

The 18 Essential Rules of Journalism

By Alex J. Coyne

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The 18 Essential Rules of Journalism serves as your no-BS cheat-sheet to the rules of the playing field.

They are, at least in my humble opinion, what makes a good journalist– and good journalism. Writing them down was partially inspired by Captain Beefheart’s Commandments of Guitar Playing (of whom I have always been a rabid fan), my various courses offered to journalists and lastly, my own mistakes.

You have my permission to print these out and keep them nearby (or, in true commandment style, keep them on your tablet).

The 18 Essential Rules Of Journalism

#1: Ask questions.

One of a journalist’s greatest assets is their natural curiosity. Start with the famed five W’s (and one H), then ask some more. Asking ‘why?’ is what gets you the good stuff.

#2: Dig for the story.

If you think you’ve got the whole story, dig around some more. The most fascinating parts of the story are often just under the surface.

#3: Master the language.

As a journalist, language is your main tool. Read as much as you can and as often as you can, research odd words and archaic sayings, look at what’s behind etymology. Learn the patterns behind language and how to use them.

#4: Spelling matters.

Double-check if you aren’t sure about spelling or style (especially in the case of names), and read through messages and articles thoroughly before sending either.

#5: Know thy publication.

Before you pitch, know a publication’s style, editorial staff and content. Publications are usually more than happy to provide back-issues. If you can’t find writer’s guidelines, send a short introductory email requesting them.

#6: Contacts are your career.

Contacts (and your reputation with said contacts) are your entire career. Editors, sources and interviewees are all vital parts of the journalistic process. Without them, you'd be screwed.

#7: Once it's off the record, keep it that way.

Trusted sources will tell you all sorts of juicy, fascinating, scandalous and personal things in your career as a journalist, often off the record. Shut up about it.

#8: Three is a golden number.

Mind the rule of threes: Have at least three reliable, corroborating sources for every fact; three interviewees for every article; and read through a piece at least three times before you sit down to change a comma – that's at least.

#9: Rejection is opportunity.

Getting a story rejected means you've just opened up a line of communication with a new editor – congratulations. Pitch again. Rejection also gives you a chance to sell the story elsewhere: Sometimes rejection just means it's not right for them

#10: Editors are teachers.

You can learn a hell of a lot from the experience of your editors, and when given the chance you should. They braved the journalistic battlefield before you, so you can trust their edits and advice. Usually, they're right.

#11: Mind the word count.

Yes, you can do that in the assigned word count, and the editor will either make you add or cut if you don't. Here, they always know better. (Remember this piece of key-advice from *The Elements of Style* and repeat it as your daily editing mantra: Omit unnecessary words.)

#12: Deadlines are holy.

Deadlines exist for a reason: Never skip out on a deadline unless you are incapacitated or dead. If you have to, let your editor know beforehand and have a damn good reason. Then, don't do it again. Compare deadlines to menstrual cycles: If you skip one, you might just be stressed. If you skip several, you're in trouble.

#13: Know the law.

Journalism can take you to some strange places. Make sure you know the law and what side of it you're standing on at all times.

#14: Always do your research.

Make sure that your research is flawless and that you can always match which source gave which fact. Cross-reference, find first-hand information and do your background research before requesting, planning or conducting an interview.

#15: Have it outlined.

Have the skeleton of your idea outlined and ready by the time you pitch the idea. That way you have all the information ready, and it makes your job – and theirs – easier. Your outline should include the article’s proposed headline, the article’s sub-headers and sections (you can write down facts as key-words here) and who you will interview.

#16: Keep and file everything.

Keep prior notes, interviews, sources, tapes, the lot: You never know when you’ll need it, and you probably will.

#17: Guard your vices.

Many great journalists have been crippled or completely destroyed by their vices – and it can be almost anything: Overworking, coffee, manic exercising, painkillers, or heavier drugs. Whatever yours is, keep it in check or risk your job.

#18: Burnout is a rabid, fanged monkey.

Burnout is a myth, until you’re there. It’s a mental and physical seize of your writing engine, and if you don’t find your way to unwind you’ll get there a lot quicker.