



Faculty Tip Sheet: Best Practices for Student-Led Investigative Reporting Projects

The Center for Community News' mission is to grow and support partnerships between college reporting programs and local news outlets.

This tip sheet includes:

1. [Key Guidance for Faculty](#)
2. [For Faculty: Additional Tips for a Successful Investigative Reporting Collaboration](#)
3. [Instructional Template: Managing an Investigative Reporting Project](#)
4. [Instructional Template: Fact-Checking Protocol for Student Reporters](#)

This tip sheet is based on guidance from Brian Patrick O'Donoghue, Professor Emeritus at the University of Alaska Fairbanks; Maggie Mulvihill, Associate Professor of the Practice of Computational Journalism at Boston University; Kathy Best, Director, Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Maryland; and Brant Houston, Knight Chair Professor in Investigative and Enterprise Reporting at the University of Illinois.

For questions about this tip sheet, email CCN Program Manager Sarah Gamard at scbgamard@gmail.com.

Key Guidance for Faculty

1. **PLAN AHEAD.** Rigorously research and report an idea ahead of time to ensure you have a viable story by the time the semester starts. (This can take months or even a year.)
 - a. You can plan the semester around two investigative goals:
 - a. **Class project** focused on a case or situation that warrants attention, justifying collective effort.
 - b. Every student pursues an **Individual investigative reporting project**. For starters, have students identify three possible investigative story ideas. Spend a few weeks collecting info and settle on the best prospect.
2. **SET STUDENTS UP FOR SUCCESS.** When starting with students, set up early successes like giving assignments that are easily done, e.g., getting primary documents or basic interviews.

- a. Create a “back-out” schedule (see more on that in the [example instructions](#) for students below) so everyone understands the deadlines for reporting, story drafts, visuals, audio, fact checking, and copy editing.
- b. Send new reporters to collect info you know exists. Specific records, interviews, maps, or photos. The goal is to ensure early success, building confidence and satisfaction.

3. **FOIA EARLY AND OFTEN.** Discuss the merits of using FOIAs right off the bat. Have students collectively brainstorm what files or information may be relevant for class and individual stories. Contact local FOIA authorities on the process. If necessary, meet with local officials and negotiate limits on FOIA requests.

- a. Students should do daily or weekly check-ins with you and with each other to update their progress. If they aren't working in person, set up a Slack channel.

4. **VISIT THE SCENE.** Most investigations involve a place or situation warranting on-site visits. Go to the “scene of the crime,” look around, and talk to people. Tell them what you’re doing. You’ll learn something. In one case at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, a star witness’s claims were disproven just by visiting the site in question.

5. **FACT-CHECK RIGOROUSLY.** See these sample instructions on fact-checking. When you collaborate with professional partners, do not send them unedited, un-fact-checked work from your students. Consider a two-day embargo on allowing republishing.

6. **SET UP CLEAR COMMUNICATION WITH ALL PARTIES.** If you're collaborating with other newsrooms, set up a Slack channel. Use a repository like Google Docs. Set up a clear, consistent communication system with students and your newsroom partner. Weekly updates are key to success. Build confidence in student reporting by sharing standards with your partners. If necessary, create an MOU that clearly defines schedules, roles, and responsibilities, including liabilities.



For Faculty: Additional Tips for a Successful Investigative Reporting Collaboration

The following tips are from Kathy Best, head faculty of the award-winning Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism.

1. **Pick partners who share your values.**
2. **Create an MOU** that spells out roles, responsibilities, ownership of material, and credit.
3. **Have an extremely robust fact-checking process.** One mistake can explode trust and doom future collaborations. Your reporting has to be right.
4. **Use shared technology to make communicating and sharing stories easier.** We use Slack, Google Docs, and GitHub for data.
5. **Have realistic deadlines and deliverables.** INVESTIGATIONS WILL ALWAYS TAKE TWICE AS LONG AS YOU THINK.
6. **Have a project manager** who can help with training and who can keep everyone on track.

The following are examples from the University of Maryland of how these collaborative principles were successfully put into practice, written by Kathy Best:

- *For the collaborative project [Printing Hate](#), we partnered with students at five HBCUs. We needed to incorporate time to train them on our fact-checking system, on how to use Slack channels, and how to use Google Docs. But before we started reporting, we had to provide background on the history of lynching and racial massacres in the U.S. so the students would have context. We shared the stories with Word in Black, which distributed them nationally. We also provided the stories to NPR and Axios, which did news stories about our work.*
- *For the collaborative project [Code Red](#), we created a reporting partnership with NPR's national investigative team. We shared all of our data and reporting with them, and they did the same with us. They produced their own stories, which cited our work. And we wrote our own stories, which cited their findings.*
- *For a collaborative story on [football players who were dying from heat-related ailments](#), we worked with USA Today's sports investigation team. Kevin Blackistone's class did the initial reporting to identify NCAA players who had died. One of our master's students then dug*

deep into those deaths, identifying patterns in the deaths and in how the colleges responded to them. Then USA Today's editors helped us refine the story, offering suggestions on additional reporting lines, particularly around NCAA rules. They ran the final piece.

- *For a collaborative project covering [sports gambling on campus](#), our students did the reporting on colleges that had signed deals allowing sports playbooks to market to their students. They traveled to the University of Colorado, which made a deal that gave them \$30 for every student who placed a bet through the playbook. We also sent students to Towson University, which had just instituted an anti-gambling campaign on campus. We shared all of our reporting with PBS NewsHour, which [used](#) the information in its [own reporting](#), crediting our work.*



Instructional Template: Managing an Investigative Reporting Project

The following tips are based on instructions to students from Kathy Best, head faculty of the award-winning Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism.

1. **Remember that this is a team sport.**
2. **Over-communicate!** Everyone on the team needs to be in the loop from Day One and be kept in the loop along the way.
3. **Tap the skills of each of your collaborators**, from using metrics and social media to refine ideas to visual and audio conversations about the most effective ways to convey information.
4. **Create a budget early and share it with everyone who might touch the project**, from audience engagement to visuals to digital design and production. Budget lines and stories can change, but this allows all the players to see the scope and to know where to go to track progress.
5. **If an asset is planned, but not completed, add it to the budget as aspirational.** This includes graphics, photos, videos, etc. You can drop it later if it doesn't pan out.
6. **Set up a Slack channel** to make communication easier. That way, all participants can see the same messages at the same time.
7. **Create a "back-out" schedule.** (Here is an [example](#).)
 - a. Pull together all the people who will touch the project – line editors, audience engagement, digital design, visual editors, copy editors, etc. – for a kick-off meeting to review the back-out schedule and allow for reaction or for people to share ideas/refinements/improvements.
 - b. The schedule can change over time. (Journalism is messy.) But start with the desired publication date and work backward from there to include:
 - i. Deadlines for story drafts

- ii. Deadlines for the final edit
- iii. Deadlines for video production and editing
- iv. Deadline for photo editing, including cutlines
- v. Deadlines for fact-checking both copy and data (Build in at least a week for this)
- vi. Deadlines for copy editing of stories, cutlines, graphics, and headlines (A week minimum for most projects)
- vii. Deadline for production (A week minimum)
- viii. Deadline for reaching out to publishing/reporting partners
- ix. Deadline for the distribution plan

8. **Link budget to back-out schedule and vice versa.**

9. **Follow [this protocol](#) for fact-checking stories.** To work, students must footnote every fact as they write.

10. **Identify copy editors** and make sure they have the permissions needed to do their work, including on all captions and headlines.

11. **Organize, organize, organize.** Have one drive for the project. Within that drive, create a folder for each element so everyone knows where to put things and, most importantly, where to find them. For example, set up folders for Story Drafts, Fact-checked Stories, and Copy-edited Stories. Within these folders, you can label the status of the story, i.e., "in progress," "final."

- a. For photos, set up folders according to the location where they were taken. Then create new folders for edited photos labeled by the story they will go with. Put a doc with the edited cutlines into the folder with the edited photos.
- b. Put the final headlines on the budget and mark them that way.
- c. (You can consider using a project management tool for this, but they can be pricey.)

12. **Label stories as FINAL on the budget once the copy editing is done.**

13. **Add links for edited assets, such as graphics, photos, and videos to the budget as soon as possible.** Make sure the link is to a specific photo or graphic and not to a folder with multiple images. Make sure permissions are set so that all those involved can access the images.

14. Work to develop a **distribution plan**.

15. **Celebrate when everything comes together and your fabulous work is published!**



Instructional Template: Fact-Checking Protocol for Student-Reported Investigative Stories

This template is based on instructions to students from Kathy Best, head faculty of the award-winning Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism.

If you don't find any errors, you haven't looked hard enough. They are lurking, no matter how careful you are. Is it the spelling of a last name on a second reference? Is it the date you were so sure about, therefore didn't think to check? No fact is too small to check and fix.

Preparation by the Reporters

Every fact needs to be footnoted and linked to its source, which should be stored in a Google Doc folder (e.g., Google Drive links to documents, reports, interview transcripts, PDFs of emails, and URL links when applicable). **Include the page number and paragraph.**

Every human mentioned by name or reference needs a phone number, email address, and (if relevant) URL. *That information also should be at the top of interview transcripts.*

Every entity and organization in the story needs a link to the official organization website as well as contact information.

Every **government office** in the story needs a link to the official government office as well as contact information.

The footnotes must provide whatever the fact checker needs to confirm the facts without having to ask you. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

Let your sources know that someone else also will be calling them for a fact check. *If you change anything after the fact-checker has begun work, you must alert the fact-checker to the change so they can re-check it. Always alert them to the change in a comment so they can see and recheck it.*

**YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE
FOR ANSWERING THE FACT-CHECKER'S QUESTIONS PROMPTLY
AND ENSURING FIXES GET INTO THE WORKING DRAFT**

**There is no penalty for errors found before publication. You get a gold star for finding them.
There are serious consequences for any errors found *after* publication.**

Instructions for the Fact-Checkers

The fact-check team should divide the story in a way that multiple people are not calling the same person, agency, or company.

MAKE A COPY OF THE STORY and RENAME IT with the letters "FC" in front of its original name. Put it in a folder labeled "FACT CHECK STORIES." *Ask the editor before doing this to make sure you have the most recent version.*

Fact-checker checklist:

- Check **every fact** in the story against its source (e.g., document page, URL, human, audio, and transcripts of interviews).
- Check **every person** in the story for proper name spelling (including each and every subsequent reference), title, age, etc.
- Check **every organization, government agency, program, company, and retailer** in the story against its official website for accurate identification, affiliation, and description.
- Contact every organization, office, store, or company mentioned in the story by name or reference and read anything attributed to *OR ABOUT* them and their organization.
- Flag any fact that's missing attribution and get it from the reporter.

Contact every person, organization, government agency, company, and store identified by name or reference to check each for accuracy. You'll find many people are eager to come to the phone if you tell them you are fact-checking what the story says about them. Seize the opportunity to ask them additional questions!

- Make sure they know the wording in the story may be different than what you share, so you are only looking for errors or omissions in the underlying facts.
- Read anything attributed to them and their organization (not just quotes, more importantly, paraphrases and context). *IMPORTANT: This is not for censorship. You are not getting their approval. You are allowing them to identify any **factual** inaccuracies and omissions so they may be corrected.*
- If they say something is wrong, ask them what the correct information is. If there's a major discrepancy in what you've found to be accurate and what they assert is accurate, ask them to provide documentation.

- If they raise complaints about tone, context, or conclusions, hear them out, take notes, and check that the objections they raise are adequately and fairly addressed in the story.
- Fact-checking **by phone** is preferred. However, if you don't get a swift response, then do an email fact check. Read the sample email below, including the instructional comments in red. But be sure to **show your email to an editor before sending**.

SAMPLE EMAIL:

Dear Ms. Aubrey Vincent:

This email follows up on my call to Lindy's on WHAT DATE. [Include a line that notes your effort to reach them.] I am a reporter for the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at The University of Maryland. We are working on a story about the working, living and transportation conditions of H-2B visa seafood processing workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of protections by the State of Maryland.

In the project, we will use the story of an H-2B visa worker from Lindy's Seafood, Inc. who contracted COVID-19 last June while working at the company and renting a room for \$50 a month in employer-provided housing with nine other H-2B visa workers. [Include a general statement on what the story is about. Also include all details that will appear in the story about them, their employees, etc.]

The Maryland Department of Health confirmed that 50 seafood workers contracted COVID-19 in July at Lindy's and Russell Hall Seafood.

The worker was not tested until 11 days after developing symptoms. When the worker received a positive result, Lindy's moved the person into quarantine housing with six other employees who tested positive.

A church in Cambridge, Maryland provided the seven women with food, soap, water and cleaning supplies during their quarantine. Local community health providers gave the workers thermometers and masks.

The worker said they don't have health insurance and they fear retaliation by their employer if they complain.

Please let me know if anything big or small is in error and provide the correct information. And is there anything I omitted that you consider important? [Include this wording in your letter.]

Is there anything you would like to add? I also have several questions. [Give them an opportunity to add anything. And then list the questions you would've asked if you'd been able to interview them.] How many Lindy's workers have contracted COVID-19? How many outbreaks have there been? What steps has Lindy's taken to protect against the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace? In

housing? Does Lindy's arrange for workers to be tested for COVID-19? How often and who does it? Why would it have taken 11 days for a worker to be tested?

Did Lindy's or its owners support or oppose the proposal for an Emergency Temporary Standard by the governor? Or for the bill introduced in January that would have required six feet of social distance in workplaces, migrant housing and transportation and for the Maryland Department of Labor to inspect migrant housing for safe conditions during the pandemic?

*I will need your response no later than this Monday morning, April 19. **[Include a deadline.]** Thank you.*

Next, correct the story. All fixes should be in **bold** or ~~bold~~ and explained in a comment. Put questions in comments, too.

Highlight every fact that's checked. If you are working in a team, pick different highlight colors. Put a color key with names at the top of the FC story.

Recommended: Pull the story up on your screen. But also print out a copy of the story, so you can put a check mark through each word that you've verified. Then transfer it to the main bar by highlighting the verified sections in your assigned color (making sure to check for changes in wording after you made your printout). If you find something that needs to be fixed, do put that into the electronic copy right away, following the instructions below.

There is no penalty for errors found before publication. You get a gold star for finding them. There are serious consequences for any errors found after publication.

Below are additional fact-checking tips from **The Investigative Reporter's Handbook**.



HOW TO Bulletproof Your Fact-Checking

Good reporters come up with their own system to fact-check their work. Typically this involves highlighting every single fact in a story—names, numbers, quotes, etc.—and meticulously checking each. Here's an example of how that can work.

Check the spelling of every name, and don't rely on your own notes. Go to a reliable source—the subject's social media site, a biography page on their workplace, etc.

Make sure this is exactly what the police report says.

Check with the source material. If you did the analysis, redo the data work to make sure you get the same result.. See if anyone else has done the same analysis and gotten similar results.

Johanna Rodriguez was terrified.

Hiding in the walk-in closet of the second floor of the home she shared with her boyfriend Terry Jones, she listened intently for signs that he was getting closer.

She had fled the kitchen after he threw a glass vase at her, according to a police report. Her brown eyes widened as she heard steps in the bedroom and a knock on the closet door.

Rodriguez is one of more than 100 women who have been physically abused by their partners in the past year in Bigtown, a six-month examination by The Post has found. In fact, Bigtown has the highest rate of abuse in the state.

How do you know this? Described in a police report? From a direct quote from the source? Find the origin of this specific wording.

Double check every single detail with documents such as police reports or interview notes.

Really, check every single detail. Nothing is too small to require verification. If she has blue eyes, this is an embarrassing correction.

How do you know this? Get all the source material and recheck every number to make sure.