Editorial Leadership

A one-week summer course
Columbia Scholastic Press Association
Columbia University · New York



Photograph by Jody Weinberg

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What does the editor do to make this better?

The central question

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

By Friday

Present a working Style & Policy Manual and an Editorial Leadership Action Plan.

Throughout the week

Connect each activity to one change you can carry back to your staff.

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Ten sessions across one week

Sunday

Read a partner’s publication and audit your own.

Monday

Coverage planning; training, delegation, and the adviser relationship.

Tuesday

AI and editorial judgment; interviewing and profiles.

Wednesday

Opinion writing; an editorial-board case study.

Thursday

Press freedom; systems and the policy manual.

Friday

Present action plans and identify what you will finish with your staff.

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Read like a first-time visitor

Notice the experience

What does the publication value? What is easy to find? What feels current? Who is missing?

Cross media

A yearbook editor can give a news site a fresh reading, and a news editor can do the same for a yearbook.

Make feedback specific

“Opinion has not updated in months” gives an editor something to address. “It looks good” does not.

Check trust signals

Can you find a masthead, editorial policies, and a corrections process?

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Publication Snapshot Audit

01 Review coverage, design and navigation, audience engagement, staff workflow, and leadership or policy.

02 Describe the publication readers actually see. Support each observation with an example.

03 Name one problem to work on throughout the week.

WORKING TIME

35 minutes

YOU WILL PRODUCE

A completed audit and one clearly defined priority.

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Make coverage a leadership responsibility

Look for patterns

Review the last 15–20 stories or spreads. Which students, teams, grades, and interests appear repeatedly? Who is absent?

Turn the gap into an assignment

A beat, a source list, and a useful angle give reporters a way into the story.

From topic to angle

“Soccer” becomes “How the team rebuilt after losing several seniors.”

From announcement to reporting

“The new schedule” becomes “How the new schedule changes sleep, lunch, homework, and clubs.”

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Coverage map and first-month plan

01 Map your community and the gaps in recent coverage.

02 Develop at least 10 story ideas and assign beats or owners.

03 Choose one flagship package and explain why readers need it.

WORKING TIME

45 minutes

YOU WILL PRODUCE

A coverage map and a first-month plan.

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Teach the work instead of doing it all

Coach a flat lede

Ask what surprised the reporter, why it matters, and who is affected. Let the writer rebuild the opening.

Return incomplete reporting

Name the missing perspective and help the writer plan the next interview.

Delegate visibly

Give each editor a responsibility, deadline, and check-in.

Build a staff that lasts

Train new people before a deadline makes them indispensable.

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Write the adviser relationship policy

01 Identify who makes final content decisions and how the adviser supports that work.

02 Address prior review, outside pressure, disagreement, and applicable school policy or law.

03 Rehearse a respectful conversation in which editors explain their responsibility.

WORKING TIME

25 minutes

YOU WILL PRODUCE

An internal working agreement. Keep private personnel matters out of the public manual.

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Set the newsroom’s AI boundary

Students own the journalism

Reporting, final copy, quotations, original artwork, and editorial decisions remain human work.

Protect the record

Do not fabricate quotes, sources, people, or events. Distinguish labeled design from documentary photographs.

Evaluate assistance deliberately

Discuss permitted uses such as transcription or website code. Verify output and follow privacy and consent requirements.

Publish a clear policy

Explain permitted use, review, disclosure, and accountability. A tool does not excuse an error.

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Draft an AI and image-integrity policy

01 Audit where automated tools already touch your workflow.

02 Write specific permitted and prohibited uses, with a named reviewer.

03 Trade policies and look for ambiguous language or loopholes.

WORKING TIME

35 minutes

YOU WILL PRODUCE

A policy draft your staff can evaluate and revise.

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Show a person through a revealing detail

General statement

“Sarah is a hardworking editor who likes journalism.”

Reported detail

By 7:45 each Monday, Sarah has checked the newsroom calendar and contacted three section editors.

Ask open questions

Invite scenes, decisions, examples, and follow-ups.

Use the same discipline in captions

A strong caption reports something the photograph alone cannot tell the reader.

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Interview and write a short profile

01 Prepare five open-ended questions and interview a partner.

02 Draft a profile of 300 words or fewer with a revealing opening detail.

03 Trade drafts and check accuracy, quotations, context, and clarity.

WORKING TIME

35 minutes

YOU WILL PRODUCE

A short profile and a specific revision to complete.

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Choose the form deliberately

News and analysis

News reports what happened; analysis explains its meaning through evidence.

Staff editorial

The editorial board takes a collective position.

Column and review

A named writer offers a viewpoint or evaluates work against clear criteria.

Personal essay

A first-person experience can help readers understand an issue. Label the form clearly.

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Turn a complaint into an argument

Weak starting point

“School lunch is bad.”

A position with a proposal

The school should create a student food advisory group because lunch affects health, morale, and whether students feel heard.

Do the reporting

Interview people with different stakes. Test your claim and acknowledge the strongest counterargument.

Offer a way forward

Name an action that someone can realistically take.

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Convene a mock editorial board

01 Choose a campus issue and debate the evidence.

02 Reach a defensible position, or choose clearly labeled contrasting columns.

03 Outline a reported editorial and its proposed action.

WORKING TIME

35 minutes

YOU WILL PRODUCE

An editorial outline and a record of the board's reasoning.

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Apply the standards to a difficult story

01 Read the assigned Gator case about racist graffiti and distinguish confirmed facts from assumptions.

02 Identify the audience’s need, potential harms, response opportunities, and unresolved reporting questions.

03 Debate a position, draft about 300 words, and explain your reasoning to another board.

WORKING TIME

Wednesday afternoon · 2½-hour session

YOU WILL PRODUCE

A reported editorial draft and a clear explanation of the choices behind it. Use the course guide for the full session plan.

Open The Gator example ↗

Slides & resource links ↗

Name pressure and self-censorship

External pressure

A demand to preview, change, withhold, or remove work requires a careful response grounded in the facts, policy, and applicable law.

Self-censorship

Staff may stop proposing important stories because they expect conflict. Make space to discuss that fear.

Before a difficult story runs

Is it verified, fair, useful to the community, and supported by a meaningful chance to respond?

Stand behind the process

Document reporting and editorial reasoning. Correct errors and seek help when needed.

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Know which protections apply

Public school

First Amendment precedent, state law, school sponsorship, and forum status can affect the analysis.

Private school

The First Amendment generally does not bind a private school. State statutes, contracts, and school commitments may still matter.

New Voices

SPLC lists 18 states with laws protecting public high school journalists. Coverage and adviser protections differ.

PSJA Model Affirmation

A voluntary commitment private schools can adopt to support student expression and adviser advocacy.

Explore the New Voices tracker ↗

Slides & resource links ↗

Build a press-freedom reference sheet

01 Identify your school type and state. Read the actual law and policies that may apply.

02 Use the press-law slides and SPLC resources to analyze a hypothetical dispute.

03 Draft a standard for responsible coverage of difficult issues.

WORKING TIME

35 minutes

YOU WILL PRODUCE

A source-linked reference sheet and one policy question to resolve with qualified help.

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Assemble the Style & Policy Manual

Editorial responsibilities

House style; editorial authority and forum policy; editor and writer duties; adviser relationship.

Accuracy and accountability

Corrections; source standards; AI and image integrity; social publishing.

Difficult situations

Takedown requests; deaths and tragedy; privacy and harm; outside pressure.

Keep it usable

Write specific steps and assign responsibility. Review the public sections with your staff and school as appropriate.

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Give each editor a real job

A weak description

“The sports editor edits sports stories.”

A useful description

Maintains the calendar, assigns coverage fairly across teams, coordinates visuals, edits copy, and trains reporters.

For a yearbook

A section editor owns the coverage plan, caption standards, representation, and production deadlines.

Make responsibility visible

Name a person, task, deadline, and handoff so work does not disappear between roles.

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Build systems, then stress-test the plan

01 Draft the masthead and your highest-priority unfinished policy.

02 Rank repairs: now, this semester, and later.

03 Trade your action plan for specific critique and revise it.

WORKING TIME

35 minutes

YOU WILL PRODUCE

A masthead, a ranked repair list, and a revised action-plan draft.

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Present commitments someone can measure

Your action plan

Name the priority, first-month coverage goal, delegation change, owner, deadline, and evidence of progress.

Show your judgment

Explain your legal or policy context, approach to difficult coverage, and a lesson from the editorial-board case.

Your manual

Show completed sections and name the two you will finish next with your staff.

Make it observable

“Update the homepage every week” can be checked. “Make the site better” cannot.

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Carry the work back to your newsroom

Keep the central promise

Build a publication that serves the whole community and gives students meaningful editorial responsibility.

David Cutler's course materials

Prepared for the one-week Editorial Leadership summer course at CSPA, Columbia University, New York.

Finish with your staff

Discuss the drafts, test the routines, and agree on a review date.

Continue the work

The companion page includes the course guide, timed schedule, press-law slides, and discussion activities.

Open slides and resources ↗