



University of Vermont
Center for Community News

Faculty Tip Sheet: Solutions journalism in community reporting programs

The Center for Community News' mission is to grow and support partnerships between college reporting programs and local news outlets. CCN has created a series of sample templates and tip sheets for faculty to give to students to contribute local news to their community. Faculty are welcome to use any and all of these and amend them as they see fit for their classes. This tip sheet is based on insights from Jerry Zremski, Klingenstein Family Endowed Chair in Journalism and director of the Local News Network at the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism, and Elizabeth Hewitt, freelance journalist and lecturer at Mississippi State University, and a Solutions Journalism Network certified trainer. For questions about this tip sheet, contact Elizabeth Hewitt at lizmhewitt@gmail.com.

What is solutions journalism?

News stories often focus on what went wrong. A solutions approach broadens the journalistic lens to treat responses to problems as news, too. These stories are more than just "fluff" or "good news stories." They apply rigorous reporting to probe what works and what doesn't about a response to a social problem. Solutions stories meet four criteria – the four "pillars":

- **Response:** The story is focused on an effort to respond to a well-known social problem.
- **Insights:** The story informs audiences about what can be learned from the response, and makes it relevant to news consumers.
- **Evidence:** The story includes evidence of the effort's impact. Evidence can be quantitative, such as data, or can be qualitative, based on interviews with people impacted by the solution, or a mix of both.
- **Limitations:** No solution is perfect. Solutions reporting includes the limitations of a response, and information about what is not working. The story puts the response in context.

The Solutions Journalism Network offers many diverse training and teaching resources on this approach. Check out the SJN website for more information: solutionsjournalism.org

EXAMPLE STORIES: Student journalists are producing solutions stories in print/digital and broadcast formats.

[This school banned cellphones six years ago. Teachers – and many kids – couldn't be happier.](#), by Sam Gauntt, Capital News Service, Sept. 22, 2025

[Youth mental health? There's an app – many apps – for that. But are they effective?](#), by Lillian Glaros, Capital News Service, June 16, 2025

[How Athens Takes on Water Pollution through Pet Waste Stations](#), Grady Newsource, May 7, 2024

['Playworks' Reinvents Recess as a Learning Experience](#), by Christina Walker, Capital News Service, April 21, 2025.

Why incorporate solutions journalism in a community news partnership program?

Incorporating solutions journalism into news coverage can help build trust with audiences. The [2025 Digital News Report](#) by the Reuters Institute found that nearly one in four people avoid the news. While many factors play a role, research finds that one driver is frustration in negativity in the news.

But shifting the news lens to report on responses to problems can help. A [study in 2021](#) found that solutions stories had greater audience appeal, and built loyalty to news stations that aired them.

Students find solutions journalism engaging. Research also shows that the solutions approach particularly resonates with younger audiences. That seems to bear out in classrooms. Instructors often see students engaged in lessons around solutions journalism, and eager to try the approach out in their own course projects.

Solutions journalism can help students develop reporting skills. Integrating solutions journalism into an academic-news partnership course or program can help students move beyond basic news stories into more complex enterprise projects. Solutions projects generally require a high level of familiarity with the subject, so they offer a chance for students to learn the importance of background research and pre-reporting . In order to meet the four pillars of

solutions journalism – particularly evidence and limitations – students need to engage deeply and critically with the subject.

How can instructors use solutions journalism in a community news partnership program?

Level of instruction: Solutions journalism lessons can be incorporated in a course for students of any skill level. Many students find the approach exciting, and the four pillars can also help students learn some of the research and critical thinking skills important for journalism.

However, because solutions stories tend to require in-depth reporting, assignments generally work best for advanced students who have mastered basic reporting skills and have the capacity to take on a more in-depth enterprise story.

Lay the groundwork for students: Unlike professional beat reporters, students typically come into their reporting subjects with little background knowledge. Instructors can help by doing some prep in advance so it's easier for students to get up to speed and start work on their projects.

In Zremski's advanced-level course on solutions journalism, he structures each semester around a different topic. Ahead of a semester dedicated to climate solutions, he compiled a list of 20 possible story ideas that students could use for their projects. For a semester devoted to youth mental health, Zremski and his students attended an online conference and gathered ideas from sessions.

Doing this legwork and vetting story ideas in advance has another benefit: minimizing false starts. Even so, sometimes a story idea falls apart after a student does some reporting. In those cases, having a cache of potential story ideas gives them something to fall back on.

Build up to a solutions story with multiple stages and drafts: As enterprise stories that require in-depth reporting, solutions projects can work well as final projects. Instructors can use coursework through the semester to help students master the four key pillars of solutions journalism while building toward their final article.

For example, Zremski structures his course so students complete phases of their reporting in concurrence with lessons on different aspects of solutions journalism. Instructors can pair each stage of a reporting assignment with in-class activities, like analyzing published solutions stories.

- Story Pitch
- Reporting Strategy Memo
- Evidence Memo – *due shortly after lessons on the Evidence solutions journalism pillar*
- Limitations Memo – *due shortly after lessons on the Limitations solutions journalism pillar*
- Story Outline
- Final Story – *Zremski assigns three drafts*

Solutions stories can also play a role in a course with a more general focus. Hewitt uses a solutions assignment as a final enterprise story in an intermediate course where students cover a specific beat through the semester. Using multiple smaller assignments as building blocks to the final project provides important check-in points.

- Pitch final solutions story, with reporting plan
- Story 1: shorter news story focused on “the problem” – *students report on how the community is impacted by the issue that is the target of the response they will cover in their final project*
- Final Story Outline, including specific bullet points on Evidence and Limitations
- Final Story – *Hewitt assigns two drafts*

Beware of gullibility. Solutions journalism is more than just a “good news” story, and requires reporters to rigorously vet evidence of a response’s impact, and to seek out the limitations and shortcomings of a response. Student reporters may not approach a subject with the full skepticism and critical questioning needed. Students who are not as familiar with journalistic basics can confuse the approach with PR. Instructors can help students hone their projects through activities and assignments.

Resources from the Solutions Journalism Network teach how to identify so-called “[impostors](#).” Talk through strategies for vetting evidence and limitations by analyzing and discussing published solutions stories together as a group.

The iterative assignment schedule outlined above can help. By building up to a larger enterprise story in stages, instructors can engage with students at each point in the reporting process to check in on the rigor of their reporting before students are writing the final story.

Helpful resources to bring solutions journalism into a community news partnership program:

The Solutions Journalism Network has a large library of resources and sample assignments.

- Solutions Journalism Network’s [Toolkits & Guides](#)

- [J-School Curriculum Builder](#)
- [Solutions Story Tracker](#)

About CCN

The [Center for Community News](#) at UVM is a nonpartisan nonprofit that is working to grow and strengthen university-led reporting programs around the country, to create a more sustainable future for local news outlets and the communities they serve.