Editorial Leadership Course Guide

David Cutler
One week summer course
Columbia Scholastic Press Association
Columbia University, New York

These are my instructional materials for the Editorial Leadership summer course. We work toward a usable Style & Policy Manual and an action plan for the first weeks of school. The separate timed schedule supports teaching; this guide explains the activities and the decisions behind them.

How can your leadership help your publication become stronger, more useful, more ethical, and more engaging for your school community?

What You Will Build This Week

- Style & Policy Manual — a working draft with house style, editorial authority, corrections, AI and image integrity, takedowns, deaths and tragedy coverage, social standards, staff responsibilities, and an internal adviser agreement. Finish the remaining sections with your staff.
- Editorial Leadership Action Plan — specific habits, coverage goals, responsibilities, deadlines, and evidence of progress for the first weeks of school.

Bring an AP Stylebook and your existing staff manual. Use the relevant entries in the edition available to you; chapter titles and page numbers vary. Use SPLC's live resources for legal questions.

- House style sheet — "AP style governs everything not listed here. We use 'first-years,' not 'freshmen'; the school is 'Brimmer and May' on first reference, 'Brimmer' after." Built on your AP Stylebook.
- Forum status & editorial policy — "[Publication] is a student-edited forum; student editors make all final content decisions without prior review." Model: JEA (jea.org/press-rights).
- Corrections — "We correct factual errors promptly and transparently, noting what changed." Model: SPJ Code of Ethics (spj.org/ethicscode.asp).
- AI and image integrity — Students own original reporting, final copy, artwork, and editorial decisions. Write specific rules for permitted assistance, verification, consent, disclosure, and documentary photography.
- Takedowns / unpublishing — "We don't unpublish accurate, lawful reporting on request; we correct errors and preserve the record." Models: JEA takedown models (jea.org/press-rights/takedown-requests), SPLC (splc.org).
- Deaths & tragedy coverage — "We confirm through official sources, lead with the person's life, and follow AP guidance on suicide." Model: AP Stylebook (obituaries; suicide) + SPJ.
- Editor & writer responsibilities — a masthead for your news staff and/or your yearbook staff, each role with real duties and sign-off authority. Model: JEA staff-manual templates (jea.org/press-rights).
- Internal adviser relationship — Write a working agreement about student editorial authority, adviser support, outside pressure, and how disagreements are resolved. Do not include private personnel information in the public manual.

Who This Guide Is For

This guide serves news sites, print newspapers, yearbooks, and combined staffs. Translate each exercise to your medium. Editors with different experience levels can give one another a fresh reading and practical feedback.

Before You Arrive

Before arrival, complete the publication diagnostic below, bring one or two examples of your real work, and bring your AP Stylebook and any existing style or policy manual. Your instructor will provide the submission arrangements.

Basic Information

- Name
- School
- Publication name
- Which best describes your publication? (List all that apply.) News site · Newspaper (print or print + digital) · Yearbook · Other
- What do you produce, and on what schedule? (e.g., daily web posts, monthly print issue, one annual book)
- Where can your work be seen? (URL, sample link, or note that you are bringing print/spreads)
- Your role this year
- Staff size

Self Evaluation

1 = Not true yet · 2 = Rarely true · 3 = Somewhat true · 4 = Usually true · 5 = Consistently true

- Our most important work is easy for our audience to find and engage with. (a top story online, the front page in print, how a yearbook is organized and read)
- Our coverage reflects the full school community.
- We reach our audience on a reliable rhythm they can count on. (a steady publishing cadence online, a dependable issue schedule, or on-time, well-promoted delivery for a yearbook)
- Our strongest work includes original reporting and storytelling — not just recaps, summaries, or name lists.
- Our visuals and design genuinely strengthen our work.
- We connect our work to our audience beyond the publication itself. (social media, in-school promotion, distribution, sales)
- Our staff has clear roles and expectations.
- Our editors give useful feedback.
- We have a written style guide and clear standards for accuracy and corrections, ethics, AI use, photo consent, takedown requests, and editorial independence — and our staff actually knows them.

News Site

- Our homepage makes a clear hierarchy of what matters most right now.

- We publish often enough to feel current, and old content does not masquerade as new.
- We understand how readers actually find us — search, social, direct — and use that.

Newspaper

- Our issue planning starts early enough that stories are not rushed to fill space.
- Our layout guides the reader rather than just filling the page.
- We have a real plan for distribution and for who actually picks the paper up.

Yearbook

- Our theme or concept carries consistently through the book, not just on the cover.
- Our ladder/flatplan and deadline system keep us on pace with the plant.
- Every student and group has a genuine path into the book, not just the same visible few.
- Our copy and captions report and quote — they do more than label who is in the photo.

Leadership Reflection

- What is the strongest part of your publication right now?
- What is the weakest part of your publication right now?
- Which weakness could stronger student leadership actually improve?
- What is one leadership habit you need to build this year?
- What do you most want to leave this workshop ready to do?

Work Sample Audit

- Point me to one story, spread, page, or section you are proud of.
- Point me to one that needs improvement.
- What would make the weaker example stronger?

Example of a Strong Reflection

A weak answer:

“Our publication needs better stories.”

A stronger answer:

“We publish too many event recaps and not enough original reporting. We covered homecoming but mostly summarized what happened — we never interviewed students about cost, planning, attendance, or whether it felt inclusive. As an editor, I need to help reporters find stronger angles before they start.” (A yearbook editor might write: “Our spreads name who is in the photo but never tell me anything about them. I need to teach staff to get one real quote per caption.”)

Sunday

3:00–6:00 p.m.

Reading a Partner Publication

Leadership focus: Seeing your own publication the way a stranger does.

As you review a partner's work, ask:

- What does this publication clearly value?
- What is easy to find or follow? What is confusing?
- What feels current and alive? What feels stale?
- What voices or sections seem missing?
- What would make me come back, pick this up again, or actually buy it?
- Can I find their masthead, their policies, or a corrections note — or do they appear to have none? (This is your first look at the manual gap we'll close this week.)

"The front is clean and the lead is easy to find, but I can't tell how often you publish, and sports looks far more current than opinion. As a reader, I don't see opinion." (Or, to a yearbook editor: "The student-life section is gorgeous, but it's the same twenty faces I saw in the sports section. As a sophomore flipping through, I wouldn't find myself anywhere.")

You will then complete a Publication Snapshot Audit in five areas — coverage, design and navigation, audience engagement, staff workflow, and leadership/policy — and name one specific problem you want to solve this week.

Monday Morning

9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Coverage of the Whole Community

Leadership focus: Coverage is the clearest test of whether you serve your whole community — and that pattern is set by editors, not reporters.

The most common weakness across student publications is not usually bad writing. It is narrow coverage: the same students, teams, and visible events, again and again. For a yearbook that failure is even sharper — the book's entire job is to include everyone, yet the same recognizable faces fill spread after spread. Narrow coverage is rarely a reporter problem. It is a leadership problem.

Publication problem	Likely leadership cause
"We don't represent the whole school."	No coverage map or beat system.
"Our stories sound like announcements."	Editors approve weak angles before reporting begins.

Reading: AP Stylebook guidance on inclusive storytelling. Use it to examine how fairly the publication represents the whole community.

We start with a coverage audit of your own recent work. Pull your last 15–20 stories or spreads and mark who actually appears. Then ask: Who recurs constantly? Who almost never appears — younger students, staff, arts students, families, students not already in visible roles? What whole areas of school life have you simply never covered?

Then you will build a coverage map of your community and turn it into a first-month coverage plan with at least 10 story ideas and assigned beats. (Yearbook editors: think in spreads and a coverage grid that guarantees every grade, team, and club a genuine place.)

Weak idea	Stronger idea
“Write about soccer.”	“How the girls’ soccer team rebuilt after losing several seniors — the coach, two returners, one new varsity player.”
“Cover the new schedule.”	“How the new schedule changes homework, sleep, lunch, and clubs — student interviews, faculty views, survey data.”
“Do a theater spread.”	“A behind-the-scenes package on how the fall play comes together — rehearsal, set, student leadership, opening-night pressure.”

Evening task: Finalize the coverage map, choose one flagship package, and identify the formats that would help readers understand it.

Monday Afternoon

2:00–4:30 p.m.

Training Delegation and the Adviser Relationship

Teach Instead of Fixing

Fixing (you do the work)	Teaching (they do the work)
You rewrite a flat lede yourself.	You ask: “What’s the most surprising thing you learned? Why does this matter today? Who’s most affected?” — and let them rebuild it.
You quietly add the missing sources.	You hand it back: “One source here. Who else has a stake? Find two more before we talk.”

Build an apprenticeship pairing, a shared deadline calendar, and a feedback routine that teaches a principle rather than quietly fixing the work.

The Adviser Relationship

I want advisers to become less necessary as students develop judgment. The adviser teaches, coaches, and supports students through difficult decisions. Students should have meaningful editorial responsibility.

Adviser support — lean on this	Adviser control — push back on this
Coaching you through a hard call.	Making the call for you.

Adviser support — lean on this	Adviser control — push back on this
Protecting the staff from outside pressure.	Killing a story to avoid that pressure.
Flagging a legal or safety concern.	Rewriting copy they'd just phrase differently.
Teaching a skill once, so it transfers.	Doing the task every time, so it never does.

Example: claiming ownership, respectfully

"I've noticed you do the final headline pass before we publish. I'd like the board to own that this year — you flag concerns, but the call stays with us. If we get one badly wrong, that's on me to fix."

Draft the Adviser Agreement

Write the working agreement among editors, the adviser, and the school where relevant. Identify final content authority, prior-review rules, outside-pressure procedures, and a process for disagreement. Check applicable law and existing commitments before treating the draft as policy.

It should answer, plainly: Who makes final content decisions? What is the adviser's role — and what is it not? How does prior review work (ideally, it doesn't)? What does the adviser do when administration applies pressure? And how are disagreements between the adviser and the editor-in-chief resolved?

Sample language to discuss and adapt: Student editors make final content decisions. The adviser teaches, coaches, and flags legal, ethical, or safety concerns. Editors and the adviser document disagreements and follow the adopted resolution process. A school considering this language should explain how it fits its existing policies and legal obligations.

Tuesday Morning

9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

AI and Editorial Judgment

Evaluate possible assistance such as transcription, accessibility, organization, or website code against your school's rules and your newsroom's goals. At The Gator, original journalism and artwork remain student work. Do not treat a vendor feature as permission to use it.

AI should not invent quotes, write stories, replace interviews, fabricate sources, make final editorial decisions, publish unverified information, or erase student voice. For yearbooks especially: a book is a record. AI-generated or AI-altered photographs have no place in it, and any image work must respect consent and accuracy.

Reading: Relevant AP Stylebook and AP guidance on AI. Human editors remain responsible for accuracy, verification, and the integrity of the published work.

Policy draft to discuss: Students conduct original reporting and write final copy. Tools may support specifically approved tasks after a privacy and consent review. Staff verify output against original sources and recordings. AI may not fabricate quotations, sources, people, or events, or replace student editorial judgment. Documentary images must preserve what was recorded. Editors explain meaningful automated assistance to the audience.

Tuesday Afternoon

2:00–4:30 p.m.

Interviewing Profiles and Precise Writing

Leadership focus: Editors help writers ask better questions and notice better details — which means editors must be able to do it themselves. (This is the engine of a strong yearbook caption as much as a strong feature.)

You will interview a classmate and begin a short profile of 300 words or fewer.

Weak opening	Stronger opening
"Sarah is a hardworking editor who likes journalism."	"By 7:45 each Monday, Sarah Kim has opened the newsroom calendar, checked which stories are late, and texted three section editors before most classmates reach their lockers."

The stronger version shows leadership through action and detail. When editing each other's profiles: What should be cut? What needs clarifying? Which quote works best? What detail makes the person vivid? Where does it go general?

Reading: AP Stylebook entries on quotations, ages, titles, datelines, and punctuation. Check quotations against recordings and preserve their meaning.

Optional evening observation: If attending a performance, note one choice about pacing, character, scene, or visuals that holds the audience's attention. A performance is not required to use these course materials.

Wednesday Morning

9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Opinion and Community Dialogue

Leadership focus: A strong publication doesn't only report what happened; it helps the community think about what matters.

Distinguish news, analysis, column, review, staff editorial, and personal essay. A staff editorial expresses the editorial board's collective position. Label forms so readers can tell reporting from opinion.

- Opening: Use a specific, engaging lede; establish the issue and your position early; acknowledge a serious counterargument; and introduce credible support.

- Middle: Develop the argument one reason at a time. Use interviews, credible links, facts, and data. Explain how the evidence supports the claim and use original visuals where useful.
- Walk-off: Connect the ending to the opening when it fits, and name a realistic action readers or the school can take. Paragraph counts are guides, not requirements.

Prepare to apply this structure to a difficult story in the afternoon editorial-board exercise.

Weak topic	Stronger topic
“School lunch is bad.”	“Our school should create a student food advisory group, because lunch affects health, morale, and whether students feel heard.”

Weak staff editorial	Stronger staff editorial
“Students should have less homework because everyone’s stressed.”	“The school should coordinate assessment dates across departments, because students report major tests clustering on the same days.”

By the end of the morning, you will outline a staff editorial, recurring opinion feature, or — for yearbook — a point-of-view choice for your book, mapped to the top, middle, and walk-off — ready to carry into this afternoon’s editorial board.

Wednesday Afternoon

2:00–4:30 p.m.

Running an Editorial Board

Leadership focus: An editorial is the one place your publication speaks as an institution. The skill is running the room that decides what it will say — and doing it responsibly when the subject is painful.

Read “Community Unites Against Hate,” The Gator’s report used in the supplied course case. It concerns racist graffiti targeting a member of the cleaning staff. Honor the report’s decision to keep the targeted person’s identity confidential. Confirm all details against the assigned article before making an argument.

The Group Process

- Find the angle. Choose an arguable position about accountability, solidarity, bystander responsibility, or the next practical response. Name the evidence you need and what remains unknown.
- Decide and vote. Argue the strongest case for and against, vote on the record, and settle how a dissent is handled before you draft.
- Draft together. Build the editorial with the morning’s structure — a lede and a clear nut-graph stance, a reported middle with links and facts, and a walk-off with a concrete ask.
- Read it aloud. Each group reads to the room, which names the single strongest line and one thing to sharpen.

Cover the Case Responsibly

- Refer to the slur as the news story did — as “a racial slur.” Do not reprint it.
- Keep the targeted worker’s identity confidential, as The Gator chose to.
- Write about the act and the community’s response — not the unknown perpetrator; don’t turn the editorial into a hunt for a culprit.

Tonight: polish your group’s editorial into a clean final of about 300 words, stance in the first two sentences. It feeds tomorrow morning’s session on censorship and controversial coverage.

Thursday Morning

9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Press Freedom and Difficult Coverage

External pressure can take the form of a request to preview, change, withhold, or remove a story. Self-censorship occurs when staff stop pursuing useful reporting because they anticipate conflict. Discuss the fear, the reporting needed, and the standards behind the decision.

Weak framing	Stronger framing
“We didn’t run it — it would cause problems.”	“We’re holding it until we verify the central claim and give the subject a real chance to respond — not because it’s uncomfortable. Here’s what we need first.”

Know Your School and State

For public-school student media, First Amendment precedent, state statutes, school sponsorship, and forum status can affect the analysis. Tinker and Hazelwood are central cases, but they do not cover every kind of student expression.

SPLC’s tracker lists 18 states with laws protecting public high school student journalists as of October 24, 2026: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia. Coverage, exceptions, remedies, and adviser protections differ. Read the current tracker and the actual law: https://splc.org/new-voices/.

Private schools generally are not directly bound by the First Amendment. State statutes, contracts, policies, and school commitments may still provide protections; California is one important example to investigate. PSJA’s Model Affirmation offers a voluntary school commitment, developed with Erica Salkin as chief author and PSJA and SPLC review. It is not a New Voices statute. Read its complete text and exceptions at https://ps-ja.com/model-affirmation-of-student-free-expression-rights-in-private-and-independent-schools/.

Activity: Identify your school type and state. Find the specific law, regulation, policy, contract, or school commitment that may apply. Explain its scope, record the source, and name one unresolved question. Seek SPLC help with a real dispute: https://splc.org/legalhelp/.

Write a takedown policy before a request arrives. Preserve accurate reporting as the starting point, correct errors transparently, and set a documented process for exceptional requests involving serious harm or legal concerns. A request to remove work needs review; the label alone does not decide the outcome.

Before difficult coverage runs, ask whether the central claims are verified, relevant people had a meaningful chance to respond, the public-interest purpose is clear, and potential harm has been considered. Record the reasoning and any reporting still needed.

Scenarios: a beloved teacher's sudden departure the administration would rather you not detail; a discipline matter (privacy vs. public interest); an administrator who asks to read a story first; a staff split on whether a story is worth the backlash; a budget investigation the staff is tempted to drop because "we don't want to upset people" (name that: self-censorship); a takedown demand on a year-old story; and for yearbook — candid photos and consent, senior quotes, and whether the book honestly documents a difficult year.

Thursday Afternoon

2:00–4:30 p.m.

Systems and the Policy Manual

Assemble the manual using the menu at the beginning of this guide. Finish the AI and corrections drafts, identify priority gaps, and write practical steps for the policies your newsroom most needs.

Staff Responsibilities

A masthead is a leadership document: it says who owns what and who signs off before publication. Write the one(s) you need — news, yearbook, or both. A role line should name duties and authority.

Weak role description	Stronger role description
"Sports editor edits sports stories."	"Maintains the sports calendar, assigns games and features, ensures every team gets fair attention, edits copy before publication, coordinates with photographers, and trains new reporters."
"Student-life editor does the student-life section."	"Owns the student-life ladder; assigns spreads so every grade and group appears; edits copy and captions to report and quote, not just label; coordinates photo calls; and keeps the section on plant deadlines."

Choose roles that fit your medium. Each description should name duties, authority, deadlines, and handoffs. Common roles include editor-in-chief, managing editor, section editor, copy editor, photo editor, multimedia editor, online editor, and business or sales manager.

Corrections Policy

Sample corrections policy: We correct factual errors promptly and transparently, explaining what changed. Editors notify the relevant staff, review how the error happened, and adjust the process. Identify who receives requests and who approves a correction.

Then turn your audit into a ranked repair list: Fix now · Fix this semester · Fix later.

Second half — draft and critique. You will draft your action plan now and trade it with a partner for structured critique against a short protocol: Is the goal specific and measurable? Is the leadership habit a real behavior change? Does the plan name who does the work? So that Friday is a revision, not a first attempt.

Friday

9:30–11:30 a.m.

Presentations and Closing

- Your biggest strength and biggest weakness
- The leadership habit you'll build
- A first-month coverage goal
- A training/delegation change — and a clear line on what's yours versus your adviser's
- A design or audience-engagement change
- The state of your manual: which policies are done (at minimum AI and corrections), and the two you'll prioritize next — e.g., takedowns, deaths, forum status, or your masthead
- Your state and school policy context, including any New Voices law or adopted press-freedom commitment
- Your standard for difficult coverage, one lesson from the editorial-board case, and one measurable sign of success

Weak	Stronger
"We'll publish more."	"First month: two original reported stories a week, each with three sources and a visual. Pitch Monday, draft Thursday, edit Friday."
"I need to be better."	"I'll stop doing everything myself — delegate earlier, hold editors to a shared calendar, and coach younger staff instead of fixing at the last minute."
"The site will improve."	"By the end of Q1, every section publishes four stories, the homepage updates weekly, and we run one reader survey."

Evening Work

Daytime sessions emphasize discussion, coaching, and critique. Evening work produces one bounded task, usually about an hour or less. Adjust the workload to the group's needs.

- Sunday: Finalize your Publication Snapshot Audit and write the one problem you'll solve this week. (~40 min)
- Monday: Lock your coverage map and flagship, sketch the flagship across formats, and draft your internal adviser-relationship section. (~1 hr)
- Tuesday: Polish the profile. If attending a performance, note one storytelling choice that could inform your work. About 20 minutes.
- Wednesday: Polish the editorial to about 300 words and finalize the AI policy. Begin the corrections and takedown sections. About one hour.
- Thursday: Revise your action plan using your partner's critique, and assemble your manual sections into one file (done sections + a clear "to finish with staff" list), ready to present. (~1 hr)

Final Deliverables

- Style & Policy Manual — AI and corrections complete; the remaining sections drafted or outlined with a plan to finish them with staff.
- Press-freedom reference sheet — school type, state, applicable sources, scope of protections, and questions to resolve.
- Publication Snapshot Audit (begun pre-arrival, finished Sunday)
- First-Month Coverage Plan, with your chosen flagship package
- People Plan — beats, staff roles, a delegation approach, and your adviser-line boundary
- Profile / Interview craft exercise
- Editorial Leadership Action Plan — priorities, coverage and delegation changes, responsibilities, deadlines, a lesson from the editorial-board case, and a measure of success.

Sources and companion materials

Course slides and downloads: https://teachercutler.com/courses/journalism/presentations/editorial-leadership

SPLC student press questions: https://splc.org/high-school-faqs/

SPLC private-school press guide: https://splc.org/2020/12/legal-guide-for-the-private-school-press_1201/

JEA press rights resources: https://jea.org/press-rights/

SPJ Code of Ethics: https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp