



Unit 8:

Ethics and Legal Responsibilities

Preparation for the NOCTI Broadcasting & Journalism Exam

In media, telling a story is only part of the job — telling it legally and ethically is what builds trust and credibility. Whether you're reporting the news, creating a podcast, producing a short film, or editing a school broadcast, you're responsible for making decisions that reflect both the law and your professional values.

This unit explores the critical difference between what you're allowed to do (legally) and what you should do (ethically). You'll learn about libel and slander, copyright rules, privacy laws, and the role of the First Amendment. You'll also dive into journalistic ethics, including how to stay objective, give credit, avoid bias, and protect people's rights.

Understanding these responsibilities isn't just about passing a test — it's about protecting yourself, your team, your subjects, and the reputation of your work. Mistakes in this area can lead to serious consequences, from legal action to loss of audience trust.

By the end of this unit, you'll be equipped to make smart, responsible choices in your media projects — and know how to recognize potential problems before they happen.

Each of these terms is relevant to the "Ethics and Legal Responsibilities" section of the NOCTI test that will comprise 7% of the exam.

This unit represents approximately 7% of the total exam.

Section 1: Unit Vocabulary

Term: Bias

Definition:

Bias is a slant or unfair preference in reporting or storytelling that reflects personal opinions or favors one side over another. It can be intentional or unintentional and often affects how facts are presented, which sources are included, and what details are emphasized or ignored.

Example:

A news segment about a local election only interviews supporters of one candidate and leaves out opposing views.

Why It Matters:

Understanding bias helps students recognize when a story may be unbalanced or misleading. In journalism and broadcasting, maintaining fairness and accuracy is

essential for credibility. On the NOCTI exam, you may be asked to identify a biased report or explain how to maintain objectivity in reporting.

Term: Broadcast License

Definition:

A broadcast license is official permission granted by a government regulatory agency — such as the FCC in the United States — that allows a station to transmit content over public airwaves for a specified period. It outlines the technical parameters, operating requirements, and responsibilities of the broadcaster.

Example:

A local radio station in Texas must apply for and renew its FCC broadcast license every eight years to continue operating legally.

Why It Matters:

Understanding the role of broadcast licenses is critical because they ensure stations operate within legal and technical standards. Violating license terms can lead to fines or loss of permission to broadcast. On the NOCTI exam, you may be asked to define a broadcast license or recognize its importance in station operations.

Term: Code of Ethics

Definition:

A code of ethics is a formal set of guidelines that outlines the principles and standards journalists should follow to ensure integrity, accuracy, fairness, and accountability in their work. These guidelines are often set by professional organizations like the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ).

Example:

A student journalist avoids reporting rumors and instead verifies facts through multiple sources, following the SPJ Code of Ethics.

Why It Matters:

A code of ethics provides a framework for making responsible decisions, especially in complex reporting situations. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked to recognize ethical best practices or choose the most ethical course of action in a scenario.

Term: Conflict of Interest

Definition:

A conflict of interest in broadcasting occurs when a journalist, producer, or media employee has a personal, financial, or professional relationship that could compromise their impartiality or objectivity in reporting or producing content.

Example: A news anchor covering a story about a local business they secretly co-own would be considered a conflict of interest.

Why It Matters:

Conflicts of interest can damage a station's credibility and violate ethical standards in journalism. Recognizing and avoiding them is essential for maintaining public trust. On the NOCTI exam, you may be asked to identify a potential conflict of interest or explain how it should be handled.

Term: Copyright Infringement

Definition:

Copyright infringement occurs when someone uses copyrighted material—such as music, video, images, or written content—without permission from the copyright holder or without meeting the requirements for fair use, licensing, or public domain status.

Example:

Uploading a video to YouTube that includes a popular song without permission from the rights holder may result in the video being taken down or the user receiving a copyright strike.

Why It Matters:

Knowing what constitutes copyright infringement helps students avoid legal and disciplinary consequences when creating or sharing media. It also encourages respect for original work. On the NOCTI exam, you may be asked to identify a scenario involving copyright infringement or recognize how to avoid it in a production setting.

Term: Defamation

Definition:

Defamation is the act of damaging someone's reputation by making false statements about them to others. In media, this typically falls into two categories: libel (written or

broadcast defamation) and slander (spoken defamation). For a statement to be considered defamatory, it must be false, communicated to a third party, and cause harm to the person's reputation or livelihood.

Example:

A student news report falsely claims that a local teacher was caught cheating on standardized test scores, leading to public backlash and job consequences.

Why It Matters:

Defamation laws protect individuals from false and harmful claims. As a broadcaster or journalist, it's your responsibility to verify facts before making public statements. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked to identify examples of defamation or distinguish between libel and slander.

 **Term: Equal Time Rule**

Definition:

The Equal Time Rule is a regulation by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that requires broadcast stations to provide equal airtime to all qualified political candidates running for the same office. This rule applies to paid advertisements and some types of on-air appearances but does not apply to news coverage or interviews in bona fide news programs.

Example:

If a television station sells 30 seconds of ad time to one mayoral candidate, it must offer the same opportunity, at the same rate, to all other qualified candidates for mayor.

Why It Matters:

The Equal Time Rule ensures fairness and prevents media bias in political broadcasting. It helps protect democracy by giving voters access to multiple viewpoints. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked what the Equal Time Rule requires or which scenarios it applies to in broadcast media.

 **Term: Ethics**

Definition:

Ethics refers to the principles of right and wrong that guide decision-making and professional conduct. In media and broadcasting, ethics means being truthful, fair, respectful, and responsible in how you report, present, and produce content. Ethical

standards help ensure credibility, protect the public interest, and maintain trust with the audience.

Example:

Choosing not to air a graphic image of an accident victim out of respect for the family, even though it could attract more viewers.

Why It Matters:

Ethical behavior builds trust between broadcasters and their audience. It ensures that content is not only legal but also morally responsible. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked to identify an ethical media decision or evaluate the ethics of a broadcast scenario.

Term: FCC (Federal Communications Commission)

Definition:

The FCC is a U.S. government agency that regulates all interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable. It oversees broadcast licensing, sets rules for media ownership, enforces decency standards, and ensures that broadcasters serve the public interest.

Example:

Before a local TV or radio station can go on the air, it must apply for and receive a broadcast license from the FCC, which sets limits on signal range, content regulations, and emergency broadcast compliance.

Why It Matters:

The FCC is central to how the media operates in the United States. Knowing what it does helps students understand why certain content is restricted and how stations maintain compliance. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked what the FCC regulates or how its rules apply to broadcast operations.

Term: First Amendment

Definition:

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution protects five fundamental freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, and the right to petition the government. For broadcasters and journalists, the most relevant are freedom of speech and freedom of the press, which allow individuals

and media organizations to express opinions, report news, and criticize the government without fear of censorship or punishment by the state.

However, this freedom is not absolute. The courts have ruled that speech can be restricted in certain cases such as libel, slander, obscenity, inciting violence, or violating someone's privacy rights. In broadcasting, the government (through the FCC) may also regulate content in the public interest, especially when it involves publicly licensed airwaves.

Example:

A student-run news show decides to cover a controversial local issue, like school policy on dress code enforcement. The First Amendment protects the students' right to report on the issue and express opinions, even if school officials disagree with the message — as long as it does not disrupt school operations or break any laws.

Why It Matters:

Understanding the First Amendment helps future media professionals know what they're allowed to say, where the limits are, and how to defend their rights when challenged. It's the foundation of ethical, responsible journalism and protects the public's access to information. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked what freedoms are guaranteed by the First Amendment or how it applies to broadcast journalism and free speech in media.

 **Term: Libel**

Definition:

Libel is a form of defamation that involves publishing a false written statement that damages a person's reputation. It must be presented as fact, not opinion, and it must cause actual harm, such as financial loss or damage to reputation. In journalism and broadcasting, libel typically involves statements in scripts, news articles, captions, or online posts.

To prove libel in court, the harmed person (plaintiff) usually must show that:

1. The statement was false
2. It was published to others
3. It caused harm
4. The publisher acted with negligence or actual malice (especially for public figures)

Example:

A student news team writes a report falsely claiming that a teacher was caught cheating on a standardized test, and it's published on the school website. If the claim is false and damages the teacher's reputation, it could be considered libel.

Why It Matters:

Libel laws protect individuals from being unfairly harmed by false information. For broadcasters and student journalists, it's critical to check facts and verify sources before publishing anything. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked to recognize examples of libel or distinguish between fact and opinion in ethical reporting scenarios.

 **Term: Objectivity****Definition:**

Objectivity means reporting facts without personal opinions, bias, or emotional influence. In journalism and broadcasting, it involves presenting information fairly and accurately, giving balanced coverage to all sides of a story, and letting the audience form their own conclusions. Objectivity doesn't mean pretending to be neutral when facts clearly show wrongdoing — it means avoiding favoritism or distortion.

Example:

When covering a school board meeting about budget cuts, a student reporter interviews both supporters and opponents of the proposal and summarizes their points equally, without inserting personal opinion.

Why It Matters:

Objectivity builds trust with the audience and supports the integrity of journalism. It helps ensure that reporting is credible, fair, and ethical — especially on controversial issues. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked to identify whether a story is objective or recognize biased language that should be revised.

 **Term: Obscenity****Definition:**

Obscenity refers to content that is offensive or indecent by community standards and lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. In the U.S., obscenity is not protected under the First Amendment and is regulated by the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) in broadcasting. Courts often apply the Miller Test (from the 1973 Miller v. California case) to decide if something is legally obscene.

Example:

A radio station airing explicit sexual content during daytime hours could face FCC fines if the material is deemed obscene by law and community standards.

Why It Matters:

Understanding obscenity laws helps media professionals avoid legal violations and maintain community trust. Knowing the difference between protected free speech and illegal obscenity is critical when producing content for broadcast. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked to identify content that violates obscenity rules or understand FCC guidelines for what can be broadcast.

 **Term: Plagiarism****Definition:**

Plagiarism is the act of using someone else's words, ideas, or creative work without proper credit, passing it off as your own. In media, this includes copying scripts, reusing footage or graphics, or lifting written content without attribution. Plagiarism is not just unethical — it can damage credibility and lead to academic or professional consequences.

Example:

A student newscaster copies an article from a local newspaper and reads it word-for-word on air without naming the original reporter or publication.

Why It Matters:

Plagiarism violates journalistic integrity and disrespects the original creator's work. Media professionals are expected to be honest and transparent about their sources. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked to identify an example of plagiarism or explain how to avoid it when producing content.

 **Term: Public Domain****Definition:**

Public domain refers to creative works that are not protected by copyright and can be used freely by anyone. This can happen when the copyright expires, the creator waives their rights, or the work was never eligible for copyright in the first place (like most government documents). Unlike fair use, public domain content requires no permission or attribution.

Example:

A student uses Beethoven’s “Symphony No. 5” in a documentary because it’s in the public domain and free for anyone to use.

Why It Matters:

Knowing what’s in the public domain saves time and prevents legal issues when creating content. It also teaches students how to find and use media legally. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked to identify works that fall under public domain or choose which type of content can be used without permission.

 **Term: Public Interest****Definition:**

In media and broadcasting, “public interest” refers to content or actions that benefit the general public—such as informing citizens, promoting safety, supporting democratic processes, or serving community needs. Broadcasters licensed by the FCC are expected to operate in the public interest, convenience, and necessity.

Example:

A local TV station airs emergency updates during a hurricane, even if it means cutting into scheduled entertainment programming.

Why It Matters:

Understanding public interest helps students recognize the civic role of media and why some content takes priority. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked how public interest influences programming decisions or why it’s a responsibility of licensed broadcasters.

 **Term: Right to Privacy****Definition:**

The right to privacy protects individuals from having their personal information, images, or likeness used without their permission — especially in situations where they had a reasonable expectation of privacy. In media, this means you cannot record or publish private information or footage (like inside someone’s home or hospital room) without consent. This is a legal and ethical principle that helps balance press freedom with individual rights.

Example:

A reporter cannot publish a video of a private conversation recorded without permission inside someone's home.

Why It Matters:

Understanding the right to privacy helps students avoid legal risks and respect ethical boundaries when filming or reporting. It teaches the importance of getting consent and being careful with sensitive content. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked to identify situations where privacy rights are violated or when media professionals need permission before recording or publishing.

 **Term: Shield Law****Definition:**

Shield laws are state laws that protect journalists from being forced to reveal confidential sources or unpublished information gathered during news reporting. These laws recognize the importance of a free press and are meant to preserve the reporter's ability to gather information from whistleblowers or sensitive sources without fear of legal retaliation. Shield laws vary by state, and there is no federal shield law in the United States.

Example:

A journalist reporting on government corruption refuses to name a confidential source, citing their state's shield law as legal protection.

Why It Matters:

Shield laws help maintain press freedom and ensure that journalists can report on controversial or sensitive issues without putting their sources at risk. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked about what shield laws do, why they matter, or which types of information journalists are allowed to keep confidential under the law.

 **Term: Slander****Definition:**

Slander is a type of defamation that involves making false, spoken statements about someone that harm their reputation. Unlike libel (which is written), slander refers specifically to things said aloud — in conversations, interviews, broadcasts, or public speeches. To qualify as slander, the statement must be false, presented as fact, and cause measurable harm.

Example:

During a live broadcast, a reporter wrongly states that a local business owner was arrested for fraud — even though no such arrest occurred. If proven false and damaging, that could be considered slander.

Why It Matters:

Understanding slander helps students avoid legal risks in journalism, especially in live or unscripted settings. Broadcasting false accusations can lead to lawsuits or disciplinary action. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked to identify the difference between libel and slander or recognize which actions could result in slander.

 **Term: Talent Release Form**

Definition:

A Talent Release Form is a legal document that grants permission to record, photograph, or use someone's image, voice, or performance in a media project. It protects both the producer and the organization by proving that the subject gave consent to appear on camera or be part of the production. This form often includes details about how the footage can be used and whether compensation is involved.

Example:

Before filming a student interview for the school news broadcast, the crew has the student and their parent/guardian sign a talent release form so the video can be legally posted online and aired on local TV.

Why It Matters:

Having a signed release form helps avoid legal issues and proves that permission was granted. It's especially important when working with minors or distributing content publicly. On the NOCTI test, you may be asked to identify the purpose of a talent release form or when it is legally required in production.

Section 2: Ethics vs. Law — What's the Difference?

When working in media, it's important to understand that **legal rules** and **ethical standards** are not the same but, both play a big role in shaping how professionals make decisions.

Laws are official rules enforced by governments. Break them, and you might face fines, lawsuits, or even criminal charges. Examples include copyright laws, defamation laws (like libel and slander), and broadcast licensing rules from the FCC.

Ethics, on the other hand, are guidelines about what's *right*, *fair*, and *responsible*. They may not carry legal penalties, but they are still essential, especially in journalism and broadcasting. Ethics help media professionals stay honest, avoid conflicts of interest, and treat people with respect.

Examples: Ethics vs. Law in Action

In media production, what's legal isn't always ethical, and what's ethical isn't always required by law. The law sets the minimum standard — rules you must follow to stay out of legal trouble. Ethics, on the other hand, are about doing what's right, fair, and responsible, even when no one is watching.

For example, you might have the legal right to record something in a public space — but that doesn't always mean you should publish it. Maybe it invades someone's privacy, disrespects their grief, or spreads misinformation. Ethical media producers think beyond "Can I do this?" and ask, "Should I?"

Understanding the difference helps you:

- Protect the dignity and rights of the people you film or interview
- Avoid harming your audience or your subject
- Build trust with viewers, classmates, and the public
- Develop a professional reputation that lasts beyond the classroom

As a student journalist, video producer, podcaster, or editor, your choices have impact. Whether you're covering a school event, reporting on a controversy, or sharing content online, you have to balance freedom of expression with social responsibility.

That's where ethics come in.

Let's look at some real examples of how law and ethics work side by side — and sometimes pull in different directions.

Example 1:

A news station airs disturbing footage of a car crash victim

✓ Legal but Unethical

Reason: They had the legal right to film in a public space but, airing graphic, traumatic content without considering the family's grief or the audience's reaction crosses ethical lines. The footage may meet legal standards, but it disrespects human dignity and causes unnecessary emotional harm.

Takeaway: Just because you're allowed to do something doesn't mean it's the right choice.

Example 2:

A student journalist covers a school dress code controversy and makes sure to interview voices from both sides.

✓ Ethical but Not Legally Required

Reason: There's no law saying you must be fair or balanced but, by applying journalistic ethics like objectivity, fairness, and impartiality, the student builds trust with their audience and shows professional integrity.

Takeaway: Ethical practices strengthen your credibility, even when no rule says you have to follow them.

Example 3:

A student copies a copyrighted pop song and uses it in their video intro without permission.

✗ Both Illegal and Unethical

Reason: This is **copyright infringement** (a violation of intellectual property law), and it also violates ethical media standards by taking someone else's work without credit or licensing.

Takeaway: In this case, the law and ethics are aligned, and ignoring them could have real consequences, including takedown notices or even disciplinary action.

Example 4:

A student records a classmate having a meltdown in the hallway and posts it online.

✔ **Legal but Unethical**

Reason: Filming in a public area of a school may not technically break the law, but sharing that footage without consent is invasive and humiliating for the person involved. It shows a lack of compassion and violates ethical standards about privacy and harm.

Takeaway: Legal access doesn't mean it's okay to publish everything you capture — consider the human impact.

Example 5:

A student records a teacher without their knowledge and uses the audio in a podcast.

✔ **Possibly Legal but Unethical**

Reason: Texas is a one-party consent state for recording conversations. This means that as long as one party to the conversation consents to the recording, it is legal to record it, whether it's a phone call or an in-person conversation. If **you** are part of the conversation, **you can legally record it without notifying the other party**. However, if you are **not part of the conversation**, then recording it without at least one party's consent would be illegal under Texas law. The relevant statute is [Texas Penal Code § 16.02](#), which governs the unlawful interception of communications. Regardless, publishing it without context or permission can **misrepresent the speaker** and damage reputations. It violates ethical standards around **informed consent** and fairness.

Takeaway: Ethics remind you to consider how your choices affect others — even if you're technically allowed.

Why All Of This Matters:

Media producers don't just follow the rules, they make judgment calls every day about **what to show, how to show it, and why it matters**. Learning to recognize the line between legal and ethical behavior helps you earn trust, protect your subjects, and become a media professional others can rely on.

Section 3: Copyright, Fair Use, and Public Domain

In media production, you'll often use music, video clips, images, or written content that you didn't create yourself — and that's where copyright law comes in. Just because something is online doesn't mean it's free to use. Whether you're editing a video, building graphics, producing a podcast, or publishing a news story, it's your responsibility to understand how to use creative works legally and ethically.

Learning to respect copyright isn't just about avoiding trouble — it's about showing professionalism and honoring the work of other creators, just as you'd want your own work to be respected. Think of it as part of your growth as a responsible and ethical media producer.

What Is Copyright?

Copyright is a legal protection that gives creators the exclusive right to control how their original work is used, shared, or reproduced. If someone writes a song, shoots a video, draws a logo, takes a photo, or publishes an article, they automatically **own the rights** to that content. That means you **can't legally reuse it** without permission, unless it qualifies for **fair use** or is part of the **public domain**.

This applies whether the content is posted on a major website, a personal blog, or a social media account. Just because you *can* download, screenshot, or copy something doesn't mean you have the **right** to use it in your project.

Examples of copyrighted materials:

- Songs and instrumentals
- Movie and TV clips
- News articles, blogs, or essays
- Logos, graphics, and designs
- Photos — even ones posted publicly on Instagram or Google Images

What can happen if you misuse copyrighted content?

- Your video might get taken down by YouTube or flagged by your school
- You could receive a copyright strike or takedown notice
- In serious cases, copyright infringement can result in **fines or legal action**

Why It Matters:

Respecting copyright isn't just about staying out of trouble — it's about **being a responsible creator**. If you expect others to respect your work, you need to respect theirs. Learning how to use content properly helps you stay professional, creative, and legally protected as a media producer.

What Is Fair Use?

Fair use is a legal exception to copyright that allows you to use small portions of copyrighted material **without permission**, but **only under specific conditions**. It's designed to protect freedom of expression in areas like **education, news, criticism, commentary, and parody**; not for general creative use or entertainment.

But fair use is **not a blanket permission**. Whether your use qualifies depends on **four key factors** that courts consider:

- **Purpose** – Is your use educational, non-profit, or transformative (i.e., does it add new meaning, commentary, or analysis)? Personal or classroom use helps — but doesn't automatically make something fair use.
- **Nature** – Is the original work factual or creative? Factual works (like news reports) are more flexible under fair use than highly creative works (like movies, music, or art).
- **Amount** – Are you using only what's necessary? A short clip or quote might qualify — but using a large portion, or the "heart" of the work, weakens your case.
- **Effect on the Market** – Does your use take the place of the original or hurt its value? If someone could watch your version instead of buying or licensing the real thing, it likely won't qualify.

Example:

Using a 10-second clip of a film to analyze how the editing creates tension in a class presentation may qualify as fair use — because it's brief, educational, and used for critical commentary.

But using an entire scene as background footage in a music video or project — with no explanation — likely does not qualify. That would be entertainment, not critique.

Bottom Line:

Fair use can protect you — but only when you understand it and apply it carefully. When in doubt, use original content, royalty-free media, or get permission. Making smart, ethical choices now helps you build good habits for professional media work.

What Is Public Domain?


Public domain refers to creative works that are **not protected by copyright**, meaning anyone can use them, for **any reason**, without needing permission or paying a fee. These works belong to the public, not to an individual or company.

There are three main ways a work can enter the public domain:

- **The copyright has expired** – Older works (like Beethoven’s music or Shakespeare’s plays) are no longer under copyright protection and are free to use. In the U.S., this typically happens 70 years after the creator’s death.
- **The work was created by the government** – Many materials created by the **U.S. federal government**, including **NASA images, census data, and public reports**, are automatically public domain, unless otherwise stated.
- **The creator gave up their rights** – Some artists or authors intentionally place their work into the public domain, usually by using special licenses or written declarations.

Examples of public domain content:

- Classic books and poetry (like works by Mark Twain or Emily Dickinson)
- Historical film footage
- Government-produced photos, maps, or research
- Some royalty-free media labeled as “public domain” by the creator

 **Important Note:** Just because something is **old, online, or “free to download”** doesn’t mean it’s public domain. You must be **sure** it qualifies — otherwise, using it without permission could still be copyright infringement. Always check the source and look for clear labeling, such as “Public Domain,” “CC0,” or similar notices.

Why It Matters:

Public domain content is a great resource for student media projects because it’s safe, flexible, and 100% legal to use. Learning how to identify and properly credit public domain materials helps you stay creative *and* professional.

Section 4: Plagiarism, Attribution, and Source Credibility

In media and journalism, your work must be accurate, honest, and original. That means you can’t copy someone else’s work without giving credit — and you can’t report something as fact unless you know the source is reliable. This section explains how to avoid plagiarism, how to properly attribute sources, and how to decide if a source is credible.

✕ What Is Plagiarism?

Plagiarism is when someone uses another person's **words, ideas, media, or designs** without giving them proper credit. It's more than just cheating — it's a form of **intellectual theft** that breaks ethical and often legal boundaries. Whether intentional or accidental, plagiarism is considered **dishonest, unprofessional**, and can lead to serious consequences, including failing grades, removal from contests, or damaged reputations.

Plagiarism doesn't just happen in writing. In media production, it can show up in video, audio, design, and even idea development.

Examples of plagiarism in media projects:

- Reading from a news article on-air **without naming or citing the original source**
- Copying someone else's video footage, music, or graphic **without permission or attribution**
- Using an online image in a thumbnail or background **without credit** or rights
- Presenting an idea, segment, or visual concept you found online as if it were your own original creation

Why It Matters:

Plagiarism breaks the trust between you and your audience. It gives you credit for someone else's effort, and it **disrespects the original creator's hard work** — something no media producer should tolerate. Just like you'd want credit for your projects, others deserve the same.

How to avoid it:

- Always credit your sources (on screen, in voiceover, or in text)
- Don't assume "public" means "free to use"
- When in doubt, ask for permission or use content labeled for reuse (e.g., Creative Commons or public domain)

Being original is part of being a professional. When you do borrow from others, **transparency and respect are key**. Give credit where it's due — it shows maturity, integrity, and credibility.

What Is Attribution?

Attribution means giving clear credit to the original **creator, source, or organization** that produced content or information you're using in your media project. It's how you tell your audience, *"This idea, quote, image, or clip came from someone else."* Attribution can be **spoken, written, on screen**, or included in text — and it's a core practice of ethical media production.

Examples of attribution in action:

- In a podcast: “According to a 2023 article from the *New York Times*...”
- On screen: “Photo courtesy of NASA” or “Data source: Pew Research Center”
- In writing: Including a hyperlink or credit after a quote, statistic, or embedded media

Why It Matters:

- It shows **professionalism** and **transparency**
- It builds **trust** with your audience by showing where your information comes from
- It helps others **verify facts** or **explore sources further**
- It gives proper credit to creators — the same way you’d want credit for your own work

Important Note: Attribution is not a substitute for permission.

If the content is copyrighted and not covered by fair use or public domain, you still need **permission or a license** to use it — even if you give credit.

In student media, good attribution habits reflect maturity and journalistic integrity. It’s a small step that makes a big difference in how your work is viewed by your audience, your school, and future collaborators.



How Do You Know a Source Is Credible?

In media production, you’re responsible for more than just reporting or editing — you’re also responsible for **getting the facts right**. A **credible source** is one that’s **trustworthy, accurate, and based on verifiable evidence**. Using unreliable or biased sources can damage your reputation, mislead your audience, and spread misinformation — even if you didn’t mean to.

Before quoting a source, sharing a graphic, or referencing a statistic, ask yourself:

- **Is the source known for reliability?**
Examples of credible sources include **Associated Press (AP), NPR, Reuters, government agencies (like the CDC or NASA), and established educational institutions**. These organizations use fact-checking, editorial review, and professional standards.
- **Does the author or speaker have expertise on the topic?**
Are they a journalist, scientist, professor, or professional in the field? Or just someone sharing a personal opinion?
- **Is the information up to date?**
Make sure the data or quote reflects current events and hasn’t been taken out of context or reposted from years ago.
- **Is the source free from obvious bias or sensationalism?**
Watch for emotional language, clickbait headlines, or sources with a political or

commercial agenda. Bias doesn't automatically make something false — but it should make you more cautious.

⊘ What to Avoid:

- **Anonymous blog posts** with no author or source links
- **Viral social media claims** or quotes with no citation
- **Screenshots of news headlines** without a link to the full story
- **Graphics or charts** that don't name the original source

Why It Matters:

Just because something looks professional — or shows up first on Google — doesn't mean it's accurate. As a media producer, your **credibility depends on your sources**. Take time to verify, double-check, and only include information that meets professional standards. Credible sources make your work stronger, more trustworthy, and more respected.

Section 5: Libel, Slander, and Defamation

In media, words have power — and if they're false and damaging, they can also have legal consequences. That's why journalists, anchors, and content creators must understand the difference between free speech and defamation. This section breaks down the legal risks of making false claims and shows how to avoid libel, slander, and defamation in your reporting.

📄 What Is Defamation?

Defamation is when someone makes a **false statement** about another person that damages their **reputation, career, or personal life**. In media, this is a serious issue because what you say or publish can quickly reach a wide audience — and if you get the facts wrong, you could face legal consequences.

There are two main types of defamation:

- **Libel** – Written or published defamation, including **articles, scripts, blog posts, captions, graphics**, or anything shared publicly online or on air.
- **Slander** – Spoken defamation, such as in **live broadcasts, interviews, classroom presentations, or podcasts**.

To qualify as defamation, a statement must:

- **Be false** – Truth is the strongest defense against defamation. If it's true, it's not defamation — even if it's damaging.

- **Be presented as a fact, not opinion** – Saying “In my opinion, they’re a criminal” may still count as defamation if you imply it’s based on fact.
- **Be published or shared** – It’s not defamation if you keep it to yourself. The damage comes from spreading it to others.
- **Cause real harm** – This can include hurting someone’s public image, damaging their job prospects, or affecting their personal relationships.

Example:

Saying on-air that a teacher was “fired for stealing school money” when that never happened could be considered libel — especially if it damages their job or reputation. Even if it was a mistake, the harm is real, and the legal consequences could be serious.

How to avoid defamation in student media:


- **Verify facts from multiple credible sources** before publishing anything serious
- **Avoid gossip or unconfirmed rumors** — even if they seem newsworthy
- **Be careful how you word things** — clearly separate opinion from fact
- **When in doubt, leave it out** or check with an advisor or instructor


Why It Matters:


As a media creator, your words carry weight. Defamation laws exist to protect people from false attacks — and understanding them helps you stay responsible, respectful, and legally safe in your work.

 **Examples in Media**

Understanding the difference between **libel** and **slander** is key to staying responsible and legally safe in media production. Both involve **false statements** that harm someone’s reputation — but how the statement is delivered determines which type it is.

 **Libel (written or published):** A student news article on the school website falsely claims that a teacher was suspended for cheating on standardized tests. The statement is presented as fact, but it’s untrue — and the story spreads quickly through the student body and beyond. The teacher’s professional reputation is damaged, and parents start questioning the school’s staff.

 **Why this is libel:** The statement was false, published publicly, and caused real harm to the subject’s reputation.

 **Slander (spoken or live):** During a live school broadcast, a student anchor says that a local business owner “was caught stealing supplies from the athletic department,” even though no

such event occurred. The claim is made without evidence, and the business owner hears about it from angry parents and students.

✅ **Why this is slander:** The false accusation was made verbally during a live broadcast, reached an audience, and caused reputational harm.

🚨 **Why It Matters:**

In both examples, the harm isn't just academic — these types of false claims can result in **lawsuits, disciplinary action, or loss of trust** in your media team. Student journalists and broadcasters are **not exempt** from the responsibilities that come with public communication. Always fact-check, clarify sources, and treat every story with care — especially when it involves real people's names and reputations.

🛡️ **How to Avoid Defamation**

In media, your words carry weight — and once something is published or aired, it can't be undone. Avoiding defamation isn't just about staying out of legal trouble; it's about being accurate, fair, and respectful in how you report. Here's how to protect yourself and others:

- **Check your facts.**
Never report rumors or assumptions. Always verify details using **reliable, credible sources** — like official statements, interviews, or multiple eyewitnesses. One bad fact can turn a good story into a damaging one.
- **Stick to what you can prove.**
If you can't back up a claim with evidence, don't state it as fact. Say only what you *know*, not what you *think*. Speculation, especially about people's actions or motives, can easily cross the line.
- **Use clear attribution.**
Say where the information came from: *"According to police reports..."*, *"Witnesses told the school newspaper..."*, or *"The principal confirmed..."* Attribution shows transparency and shifts responsibility to the source — which protects both you and your publication.
- **Separate opinion from fact.**
If you're expressing a viewpoint, label it clearly as opinion. Avoid phrasing that sounds like a factual accusation. For example: *"I feel the policy is unfair"* is very different from *"The school violated student rights."*
- **Be extra careful during live broadcasts or interviews.**
You can't edit what goes out live. Take a moment to think before speaking, especially

when discussing people or controversial issues. A careless comment could cause serious harm — and you won't get a do-over.

Bottom Line:

Being truthful, cautious, and fair in your reporting isn't just about avoiding lawsuits — it's about earning trust as a media producer. The best journalists and broadcasters learn to **balance freedom of speech with responsibility**, and that's a skill you'll use for life.

Section 6: Privacy and the Right to Consent

In media production, knowing what you can film isn't just about equipment — it's about consent and respecting privacy rights. Just because a camera can record something doesn't mean it's legal or ethical to use that footage. This section explains when you need permission, what situations are legally protected, and how to avoid violating someone's right to privacy.

What Is the Right to Privacy?

The **right to privacy** protects individuals from being **filmed, recorded, photographed, or reported on** without their knowledge or consent — especially when they're in a place where they reasonably expect to be left alone. This right is recognized by law and school policies, and violating it can lead to serious **disciplinary action** or even **legal consequences**.

Examples of private spaces where consent is required:

- **Inside someone's home** — You cannot film through a window or doorway just because you're outside.
- **In a hospital room** — Medical privacy is strictly protected by law.
- **In school offices, locker rooms, or restrooms** — These are off-limits for recording, no matter the reason.
- **During private conversations** — Even in public areas, if people are having a private discussion and you record it without them knowing, that may violate privacy laws depending on your state.

What about public spaces?

In general, filming in public areas like hallways, sidewalks, or public events is allowed — but **you still need to be respectful**. Just because it's legal to film doesn't mean it's ethical to broadcast someone's embarrassing moment without their consent.

Why It Matters:

As a media student, your job involves documenting real life — but it's also your responsibility to **protect people's dignity and legal rights**. Violating someone's privacy doesn't just hurt your credibility — it could put your entire media team at risk.

When in doubt, get permission.


Whether you're filming an interview, a behind-the-scenes moment, or background footage, a simple, "Is it okay if I record this?" goes a long way toward keeping your work professional and respectful.

Consent and Release Forms

Whenever someone's **face, voice, or likeness** will appear in a project that's **shared beyond the classroom** — such as a school website, YouTube, social media, or broadcast — you should **get a signed Talent Release Form**. This isn't just a courtesy; it's a **legal safeguard** that proves the person gave permission to be recorded and understood how their image or words might be used.

When Do You Need a Release Form?

- **Interviewing someone on camera** for a news segment or documentary
- **Filming a classroom or student activity** where individuals are clearly visible and identifiable
- **Using someone's voice** in a voiceover, narration, or recorded announcement
- **Including a teacher or student** in a promo, public service announcement, or music video
- **Any project** posted online or submitted to a contest or public event

 **Special Note About Minors:** *If the person being filmed or recorded is **under 18**, a **parent or guardian must sign the form** — even if the student is okay with being on camera. Without this, the footage should not be used publicly.*

Why It Matters:

Release forms protect **you, your school, and your subject**. They help avoid legal issues, prevent misunderstandings, and teach you the **professional standards** followed in newsrooms, film studios, and advertising agencies.

If you're ever unsure whether you need one — **get the form anyway**. It's better to have it and not need it than the other way around.

What's Off-Limits?

As a media creator, you have the power to inform, influence, and spotlight real people — but that power comes with limits. Not everything you *can* record is something you *should*, and in many cases, doing so without proper consent is **illegal or unethical**. Whether you're filming for class or publishing online, it's your responsibility to know what's off-limits.

Private Spaces (No Hidden Cameras):

- **Bathrooms, locker rooms, dressing rooms**

- **Bedrooms, private homes, or inside cars**
- **School offices, counseling rooms, or nurse's stations**

People have a *reasonable expectation of privacy* in these places — filming here without consent can lead to legal consequences.

Audio Recording Without Permission:


- Secretly recording private conversations — even in person — can violate **wiretapping laws**, depending on your state.
- Always get **clear consent** before recording someone's voice, especially during interviews or sensitive topics.

Minors and Online Sharing:

- Never post **images or video of minors online** without **parental or guardian consent** — even if it's a great shot.
- For school projects, use **signed release forms** before featuring students on camera.


Sensitive or Protected Information:

- Avoid including anything that could reveal:
 - Medical details (protected under **HIPAA**)
 - Student records or grades (**FERPA** violation)
 - Personal identifiers like addresses, phone numbers, or student ID numbers

 **Final Thought:** Even if something happens in public — like an accident, fight, or emotional moment — **pause before posting**. Ask:

 *Is it respectful?*

 *Is it necessary to the story?*

 *Does it follow school or district policy?*

When in doubt, choose caution and compassion. Respecting boundaries builds trust — and keeps your journalism or media work professional.

Section 7: Bias, Objectivity, and Transparency in Reporting

In journalism and broadcasting, credibility is everything. Audiences rely on media professionals to provide fair, accurate, and balanced information — not opinions disguised as facts. This

section teaches students how to recognize bias, maintain objectivity, and practice transparency to build trust and avoid misleading the public.

What Is Bias?

Bias is any unfair slant in reporting that gives one side an advantage, whether through words, images, tone, or what's included (or left out). In journalism and media, bias undermines credibility and trust. It can creep in **intentionally** (to persuade or push an agenda) or **unintentionally** (based on your background, opinions, or blind spots).

Examples of Bias in Media:

- Only interviewing one side of a controversial topic
- Using loaded language:
→ *“Heartless lawmakers blocked the bill”* vs. *“Lawmakers expressed concern about the bill’s cost”*
- Choosing visuals that reinforce a stereotype (e.g., showing only negative imagery of a group or place)
- Omitting key facts that could change the audience’s perception
- Framing headlines in a way that leads readers toward a conclusion

Why It Matters for Students:

Even if you’re just reporting for a school broadcast, your work shapes how others see events and people. Learning to recognize bias in yourself — and correct it — makes you a more **honest, responsible, and respected** storyteller.

Tip: Before finalizing a story, ask:

 *Would someone from the other side of this issue say I was fair?*

If the answer is no, revise.

Bias is natural. Awareness is the first step to avoiding it.

The Role of Objectivity

Objectivity means reporting the facts **without letting your personal opinions, preferences, or feelings shape the story**. It’s the foundation of trustworthy journalism. Being objective doesn’t mean pretending everything is neutral or equal — it means being **fair, accurate, and transparent**.

You can still report that something is controversial, harmful, or widely criticized — but your job is to **show the evidence, not push a conclusion**.

To stay objective:

- **Use neutral language.** Avoid loaded or emotional terms. For example, write “The district implemented new rules,” not “The district unfairly cracked down on students.”
 - **Attribute opinions.** Don’t state viewpoints as fact — say who said them and why.
 - **Include multiple perspectives.** If you’re reporting on a school issue or event, give both sides a voice.
 - **Verify everything.** If a claim sounds extreme or surprising, double-check it before repeating it on air or in print.
-

Why Objectivity Matters:

In school journalism and beyond, your reputation depends on how fairly and accurately you report. Audiences are smart — they can sense when they’re being fed opinion instead of facts. Practicing objectivity not only protects your credibility but helps your audience form their own informed views.

Tip: After finishing a piece, ask yourself:

👉 *If someone with a totally different opinion read this, would they feel represented?*
If not, adjust.

Objectivity earns trust. And trust is what sets great journalists apart.

Practicing Transparency

Sometimes, no matter how careful you are, **bias can still sneak in** — especially if you’re reporting on a topic where you have a personal connection. Maybe the story involves a **friend**, **family member**, or **part-time job**. In those cases, transparency becomes essential.

Transparency means being upfront about anything that could affect your fairness or the audience’s trust. That might include:

- **Telling your teacher or editor** about any conflicts of interest
- **Stepping away** from stories you can’t cover objectively
- **Letting your audience know** how and where you got your information

It also includes important ethical habits, like:

- **Citing your sources** clearly and consistently
- **Admitting mistakes** and correcting them publicly when necessary

- **Describing your reporting process** (e.g., “We interviewed five students and reviewed school board minutes from July”)

These practices build trust and show that you take your role seriously — **just like professionals in the field do**. When your audience knows you're being honest, even about your limits, your credibility goes up.

In short: If there's something readers or viewers should know about how you did the story — **tell them**. Transparency protects both you and the story.

Section 8: Censorship, Obscenity, and FCC Rules

Freedom of expression is a cornerstone of media work — but it has limits. Broadcasters must follow certain laws and regulations that restrict what can be aired, especially on public airwaves. This section explores the boundaries between **free speech and censorship**, what counts as **obscene or indecent content**, and how the **Federal Communications Commission (FCC)** enforces broadcasting rules.

What Is Censorship?

Censorship is when certain content is blocked, edited, or removed to stop people from seeing or hearing it. This can be done by **governments, schools, companies, or media platforms** — often to control messaging, protect certain groups, or maintain public standards.

In the U.S., the **First Amendment** protects freedom of speech and the press. But that protection isn't absolute. Some types of content can still be **restricted by law or policy**, especially in broadcasting and schools.

Censorship may apply:

- To **obscene or indecent content**, especially during school hours or on public airwaves
- In cases where **speech incites violence** or poses a **real threat to public safety**
- On **school-run media**, where administrators may limit certain topics if they disrupt learning or violate rules

It's important to understand the difference between **censorship and editorial judgment**. Being told you can't include something because it's inaccurate, harmful, or violates school policy isn't always censorship — sometimes it's a matter of **responsible media practice**.

Student journalists should ask:

- “Is this restriction about protecting safety or avoiding discomfort?”
- “Does it prevent people from thinking freely, or just from publishing recklessly?”

Learning where the line is helps you push boundaries **thoughtfully**, not carelessly — and ensures your reporting is both impactful and protected.

Obscenity vs. Indecency

When it comes to media and the law, the **FCC (Federal Communications Commission)** and U.S. courts draw a sharp line between *obscenity* and *indecenty* — and understanding the difference is critical for student creators.

- **Obscenity** refers to content that meets **no educational, artistic, or political standard** and is considered **deeply offensive by community norms**. This type of material has **no First Amendment protection** and is **completely banned** from public broadcast (radio, TV, etc.).
→ Example: Graphic sexual material with no artistic or journalistic purpose.
- **Indecency** includes things that are **mildly offensive, sexual, or vulgar**, but **don’t rise to the level of obscenity**. Indecent content is **legal**, but it’s restricted to **“safe harbor” hours (10 PM–6 AM)** when children are less likely to be in the audience.
→ Example: A movie scene with suggestive dialogue or mild profanity.

To help determine whether something is obscene, courts use the **Miller Test**, based on the 1973 Supreme Court case *Miller v. California*. A piece of content is **legally obscene** if it meets all three of these criteria:

1. **The average person**, applying contemporary community standards, finds the content **appeals to prurient (excessive sexual) interest**.
2. The content **depicts or describes sexual conduct** in an **offensively explicit way** as defined by law.
3. The work, **taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value**.

For student media:

- You likely won’t deal with true obscenity, but you *might* encounter **indecent language, music lyrics, or suggestive humor**.
- Schools and districts usually have **stricter guidelines** than the FCC, especially in student broadcasts and publications.

Tip: When in doubt, ask: *Does this serve a purpose beyond shock value?* If not, it might be best to cut or rework the content.

The Role of the FCC

The **Federal Communications Commission (FCC)** is the U.S. government agency responsible for **regulating radio, television, and other forms of public broadcasting**. If you plan to work in media — especially on the air — it’s essential to understand what the FCC does and why it matters.

What the FCC Oversees:

- **What can be legally broadcast** over public airwaves (especially during certain hours)
- **How broadcasters respond** to complaints about indecent or harmful content
- **Penalties and enforcement**, including warnings, **fin**es, or even **license suspensions**

Real-World Examples:

- A **radio host swearing** on a live morning show (outside “safe harbor” hours) may trigger an **FCC fine**, especially if the station has had prior violations.
- A **TV station airing graphic violence or nudity** during family programming hours could face **viewer complaints**, and the FCC may investigate or issue penalties.

Why This Matters to You:

Even in a **school or student-run setting**, you’re preparing for environments where **broadcast law and FCC standards apply**. Many of the same rules that govern national media also shape expectations in student media programs — especially if you’re airing content through public channels or radio stations.

Tip: Know the difference between what’s legal, what’s ethical, and what’s school-appropriate. Following FCC-style guidelines now builds habits that will serve you in professional media later.

Section 9: Using Contracts, Releases, and Licensing Agreements





Media production isn’t just creative — it’s legal. Behind every video, photo, or broadcast is a series of documents that protect both the creator and the people or property being featured.

This section introduces students to the **practical paperwork** used in professional media, including **talent release forms, location agreements, music licenses**, and more. Understanding these tools helps ensure that your work is legal, publishable, and free from future disputes.

What Are Contracts and Why Do They Matter?

In media production, a **contract** is a **legally binding agreement** that spells out who can do what, who owns what, and what happens if something goes wrong. It protects **everyone involved** — from the person being filmed to the person doing the filming.

Why Contracts Matter:

-  **Filming someone?** A talent release ensures you have permission to use their image and voice.
-  **Using music?** A licensing agreement proves you're allowed to include that track in your video.
-  **Shooting at a location?** A location agreement sets rules for how and when you can film there.
-  **Working with a client or team?** A production contract outlines deadlines, deliverables, and payment terms.

What Happens Without a Contract?






- Your video might get **taken down** from YouTube or social media for copyright violations.
- You could face **legal action** if someone didn't agree to how they were portrayed.
- A client might **refuse to pay** if the scope of work wasn't written and agreed upon.
- A venue could **cancel your shoot** if expectations weren't documented.

Bottom line: In media, it's not enough to have a handshake deal. If it matters, put it in writing. Contracts prevent misunderstandings, protect your rights, and help your work stay online and legally safe.

Talent Release Forms

A **talent release form** is a legal document that gives you permission to record someone's **image, voice, or performance** and to **use that footage in your media project**. Without this signed form, you technically don't have the right to publish or share what you recorded — even if the person said “yes” at the time.

When You Need One:

-  Interviews
-  Performances (skits, plays, musical acts)
-  Promotional videos or trailers
-  Anything going online (YouTube, school website, social media)
-  Anything that will be aired or entered into competitions

Why It Matters:





- It protects you legally — no one can later claim they didn't give consent.
- It protects your school — especially when footage is public-facing.
- It ensures everyone understands **how their image or voice will be used.**

For minors, a parent or guardian must sign the release. Schools often require this before students can appear in broadcasts, online videos, or yearbook interviews. It's not just paperwork — it's part of producing content the right way.

Location Release Forms

If you're filming in a **private home, business, or non-public space**, you need a **location release form**. This legal document gives you permission to record on someone else's property and confirms that the **owner understands and agrees** to how the footage will be used — whether that's for a class project, competition, or online video.

When You Need One:

-  Filming inside a store, restaurant, or business
-  Shooting at someone's home
-  Recording in non-classroom areas (like offices, maintenance areas, or behind-the-scenes school facilities)
-  Filming near hospitals or restricted zones

Why It Matters:

- Protects you from being told to stop filming — or worse, having to delete your footage
- Prevents legal or disciplinary complaints after a shoot
- Shows respect for the property owner's rights

Even if the location *seems* public, it's always smart to ask: "Do I have permission to record here — and can I get that in writing?"

Licensing Agreements for Media Use

If you're using **music, video clips, images, or sound effects** that you didn't create yourself, you need to make sure you're doing it legally. That means either:

- Getting permission from the creator, or
- Using content that's covered by a proper **license** (like royalty-free or Creative Commons), or
- Choosing media in the **public domain**.

Common Types of Licenses

- **Royalty-Free Music Licenses**

You pay once (or use free resources) and can use the music without paying again. But "royalty-free" doesn't mean "completely free" — always read the terms. Example: AudioJungle, Epidemic Sound.

- **Creative Commons Licenses (CC)**

These are free to use, but often come with conditions like:

- You must give credit
- You can't use it commercially
- You can't remix or change it

Sites like Free Music Archive or Pixabay offer CC content — but **check the specific license** on each file.

- **Commercial Use Licenses**

Required if your video or podcast will be posted on YouTube with ads, used in a competition, or tied to a business or fundraiser. These licenses usually cost money.

Why It Matters

Using media without the correct license can lead to:

- Your video being taken down (especially on YouTube or TikTok)
- Copyright strikes or school consequences
- Legal complaints if your content is distributed widely

Understanding licenses now builds **professional habits** for future media work — whether you're submitting for school, competitions, or clients.

Reading the Fine Print

Just because something is labeled "free" or "Creative Commons" doesn't mean you can use it however you want. **Every license comes with conditions**, and you're expected to follow them — even in student projects.

Common Licensing Terms to Watch For:

- **Attribution Required**
You must credit the original creator — usually by name, with a link, or on-screen label. Skipping this step can still result in a violation.
- **No Derivatives**
You're not allowed to edit, remix, or change the original content in any way. This includes trimming a song, cropping an image, or adding filters to a video.
- **Non-Commercial Use Only**
You can't use the content in anything that makes money or promotes a brand, including YouTube videos that earn ad revenue, fundraisers, or promotional school content.

Why It Matters

Even **accidental misuse** of licensed content can lead to:

- Copyright takedown notices
- Demonetization of your video
- School or competition disqualification

That's why it's essential to **read the license terms carefully** and when in doubt, use verified public domain material or content you created yourself.