

Visual journalism best practices

While there are some legal principles guiding the work of journalists – libel and people’s right to privacy, for instance – a large part of the work we do in journalism is directed by ethical principles, not legal ones. These have been established over many years. The Society of Professional Journalists, which serves journalists of all stripes, has an established [Code of Ethics](#) which enumerates principles journalists should work by. These are standards upheld by news organizations both large and small.

When it comes to visual journalism, these principles also hold true. The National Press Photographers Association has its own [Code of Ethics](#), which echo SPJ’s, but focuses specifically on visual issues. Both Code of Ethics are worth reading and thinking about as you do your work.

Here are some things to consider about you are out taking pictures or video on assignment and later editing your work:

1. WHILE YOU ARE IN THE FIELD:

A. By law, you are free to photograph in many public places -- city and state parks, state college and university campuses, and city streets and sidewalks -- without procuring permission from anyone beforehand.

- However, that doesn’t mean *all* public entities allow photography without prior permission; publicly owned hospitals require permission before coming in to take photos, as do public grade schools, college classrooms, stadiums and courtrooms.
- Rule of thumb: If you are going to be in a business or government building, make sure you have permission to be there to take photos or video. A good place to start is checking with the communications department associated with the place you will be taking pictures.

B. It’s always the right thing to talk with the person you want to photograph or video, either before or after you’ve taken their picture/video.

- You are legally allowed to take photos of people in public places without getting their permission, but it’s always best to connect with the subject of your video or picture.
- There are spot news situations where that will be hard or impossible to do, but most assignments are not ones that involve breaking news.
- Introducing yourself, explaining who you work for and what you are doing. All these steps go a long way to build trust with the people you are photographing.
- People are generally excited to be covered by “the news”. You’ll be surprised by how generous people will be with their time!

C. When you are photographing children, make sure you find their parent or guardian before taking photos.

- Introducing yourself and the work you are doing to the adult taking care of a child is an important first step to establishing trust and getting the ok to take photos or video.

D. Part of establishing trust between you and the subject is making sure you correctly identify them in your captions and videos.

- Unless your subject requests anonymity – which is problematic, since they are visible in your images! -- anyone identifiable in your photo or video should be named in your captions.
- If you are taking a photo of an overall crowd, where no one person stands out, names aren't necessary. But if you are taking a single person or group portrait, for instance, you should name everyone. It's a means of creating trust in the community you are covering.
- Make sure you spell their name correctly! Use a physical notepad or the notes app on your phone to keep track of names. If you are concerned about getting the spelling correct, have the subject look over your spelling, or have them write down their name themselves.
- Ensure you know what pronouns your subject uses. Do not assume someone is a "he" or a "she". Ask.

E. Tips for making better portraits:

- Don't say cheese: Leave it up to the person whether they want to smile for the photo. It makes for a more authentic portrait.
- If you are indoors and near a window, bring the subject close to the window and use the natural light. This makes for a more aesthetically pleasing image.
- If the photo is going to be used as a display on a webpage or in print, think about how to make the image more than just a picture of the person you are photographing. Frame them within the environment that speaks to who they are or what they do (e.g., a chef in their kitchen, a teacher in their classroom).

2. WHEN YOU ARE EDITING:

A. Don't ever alter the content of the image or video.

- Color correction or cropping is appropriate, but taking out or adding in content is strictly unethical.
- Generative artificial intelligence tools are fine to use if you are making an illustration or a piece of art. But news photography and video demands fidelity to the reality as you saw it when you took the photo or video.

B. When choosing the photos or video clips you want to publish, make sure they reflect what you encountered while covering the story.

- It's impossible to encapsulate all the elements of every story in your photos or video; what's important is to ensure that the story you are telling is accurate to the best of your abilities. Ask yourself if what you are choosing to publish reflects what you saw and experienced while on assignment.

Visual approaches for election assignments

Assignment 1: Profiling first-time and/or young voter attitudes on campus

Visual approach:

Seeing the people you are writing about is an important part of your work as a journalist.

- Take **portraits** of each of the people you are interviewing. Take at least a couple versions of each interviewee, both a tighter photo (head and shoulders) and a backed-up image (head to toe, or waist up). Visual variety is helpful for the print and web designers when they are putting together your package for publication.
- See “**Tips for making better portraits**” in the Visual Journalism Best Practices section.
- Take **videos** of each of your interviewees as they answer your questions. To make sure their answers are more succinct for the purposes of the video, it’s worth first asking them the questions for your written story, and then asking them the same questions on video.
- Later, you can create an **Instagram Reel** or **TikTok** from a compendium of these video clips. Feel free to add some creative elements that make the Reel or TikTok interesting but remember this is a journalistic endeavor at its heart. Adding in the latest Chappell Roan song as the background music may not be the best choice for the purposes of this assignment.
- **Be deliberate** where you are doing your person-on-the-street interviews. If you are in an identifiable campus spot, think about how you can take your pictures or video to show where the subject is (having the campus union in the background, for instance). This gives your audience helpful context to know where this story is taking place.

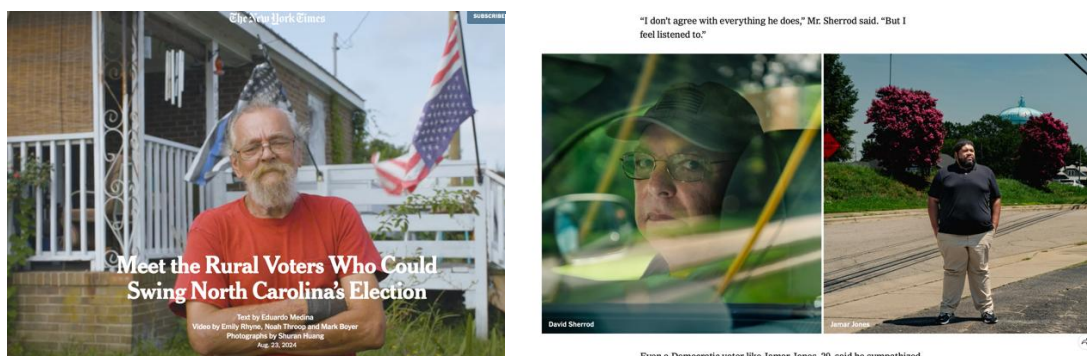
Assignment 2: Profiling voter attitudes in underserved communities off-campus

Visual approach:

Seeing the people you are writing about is an important part of your work as a journalist.

- Take **portraits** of each of the people you are interviewing. Take at least a couple versions of each interviewee, both a tighter photo (head and shoulders) and a backed-up image (head to toe). Visual variety is helpful for the print and web designers when they are putting together your package for publication.
- See “**Tips for making better portraits**” in the Visual Journalism Best Practices section.
- Take **videos** of each of your interviewees as they answer each of the questions you ask them. To make sure their answers are more succinct for the purposes of the video, it’s worth first asking them the questions for your written story first, and then asking them the same questions a second time on video.
- Later, you can create an **Instagram Reel** or **TikTok** from a compendium of these video clips. Feel free to add some creative elements that make the Reel or TikTok interesting, but remember this is a journalistic endeavor at its heart. Adding in the latest Chappell Roan song as the background music may not be the best choice for the purposes of this assignment.
- **Be deliberate** where you are doing your person-on-the-street interviews. Visually placing your subject at home or in their neighborhood helps give your audience context to know where this story is taking place.

Example: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/08/23/us/elections/north-carolina-rural-voters.html?unlocked_article_code=1.Gk4.EMS0.vqTcLp8ev3wM&smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare&sgrp=c-cb



Assignment 3: How do I cast my vote? A how-to guide for first-time voters in the 2024 election

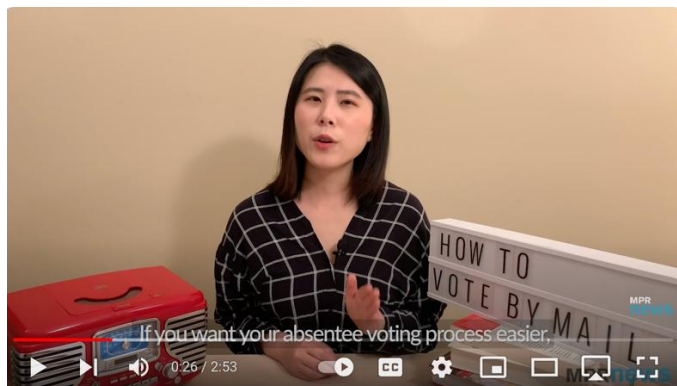
Visual approach:

- Create a how-to-vote explainer **video** that can be platformed on a news website, YouTube, Instagram Reels or TikTok.
- **Keep it simple** – take the elements you are going to write about in the how-to guide, and then extrapolate them for a video explainer.
- **Enumerate step-by-step** what any first-time voter needs to know, from getting registered to absentee voting and Election Day voting.
- You get to choose if it's a "talking head" explaining the steps to vote (as exemplified by the videos below), a graphic, or a fully text approach. **Think creatively!**

Examples: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcAcX6VnILw&list=PLkjGv8mnz0wvTV7e-maN4oZdFUCR5cC&index=4>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2skQLdWZjzo>



Assignment 4: Student-made voter guide project

Visual approach:

- Often, candidates have their own **campaign headshots** prepared to hand out to the news media and voter guides. Ascertain if that is the case with the candidates you will be writing about. If they do not a photo, make sure to take one for the guide. For fairness' sake, the images should appear of equal size in the guide, so it doesn't look like one candidate is being supported more than another. Take this into consideration when you are taking photos.
- In addition to photos of the individual candidates, see if the candidates are willing to have **video** taken of them answering the questions you will also be asking them for the written guide.
- This video that can be platformed on a news **website, YouTube, Instagram Reels** or TikTok.
- Allowing your audience to hear the candidate speak for themselves gives voters another way of assessing the quality of the candidates.

Assignment 5: Pitch a feature story on the 2024 election to your “editor”

Visual approaches:

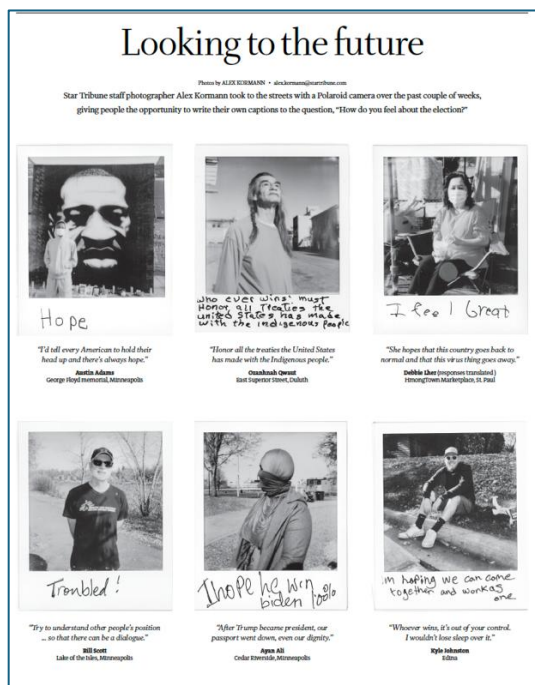
- Depending on what you are pitching, think about how you can **go more in-depth** with a photo or video story on the topic you have picked.
- If you are focused on an issue that is being voted on – for instance, a referendum to raise funding for local schools – **show what is at stake**. Is the school district dealing with overcrowding and needs more classroom space for students? Go to the school and show that, through photos and videos.
- If you are focused on the work campaign volunteers, for instance, capture them as they move through their day: door knocking, phone calling, eating pizza at campaign headquarters. What does a day in the life of a campaign volunteer look like?
- **Showing, and not just telling**, your audience what the story is about helps define the issues being considered and puts a human face on the people you interview.

Assignment 6: Pitch a visual story or package on the 2024 election to your “editor”

Ideas:

A. Capture voter sentiment through photo elicitation

- Photo elicitation is a technique where a photographer takes photos of a subject, and then shows the subject the photos as a means of prompting thoughts and reactions from them.
- It's a fun and interesting way to create a truly “interactive” piece of journalism.
- One way of creating photo elicitation is to take photos that can be printed “instantly” (e.g., Polaroid cameras), and then have the subject write their thoughts underneath the photo.
- Another way is to show the subject the photo on your camera, and then have them handwrite their thoughts on a separate piece of paper (this might be more feasible, if you don't have ready access to an instant camera).
- Example: *Star Tribune* photographer Alex Kormann took Polaroid pictures of Twin Cities residents during the 2020 election, asking each of them to write how they were feeling underneath their image.



B. Day at a polling station

- As the integrity of the voting process has been questioned by some, showing the process visually is useful. What does the voting process look like, in person?
- Identify ahead of time what precinct(s) would be good to focus on: are they particularly visual or interesting looking? Do they have an interesting cross-section of people or neighborhoods that vote there? Is it known to be particularly busy? Much of this information can be found ahead of time on your state's Secretary of State website, which lists statistics from previous elections.
- Additionally, check with your state's Secretary of State office to see what the specific rules are in your state regarding taking photos or video polling places. As a rule of thumb, credentialed journalists are allowed to take photos in polling places but are restricted as to how close they can be to the voting booths themselves. For instance, in Minnesota, it is illegal to take close-up images of people's ballots.
- Example: Star Tribune photojournalist Leila Navidi photographed polling places in Sibley County, Minnesota's county with one of the state's highest voter turnouts (91.4 percent in 2016).

