

I do this activity in all of my news writing classes in an effort to get my students to engage with the SPJ Code of Ethics. I suspect that most of them won't read the entire code of ethics, and I don't want to quiz them on it because I think ethics is far too exciting to be relegated to a test. So, I came up with some real-life scenarios that student journalists have faced so my students can see how the code of ethics can help them figure out the best ethical decision.

I've found that it's best to have the students work as a group on one specific scenario, then have everyone read it aloud and give their response. I provide a hint as to what section in the code of ethics to explore, otherwise searching for the answer can be a little daunting for some students and/or can take up too much class time. It can also be given as homework, then discussed during the next class session

Ethical Decision Making Using the SPJ Code of Ethics

1. You're doing a story about the eating habits of college students. In the process of reading various newspaper stories online, you come across an L.A. Times article that has some interesting facts. The source is a doctor at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. Is it OK to "cut and paste" a paragraph from the Times story and use it in your story? Why or why not? Going one step farther, should you use *any* of the information, even if you rewrite it? (see "*Seek Truth and Report It.*")

A. What is the specific code that gives you guidance?

B. What would you do, based on that guidance?

2. You're assigned a story about a coach who is allegedly illegally recruiting students to our campus with offers of free bookstore gift cards and meal vouchers. You stop by the coach's office but he's not in, so you leave him a written message. While standing outside his office, you call his phone and also leave a voicemail. In the meantime, you interview various sources who confirm the allegations. He doesn't contact you after two days and the story is due so you turn it in, with a sentence saying that he was unavailable for comment. Did you act ethically? Why or why not? (see "*Seek Truth and Report It*")

A. What is the specific code that gives you guidance?

B. What would you do, based on that guidance?

In a story about a board of trustees meeting, you wrote that new carpeting in a portion of the administration building will cost \$1,300. While admiring your story on the student media website, you realize that you should have written \$13,000. No one has called to point out your mistake. Should you tell the editor in chief or just forget about it? Why or why not? (*see "Be Accountable"*)

A. What is the specific code that gives you guidance?

B. What would you do, based on that guidance?

You're doing a feature story about ways students can help improve the environment, a topic that you care about a lot. In the middle of the story, you write an unattributed sentence that reads, "Students should do all they can to improve the environment." Is it ethical to include such a sentence in a feature story that is not labeled as analysis or commentary? Why or why not? (*see "Seek Truth and Report It."*)

A. What is the specific code that gives you guidance?

B. What would you do, based on that guidance?

Your math teacher this semester is the most dynamic math teacher you've ever encountered. She would make a great profile story. Would it be ethical to suggest the Student Voice do a profile of her this semester? If so, should you be the reporter? Why or why not? (*see "Act Independently"*)

A. What is the specific code that gives you guidance?

B. What would you do, based on that guidance?

Student government elections are in two months and you'd like to run for office. Should you discuss your plans in advance with the editor in chief or wait to see if you win? Explain your decision. (*see "Act Independently"*)

A. What is the specific code that gives you guidance?

B. What would you do, based on that guidance?

You hear about a group of undocumented students who are attending our university. They agree to be interviewed but do not want their names or photos used for fear of being deported. It's common knowledge that they aren't U.S. citizens. You've even heard students in your science class talking about them. Is it ethical to use their names and/or photos in your story? Why or why not? (*see "Minimize Harm"*)

A. What is the specific code that gives you guidance?

B. What would you do, based on that guidance?

You're the A & E editor and you get a call from a record label offering to send the newspaper free copies of their newest CDs for review purposes. Is it ethical to take them up on the offer? Why or why not? (*see "Act Independently"*)

A. What is the specific code that gives you guidance?

B. What would you do, based on that guidance?
