stiff arm. — J. Dyre
* You almost never need to transcribe your whole interview word-for-word before writing. The sooner you start working on your story after your interview, the better.
* The more you stress the worse/slower you will write. Don’t be afraid to write badly, then go back and edit. Every story will be imperfect.

Start with the most important info in a sentence, not where it came from.

* NO: The Galesburg Police Department released its annual report, showing an increase in arrests and crimes against people in 2021 compared to 2020.
* YES: Arrests and crimes against people in Galesburg increased in 2021 compared to 2020, according to the Galesburg Police Department’s annual report.
* NO: The email, addressed to the “Knox Community” on Dec. 9 from the college’s vice president of communications and information technology services, Lisa Van Riper, states that the college has reported the incident to the FBI.
* YES: The college has reported the incident to the FBI, according to an email sent Dec. 9 from the school to the “Knox Community.”

Clarity:

* Are you trying to fit too much into one sentence?
* Alternatively, can put it all into one sentence?

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## AP STYLE GUIDE

In addition to rhetorical concerns, there are literally thousands of stylistic rules to which journalistic writing adheres. They’re summarized in the AP Style Guide, and while we don’t require that you become familiar with all of them, here are a few common ones by which you should abide:

* Do not use contractions outside of quotations.
* Do not use the Oxford comma. This is the Oxford comma: I bought Naked Juice, chips**,** and ice cream at the convenience store.
* Only use one space after a period.
* Punctuation always belongs inside quotation marks.
* Use em-dashes (—, not -) to connect ideas.
* Do not use exclamation points.
* Movie titles, book titles, etc. are not italicized, underlined or set off by quotation marks.
* Capitalize a person’s work title when you write it before their name. Use lowercase when writing a work title after you’ve introduced their name.
* When using quotes in a headline, use ‘apostrophe marks’ not “quotation marks.”
* Use “according” when attributing things to a document, not to a person.
* The time of an event (2 p.m. not 2pm) comes before the month (abbreviate longer months: Feb. not February) and date (2 not 2nd, 13 not 13th, etc). At 2 p.m. on Feb. 2 the President announced…

## TKS STYLE GUIDE

TKS also has our own more specific style guide you will also need to adhere to. You can see an example ot TKS style in an article [here](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1i5sfYRxz_fL1RO-2K7xKDjga154DafUQ/edit). This article also breaks down our specific formatting rules. All articles should be in this format when submitted. If you have any questions don’t hesitate to ask, and editors will make notes to help you if your story is not formatted correctly.

The Rules:

* Only one space after a period
* Every quotation starts a new paragraph
* Every quotation must be attributed to the person who wrote it, regardless of whether it is obvious who is talking
* Every quotation must use the word “said”
* The “said” should always be at the end or middle of the quotation, never at the beginning
* If there is a dash, there should be a space on either side of the dash
* Avoid the semi-colon and colon as well, try to re-punctuate the sentence so it isn’t necessary to have one
* There should be no indents for paragraphs and no spaces between paragraphs, just a block of text.
* All commas go inside of quotation marks, in all situations
* Stories should never start with “[event] happened at [time] on [date]” that is boring
* Try to keep paragraphs short, no more than three sentences
* Make sure the most important details from the story are at the beginning, then expand from there
* Please **bold** the names of all people associated with Knox the first time they are mentioned. This includes students, faculty, staff and alumni. It does not include people only tangentially associated with the institution, such as honorary degree awardees or non-alumni donors.
* Please do not indent your paragraphs.
* All pieces should have a headline and a subhead
* “Some students” is not an appropriate source
* We use “first-year”, “sophomore”, “junior”, “senior” and “fifth-year”
* Someone’s year or title always comes *before* their name. Associate Professor of History Jon Smith...
* Use the AP style guide to correctly edit grammar, punctuation, and style, and if you have any questions, refer back to it

## EDITORIALIZING

As you write, it is very important to leave your opinion out of the story. It’s easy to slip something in like “The fantastic oboe player did such-and-such,” but attributing adjectives like “fantastic” to anything in your story is bias. It is up to sources, not you, to make judgments about aspects of your story. We acknowledge that it is impossible for a story to be completely unbiased—even the details you choose to include are a direct reflection of what you personally believe is most important—but we try to minimize bias as much as we can. Likewise, keep yourself out of the story; first person does not belong in straight journalistic writing.

Even things that appear simple, like “it was a beautiful day” is editorializing. Instead say “the sun was high in the sky.” That is a direct observation of fact. We keep reminding you to include the “so what” in your stories, but the “so what” cannot come from you. You can’t say “this is a very important step for Knox College” unless one of your sources said it, and you then attribute it to them. This is why it is so important to ask your source about the “so what” of a topic. Any opinions in your article, from if the weather was nice to how important a moment is, must come from your sources.

## LIBEL

***libel (n): defamation by written or printed content***

Libel is an extremely serious topic and an equally serious charge. To print libel is to print an untrue accusation against a person or entity, usually a negative one. U.S. libel laws are long, complicated, and vary somewhat from state to state, but here are some universal guidelines to follow:

1. Never use your story to make accusations. Any claim you insinuate needs to be backed up with facts and/or statements from official sources. Under no circumstances should you blatantly state a claim that you have inferred; let data and sources speak for themselves and allow readers to draw their own conclusions.

2. Do not include accusations made by sources in your story. You may very well feel that the quotation “Joe Smith is an asshole” is true, and you may find facts to back up this assertion, but do not use the quotation in your reporting. We are responsible for whatever we print, even if someone else said it, so it is best to be careful.

3. Always get quotations right. Better to ask a source three times and be annoying than get tangled up in the messy business of correcting a misquote.

4. Always double-check your facts and mention where they came from. If you come across conflicting pieces of information, dig deeper—or, alternatively, point out the conflict in your story.

“Students think a staff member isn’t doing their job” isn’t a story until there is evidence that it is true. We do not write stories simply about how students may feel about something.

These may seem like common sense things to do (or not do), but journalists much more experienced than yourself have gotten into heaps of trouble for printing allegedly libelous content. If you ever have any questions about libel, please ask an editor.

## LEADS

The lead is the first paragraph of your story, and should grab your reader’s attention. It shouldn’t be long (max is 45 words, 30 is way better). When thinking about what to include in your lede, imagine that you’re meeting a friend for dinner and you want to tell them about this story. What would naturally be the first thing you tell them? “Dude, you won’t believe it, but \_\_\_!” That’s your lead. It should be the central part of your story.

Avoid starting with the date and time something happened, it’s boring and people won’t want to keep reading.

An anecdotal lead is a great way to start a story. Perhaps somebody said something really interesting at a protest; start with their story and get to the rest of the protest details later. Always put the most interesting piece up front and when it comes to the lead. And never write in generalities!

### *Everything You Need to Know About Writing Good Leads According to Jane Carlson*

* Is it lead or lede? The latter is an old spelling when typesetters had to differentiate between lead as the beginning of the story and lead the element. Most people just use lead now.
* What does burying the lead mean? It means the writer has hidden the most significant and relevant details of the story amid less important information. For instance, if you are writing a story about, say, someone leaving a job. But you don’t mention until the end that the person was fired over something scandalous. That’s burying the lead.
* The lead is the hook to keep people reading your story. But by no means should it be gimmicky or cliche. Instead, it should be clear, concise and entice your audience to keep reading.
* It is the introduction to the story and it sets the tone for everything else that will follow.
* Do I have to write the lead first? Not necessarily. Depending on your writing style and experience in journalism, you may prefer writing the story first and then writing the lead.
* Sometimes you will find you’ve written your lead already, but it’s five or six paragraphs down.
* First, I think we are all familiar with what a **straight news lead** does, and there are many occasions when that is appropriate, such as covering meetings, court proceedings, and stories where you are summarizing data and drawing conclusions. Here are [some tips](https://drkblake.com/six-rules-for-writing-a-straight-news-lead) on writing that kind of lead. And [example one](https://www.tspr.org/tspr-local/2022-07-08/durbin-announces-2-2-million-in-earmarks-for-wiu) and [example two.](https://www.tspr.org/tspr-local/2022-03-10/lovato-booked-on-first-degree-murder-in-macomb-apartment-shooting)
* There is also the **anecdotal lead**. And that’s exactly what it sounds like: using an anecdote to begin your story. These can be used in any kind of journalistic story, but may work better in features, profiles, and event coverage. Here’s [an example.](https://www.pjstar.com/story/news/coronavirus/2021/10/01/galesburg-illinois-man-39-dies-after-contracting-covid-19/5944927001/) And [another.](https://www.tspr.org/2022-05-01/fallen-knox-county-deputy-was-wiu-law-enforcement-graduate)
* Somewhat similar to anecdotal is the **scene-setting lead.** Another good choice for event coverage and features, though it could certainly work for an investigative piece too. Here’s [an example.](https://www.tspr.org/tspr-local/2022-09-01/recovery-is-possible-galesburg-group-works-to-prevent-overdoses-end-the-stigma-of-addiction)
* There are variations on these and other types of leads, but these are the most relevant to the work you do at TKS.
* What to avoid with leads? Cliches, puns, opinions, passive voice.
* One major tip: If your story is well-reported, and you understand the topic thoroughly, writing the lead is easy. Sometimes when I’m not sure what my lead is going to be, it’s because the story is not clear, either.

Jane Carlson, Advisor 2021-Current

### *Tips on Leads from TKS alumn Sam Lisec*

* If you were describing your story to a friend, what would you say happened (in one sentence)?
* “A lede should be a promise that a compelling story is to follow.” — T. Martin
* Avoid data; can you begin with a human angle?
* For a news writer, the lede is often your one opportunity to write a more conversational sentence in the story.

## USING QUOTATIONS

Quotations are central to your story, but it’s important to know when to use them. A quotation should appear within the first three paragraphs of your story; more so than they want to know what happened, readers want to know what others think about it. After that, alternate between using quotations and summary. Use quotations to validate statements you have made and to transition between topics. If you can summarize what a source said without losing the essence of the statement, do so. A good rule of thumb is that your story be approximately 2/3 material that you wrote and 1/3 quotations. Quotations should offer unique insights and opinions that cannot be easily paraphrased; if it doesn’t add anything to your story, leave it out.

When using a quotation, double-check to be sure that you’ve written it exactly as the source said it. Sometimes, a source will dissolve into incoherent mumbling in the middle of an otherwise good quotation, or a quotation may benefit from being shortened; feel free to cut extraneous information, but indicate that you have done so with an ellipsis, and *do not* do so if cutting means you lose the overall sense of the quotation. Likewise, if a source creatively omits words usually used in written English, you may bracket them in. Otherwise, the quotation should stand as is.

Always attribute your quotations, even if who said them seems obvious. Do this by writing “so-and-so said” after the quotation (or in the middle, normally after the first full sentence being quoted). On the first mention, be sure to use the source’s full name and to provide any information necessary for explaining why that person is an authoritative source on the matter, such as a title or committee membership. For students, always provide a class year before the name on the first mention, e.g. junior Joe Smith. The names of alumni should be followed by their graduation year, e.g. Robert Seibert ’63. After the first mention, refer to a source by their last name only. In the case of two people in the same story with the same last name, use full names on each mention unless it’s very clear which one you are talking about.

### *Tips from Sam*

* You can stand to use quotes a lot less often than you think. They become unnecessary when you can more easily summarize what someone said.
* Use quotes to illustrate someone’s personality or strong opinion. Do not use them to quote someone citing data.
* Often, you can approach a lengthy but important quote with a kind of one-two punch. Summarize the points someone was making, then quote the more colorful part of what they said.

## CONCLUDING YOUR STORY

As you come to the end of your story, try concluding with a particularly sentient quotation. Whatever technique you use, tie up loose ends and, if applicable, let the reader know where to find more information. Please write a headline and subhead for your story, it helps us know what you think the focus is and it’s good practice. But editors may choose not to use yours because of space considerations or wording issues. However, it is good practice for getting into the habit and even editing headlines yourself one day!

## WORD COUNT

We strive to have our articles not reach more than 750 words unless it is a larger and important story. People will often stop reading if you become too verbose. For simpler stories, like event coverage can be around 500 words.  Please come as close to this word count as you can. Generally, being within a hundred words either way is okay. If you’re done writing and your article is too short, you likely didn’t collect enough information; if it’s too long, you need to do some cutting. Make sure you haven’t repeated yourself and that everything is germane to the topic at hand. If you find cutting difficult, don’t hesitate to contact your section editor for help, we are very good at it by now.

## WRITING FOR THE MAG

Writing for the mag is not so different than writing for the web. The biggest change is that the articles should be longer, around 1000 words, and you should have at least 3 sources. These pieces can take you closer to four weeks to research and write. If they are not complete by the deadline, they will not be included in the magazine. Mag pieces should not be about events, they should be about trends and should be the kind of reporting that reveals new information. You can see many examples of previous articles in the drive.

## WRITING FOR THE RADIO

Writing for the radio is different. All writers are expected to write a radio version of every story they produce. Radio stories are significantly shorter. One thing to think about is taking each of your paragraphs and turning it into one sentence. You want only the most vital information in your radio story. Sentences are shorter and more clipped, but can have a more conversational tone. See the TKS formatting guide for an example of a radio story. It takes some time to get a hang of, but your editors will help you.

## DEADLINE POLICY

All stories are due at 5 p.m. on Monday’s at the weekly meeting unless you have talked to your section editor about an extension. They will then be edited through the week.

**If you are not getting your stories in on time, your editors will give you a warning the first time. Having articles come in very late can greatly inhibit the publishing process. If you know you’re going to have a problem, let them know before Monday night.**

● I’m really sick/had a family emergency at the last minute and can’t send in my story on time. Please let your section editor(s) know ASAP.

● I have a lot of homework this week.

Writing for TKS is entirely voluntary, so please consider your workload before taking stories. Feel free to take stories some weeks and not others, balancing your workload is an important skill and we’d rather you not take a story one week than not finish it or be overly stressed because of it.. *Having a lot of homework is a perfectly acceptable excuse for not taking a story; it is not a valid excuse for not turning one in.*

If you are a staff writer, you are expected to write a story a week, regardless of your workload. This is a paid position, and though your hours are not set, it should be treated like a job.

# *Editing*

After you have turned in your story it will go through the editing flow. Make sure you’re checking in with where your story is in the process as it happens.

### *Managing Editor*

The first person to read your story after you send it in will be one of your managing editors. They will give it a quick readthrough to make sure that you’ve covered the topic comprehensively, included both sides of the story (if applicable), and kept your bias out of the article. If there is a problem with your story, your managing editor will contact you and ask you to do some revising. Usually, they will leave notes and comments in the Google Doc, so please check your email and get to these comments as quickly as possible. Don’t feel bad if this happens; it’s happened to each one of us and is part of the learning process. We want to print the best work in our paper and the best work under your name, so please do what revision is asked of you promptly. They may also make some minor style and grammar changes. Please don’t be upset by this, it’s a learning experience for all of us, and is quite literally their job as editors.

### *Copy Editor*

Once you have made the requested changes you can move your story into the Copy Editor folder. There it will be read and edited by the copy editor. After this, the copy editor will move it into Copy 2 for the EIC to read. More likely than not, changes will be made to your article in terms of sentence structure, transitions, etc. TKS is not a literary magazine, and editors have the power to edit your articles as they see fit without your permission. That being said, we will not rewrite your entire story, nor will we make any major changes without going through a revising process with you, which is why it is important you are responsive to our attempts to contact you.

### *Publishing*

Your article will be published online as soon as it is ready. It will also be added to the weekly newsletter that is sent out on Friday mornings. If your article was written for the Mag then it will not be published online until the Mag has come out.

### *The Radio*

Your radio story will be edited right along with your web story. The main difference is once the story has been edited, you need to record yourself saying it. Find a quiet space, and you can record it on your phone. Speak slowly and clearly. Then send the recording to the radio editor to be included in the next radio show.

# *Tips and Tricks*

## HOW TO FOIA

**What is FOIA?**

FOIA stands for Freedom of Information Act, a federal law that requires the full or partial disclosure of information and documents from public bodies.

**What is a FOIA Request or Public Records Request?**

A formal request for information or documents from a public body.

**Who can I FOIA?**

Most federal and state agencies, local governments, boards and commissions, police and fire departments, public schools, public universities, etc.

**How do I FOIA?**

Find the FOIA information on the public body’s website. Some have forms to fill out and submit; for others you submit the request via email, fax, or mail.

**How long does a FOIA take?**

By law, a public body should respond in five business days. But the public body is allowed to request additional time for various reasons.

**Are FOIAs ever denied?**  
Yes, frequently. There are some legal exemptions to FOIA, such as classified information and information related to personnel.

**What if I don’t think my FOIA should have been denied?**

In Illinois, the Public Access Counselor in the Office of the Attorney General investigates FOIA violations as well as violations of the Open Meetings Act.

## TIPS FOR WHITE REPORTERS

Here’s the thing. White people hold privilege. We literally don’t have to learn about this if we don’t invest personally into it. It doesn’t personally harm us in any way, and that’s exactly why we have to take responsibility and educate ourselves. A huge problem is the fact that white people aren’t listening, educating, sharing, or making room for BIPOC voices. We are a part of the problem no matter where we stand in understanding and recognizing our privilege. There is always more work to do. So how are you going to move forward? How can you re-imagine your identity as not only a journalist but a white person living in a place of privilege?

Looking up simple things on google like “white people in journalism” or anything along those lines is important. Read. Learn. Educate others so the responsibility doesn't fall to your BIPOC peers. Do the work yourself, or reach out to me and we can do it together!

Information from “[Tips from Journalists of Color and ONA on how to support as a white ally” by Justin Joffe](https://muckrack.com/blog/2020/07/02/support-journalists-color-as-a-white-ally)

1. Work on yourself
   1. Expand your social circles
   2. Learn about the people you are talking to. Learn how to pronounce their names correctly.
   3. Educate yourself on the racist history of this country.
   4. Read, listen, share the works on people of color - what are you sharing with others on social media? Are you amplifying your voice only, or are you including other voices in the conversation?
   5. Acknowledge that racism exists and that YOU have benefitted from it directly.
   6. Understand the privilege that you hold - especially in the journalism industry
   7. Don’t be defensive
   8. Apologize when you fuck up.
2. Listen and share information
   1. Create space for BIPOC thoughts and opinions
   2. Be transparent with BIPOC
3. Support the work and voices of BIPOC
   1. Express solidarity in public
   2. Give credit
4. Take direct action
   1. Speak up in white spaces where BIPOCs can’t be heard
   2. Push for BIPOC
   3. Volunteer to do the less glamorous diversity work
   4. Implement the change, don’t put it all on BIPOC
   5. Put BIPOC in places of power and make room for that to happen

Sadie Cheney ‘22

## QUESTIONS FOR COPY EDITORS

* Is the story well structured?
* Are all voices in the voice of the story? What voice is not included?
* Are names, titles, and facts stated correctly?
* How is the lead? (Does it say everything it needs to? Is it too long?)
* Check grammar!
* How does it flow?
* Are there parts that sound awkward or should be reworded?
* Is it journalistic style?
* Could any quotes be paraphrased or are out of place?
* Is everything explained well? What is still confusing to you?

## WEBSITE CHECKLIST

Website Checklist:

* Headline?
* Subhead?
* Right author?
* Featured image?
  + Use your section default if needed
* Photos aligned?
* Any weird simples in the text?
* 5-7 tags?
* Right category?
* Featured?

## MEETING COVERAGE

There are a few types of meetings you might be asked to cover, the most common being Student Senate.

Student Senate is not the most glamorous of the reporting jobs, but it is essential that someone goes to every meeting. When at the senate meeting, take your own minutes, write down quotes if you are able, but if you are not sure about the way someone said something, don’t quote it. The main reason to cover senate is to get information about other interesting stories that might be happening on campus, and to keep senate accountable.

Student senate sends out their own minutes, so people interested in the minutia of senate can read that. Your story should only include new or interesting information about what is happening in the senate. If possible, follow up with some senators about something interesting that was spoken about afterwards.

The other common meeting are faculty meetings - which students do not receive minutes of.

Meetings alone are not a story, but they are the jumping off point for one. Reporters attending meetings should come back to the all staff meeting with 2-3 story ideas based off of the discussion in the meeting.

## EVENT COVERAGE

Event coverage is a bit different from standard newswriting. Here are 10 tips to help you out if you’ve taken an event assignment:

1. If you’re covering a meeting of any kind: SLC, Senate, Faculty, etc, introduce yourself to whoever is leading the meeting before it starts so that they know somebody from TKS is there. They’ll probably tell the rest of the group, too. If you’re going to take an exact quote from somebody something said at the meeting, ask them for permission before they leave.

2. If the event is a concert or something similar, there is no need to record it; taking notes on what happens will be enough. If, however, the event is a lecture, you MUST record it, as you can’t ask the speaker to repeat him or herself as you might in an interview setting.

3. Sit in a place where you can see the entire room and note how many people are in attendance. Round to the nearest multiple of five, and include this number in your article. If the event is a major one (such as a Terp dance concert), you do not need to include a specific number; a statement such as “Harbach was packed” is sufficient.

4. If the event is not student-produced (i.e. not a student concert, etc.), look up a little bit of information about the speaker or performer before you go. This will help provide context for your story.

5. Know who is sponsoring the event and include this information at the end of your story. Usually, you can find information on sponsors on the Knox Events Calendar.

6. After the event, grab a couple of students quickly before they leave and ask them what they thought of the speaker/performer/whatever.

7. If the event is sponsored by a student group, try to talk to the president of that group about why they chose to hold the event and what they hope attendees got out of it.

8. Arrive before the event starts and don’t leave until it’s completely over. (This includes staying for the question-and-answer portion afterwards, if applicable.) This sometimes means you may be at an event for longer than you intended, so plan accordingly; if the event begins at 6 p.m. and you have a class starting at 7, it’s probably best to play it safe and not cover that event.

9. Writing about an event chronologically is often boring and can lead to the overarching theme of an event getting buried somewhere in the middle of your story. Rather than using a “this happened, then this happened” format, pick out the most interesting part of the event or the central point being made by the speaker and begin that way.

10. You don’t have the space to include everything that was said or that happened, especially when the event lasted for multiple hours. Pick out the highlights and write about those.

# *Resources available to you*

Despite our attempts at being comprehensive, there are surely things we’ve skipped over in writing this guide. If you have questions, run into problems, are curious about something TKS-related, etc., please ask! Additional resources include:

1. **Talking to your desk editor.** If you email or text your desk editor, they would be more than happy to meet with you somewhere on campus to talk about your work at TKS or just about anything else that’s on your mind. They’re a great resource.
2. **TKS meetings & workshops.** If you have any interest in going over a specific topic in more detail, such as leads, feature-writing, FOIA, political reporting, etc, we’re probably going to be talking about it as a crew at some point in the year. If you have an idea for a workshop (usually led by one of us or Jane Carlson, our adviser) let us know. We’d love to hear it. We’ll also be sure to let you know when we’ll be talking about these specific topics.
3. **Your editor-in-chief:** Me, Eleanor Lindenmayer Shoot me an email or a text and we can definitely meet with you. That’s what we’re here for! I would love to grab coffee at The Beanhive whenever to talk about journalism, your work, etc. I’ll make an announcement about this early in the term and at the end of the term, but feel free to email, call or text me whenever!

Useful websites

* [Otranscribe](https://otranscribe.com): for transcribing audio
* [Judici:](https://www.judici.com) for Illinois court records
* [Pacer](https://pacer.uscourts.gov): for federal court records
* [Google News Initiative](https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com): free classes/lessons
* [Journalist’s ToolBox](https://www.journaliststoolbox.org/2023/01/22/public-records-databases/): database of resources for various reporting skills
* [Copoganda substack](https://equalityalec.substack.com): newsletter that critiques mainstream news

Best of luck to you, and happy reporting!

# Written by Connor Wood (2019-2020)

# Updated by Eleanor Lindenmayer (2022-224)