



BETTERJOURNALISM.ORG

## “Civics” (Spring 2017) Student Guidelines

The Project for Better Journalism is excited to work with your school to present our spring collaboration project: “Civics”! Have you ever wondered about the specific issues that affect your community? What do your fellow community members think about the steps that can be taken? And what role can you and your classmates play in exposing and addressing these issues?

In this assignment, you will have the opportunity to express your perspective on a particular issue that impacts your community. Your work will be published and displayed alongside the work of other students all across the country—and many of them will have very different responses that reflect the unique civic issues affecting their own communities! You’ll be able to view them on an interactive website.

Here are some questions that you might consider in choosing an issue: What local issues are you particularly passionate about? Have any recent policy changes affected your day-to-day life? For example, is your local government responsive to its constituents’ needs? Is your school making changes to policies? Is there legislation being discussed or implemented by your city council?

**The PBJ deadline for submissions is April 28, 2017 at 11:59 PM EST.**

*Your adviser may ask that you ready your work earlier.*

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- **You should first identify an issue in your community.**
    - Be specific. You should be able to write at least 650 words on the topic: raising the issue, painting the background, introducing key players and organizations, and then explaining steps, if any, that have already being taken to address the issue.
    - Think about how one might define “community”. Your community may be your classroom, your school, your neighborhood, or even your entire city!

- Some examples of issues might include:
  - A law recently passed by your city council that might impact citizens.
  - The closing of a prominent local business, perhaps to a displacing force.
  - An event that will draw a lot of people, but which might be controversial.
  - The actions of your school student council, or a new policy by school administration.
- There should be enough information that you can conduct a proper investigation. You should be able to find at least one person who is passionate and/or are involved.
- Your issue may be controversial. Try to see as many sides of the issue as you can.
- **You should interview someone who is close to the issue.**
  - This person can be anyone in your community--for example, a local leader, business owner, or teacher. Try not to choose someone with whom you are very close, like a family member or best friend.
  - If you can, record the interview so you can reference it later on. Don't forget to **ask the person before recording**. You should also take notes during the interview.
    - Before you start, you should explain to the interviewee the nature and subject of your interview, and tell the interviewee that the article will be displayed online.
    - To ensure accuracy, try to give yourself enough time to run the transcript of the interview by the interviewee before submitting your final project. Make sure you keep his or her contact information in order to do this.
  - PBJ has created detailed guidelines which may help you through the interview process. You can think of the interview as a three-part process: before, during, and after. You should prepare thoroughly for your interview. They can be found at the end of these guidelines.
  - You may want to interview more than one person about the issue in order to represent more than one perspective. If so, budget more time and take care to coordinate in advance.

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- For this assignment, you can submit an **article, video, or podcast**.
    - If you choose to submit an article, it should be at least 650 words in length. We encourage you to include photographs of your interview subject and other locations, buildings, scenes, etc. which may be relevant.
      - The article can be submitted as an op-ed or an investigative article. Do not simply transcribe your interview. It should be incorporated into a substantive writing piece.
      - If you write an op-ed, you should offer your own solution to the issue as well. You should present a counterargument in order to strengthen your own argument.
      - If you write an investigative article, you should not take sides and instead remain as objective as possible.
    - If you choose to submit a video or podcast, it should be at least 2 minutes in length.
      - iMovie or Windows Movie Maker may be a helpful tool if you choose to create a video. Take care during the recording that background noise is kept to a minimum and that the interview is clearly audible.

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1. The PBJ deadline for submissions is **April 28, 2017 at 11:59 PM ET**. Your adviser may also have an earlier deadline which you must follow.
  2. Follow the instructions to submit your work to PBJ prior to the deadline by visiting: <http://docs.betterjournalism.org/docs/17s-civics-students>
  3. If you encounter any problems or have any questions, please email [collaborations@betterjournalism.org](mailto:collaborations@betterjournalism.org), where PBJ staff members can provide assistance.

# Helpful guidelines for your interview

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## Before the Interview

### 1. Think about what you want out of your interview.

- What do you hope to learn from your interviewee? A new perspective on your issue? More details about how the issue impacts lives? An expert's opinion or solution?
- *Exercise:* List 5 questions you have about your local issue, then list out what kind of people could answer them

### 2. Choose an interviewee.

- Once you've decided what kind of information you hope to gain from your interview, think about the people in your community who could provide the perspective you want. Some potential starting points:
  - Friends and family
  - Teachers and other school administrators
  - Local business owners
- Your first choice interviewee might be unavailable, so make sure you have a couple backup candidates in mind just in case!

### 3. Reach out to your interviewee.

- Whether you contact your interviewee through phone, email, or in person, make sure to ask them early enough to plan! A good starting point is asking at least 3 days before you hope to conduct your interview, and giving yourself a week to write the article.
- When reaching out to your interviewee, make sure they know exactly what the interview will entail and what your goal is/ what you're going to do with the interview. For example, make sure they know if they're being recorded, ask if they want their name/ picture/ other personal information attached to the interview, and who might see the final product.
- *An example script:* "Hi [interviewee], I hope you're doing well! My name is [your name], and I'm writing an article on [local issue]. I was wondering if you'd be free for an interview sometime before [day], as I'm interested in what you have to say about [specific question you have]. I'll mostly be asking about [more detailed questions]. My goal is to use your interview to write an article that will be published on The Project for Better Journalism website. Thanks so much!

## During the Interview

### 1. Some basic tips:

- Relax! Try to conduct the interview as if it were a casual conversation. Remember, this is someone you're familiar with, so don't get too intimidated.
- It is important to do research before the interview. What is this person's background and how might that inform his or her opinion? Have they spoken publicly about this topic before? Know some background information on your interviewee that could help you throughout the interview.
- Remain as engaged as possible. Try not to slouch, yawn, or appear bored. Maintain eye contact with your interviewee.
- Be an active listener. Try to frame your responses in a way that repeats what they just said to you— this gives them the opportunity to elaborate or clarify their statements. For example:
  - **Interviewee:** *"I like writing, it helps me think."*
  - **You:** *"I see, so writing helps you think — can you tell me more about that? What is it about the writing process that helps you think better?"*
- Don't be afraid to ask follow up or clarifying questions.
- Take notes, and/or record the interview on a mobile device.
- Remember: this handout is a guide, so don't have to use every single question listed on here. Feel free to follow the conversation where it takes you — capitalize on your own journalistic style!

### 2. Getting started:

- If you are recording your interview, be sure to gain your interviewee's consent to do so.
- Remind your interviewee that if they feel uncomfortable at any time, they are free to stop.
- Ease into the conversation topic - use basic questions like:
  - How are you feeling today?
  - What are you most excited about for this interview?
  - Anything fun happening this weekend?
- After that, start simple. Present your question in as clear terms as possible. For example: *"I'm looking to understand how you view 'x problem' in our city, and your opinions as to how we can fix it."*

### 3. Some questions you can ask: remember your 5W's

- **What do you think of *x* problem within our community?**
  - Potential follow-ups:
    - Where do you see this problem most prevalent?
    - Why do you think this problem exists within the community?
    - How do you think it came about?
    - What institutions or social structures within the community do you contributing to this problem?
    - Who do you think is responsible for it?
    - When do you think this first started to affect the community negatively?
  
- **Can you tell me about a time when you first realized this problem was affecting you (if at all)?**
  - How did that make you feel?
  - Did you have to alter any previous decisions as a result?
  
- **How do you think we as a community can best go about solving this problem?**
  - What do you think we can do to help? What about students?
  - What kind of institutions will need to get involved? For example: the police force, fire department, or YMCA?
  - Have you started taking any steps towards combating this problem? If so, what?

Remember: stay calm, remain engaged, and good luck!

## After the Interview

### **1. It's always a good idea to follow-up with your interviewee.**

- You should reach out with a basic thank you note once the interview is over. This will help you establish a relationship with your interviewee that you may need in the future! A small sign of appreciation goes a long way.

### **2. Time is of the essence: try to begin work immediately after the interview is over.**

- *If you took notes during the interview:*
  - Before re-reading your notes, write down what you can remember about the person you interviewed and the main points that stuck with you while the details are still fresh in your mind.
  - Next, look at your notes. Check to see if you can fill any gaps, expand on what you wrote or include missing information from memory. Make you sure that you are not changing what was said or adding your own words!
  - You could type up your notes and organize them into a word document or data sheet. This will make it easier to find the quotes and relevant information you need once you begin writing.
  - Annotate, circle and highlight your notes. Clearly mark information that you think you could use for your article and identify key quotes. Also look for key terms or phrases your interviewee mentioned that can be included in your article.
- *If you recorded the interview:*
  - Avoid transcribing the entire interview! This is a waste of time and should only be done if you feel that you work better with written text.
  - Instead, begin by listening to the complete interview again. Jot down the times where you feel the interviewee is discussing something you could use in your article.
  - Next, jump to the points in the recording based on the times you jotted down. Transcribe key phrases, terms or quotes that you feel that you would need in your work. Organize this material into a document or spreadsheet, highlight the most important information and annotate it. Once again, make sure that you do not add your own words or misquote your interviewee!

### **3. Do your research.**

- Expand on the important material you collected by following up on things you learned with more research. If your interviewee had mentioned key terms or phrases you did not know before or are unsure of, find additional information that could give you a better understanding of what was discussed.

### **4. Begin writing.**

- With sufficient material and primary evidence from your interviewee, you can begin writing your article. Use this evidence wisely -- you do not want an article that just summarizes what had been said nor do you want an article that makes unsupported statements. Only include quotes that are relevant to your topic!
- When listening to the interview, think carefully about which parts should remain as a verbatim quotation and which parts should be paraphrased. If your source expresses a strong emotion or specific turn a phrase, you may want to keep that in his or her own words. However, if he or she is explaining something complex, you may want to paraphrase.
  - Quotations surrounded by quotation marks such as, "I love writing," must be *verbatim* or that those were the exact words he or she said.
    - Example: "I love writing," John said.
  - Paraphrasing should look something like this:
    - John said he loves to write.
  - *An example script:* Jane also wants to help solve the issue of limited office space and reexamine the school's faculty governance structure to ensure that faculty members time on committees are "well-spent," she said. Jane said she hopes that this program will allow faculty to share their knowledge with one another.

## 5. Remember...

- If you use either direct quotes or paraphrased statements in your work, make sure to cite your source.
- Do not hesitate to reach out to your interviewee if you need further clarification about what was said in the interview.
- Use the material you collected in your interview honestly -- never misrepresent or misquote your interviewee or what had been said.
- Feel free to send the finished article to your interviewee once it has been published!