



Chapter 2: What is a journalist?

Index of Chapter 2

Here we will discuss: who journalists are and what they do; why people become journalists; and what qualities you need to be a good journalist.

1. What do journalists do?
2. [Why be a journalist?](#)
3. [What does it take?](#)
4. [To summarise](#)

Journalists work in many areas of life, finding and presenting information. However, for the purposes of this manual we define journalists principally as men and women who present that information as news to the audiences of newspapers, magazines, radio or television stations or the Internet.

What do journalists do?

Within these different media, there are specialist tasks for journalists. In large organisations, the journalists may specialise in only one task. In small organisations, each journalist may have to do many different tasks. Here are some of the jobs journalists do:

Reporters gather information and present it in a written or spoken form in news stories, feature articles or documentaries. Reporters may work on the staff of news organisations, but may also work freelance, writing stories for whoever pays them. General reporters cover all sorts of news stories, but some journalists specialise in certain areas such as reporting sport, politics or agriculture.

Sub-editors take the stories written by reporters and put them into a form which suits the special needs of their particular newspaper, magazine, bulletin or web page. Sub-editors do not usually gather information themselves. Their job is to concentrate on how the story can best be presented to their audience. They are often called *subs*. The person in charge of them is called the **chief sub-editor**, usually shortened to *chief sub*.

Photojournalists use photographs to tell the news. .i.photojournalists;They either cover events with a reporter, taking photographs to illustrate the written story, or attend news events on their own, presenting both the pictures and a story or caption.

The editor is usually the person who makes the final decision about what is included in the newspaper, magazine or news bulletins. He or she is responsible for all the content and all the journalists. Editors may have deputies and assistants to help them.

The news editor is the person in charge of the news journalists. In small organisations, the news editor may make all the decisions about what stories to cover and who will do the work. In larger organisations, the news editor may have a deputy, often called the **chief of staff**, whose special job is to assign reporters to the stories selected.

Feature writers work for newspapers and magazines, writing longer stories which usually give background to the news. In small organisations the reporters themselves will write feature articles. The person in charge of features is usually called the **features editor**. Larger radio or television stations may have specialist staff producing current affairs programs - the broadcasting equivalent of the feature article. The person in charge of producing a particular current affairs program is usually called the **producer** and the person in charge of all the programs in that series is called the **executive producer** or **EP**.

Specialist writers may be employed to produce personal commentary columns or reviews of things such as books, films, art or performances. They are usually selected for their knowledge about certain subjects or their ability to write well. Again, small organisations may use general reporters for some or all of these tasks.

There are many other jobs which can be done by journalists. It is a career with many opportunities.

[^^back to the top](#)

Why be a journalist?

People enter journalism for a variety of reasons but, money apart, there are four main motives:

The desire to write

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- [Volume 1: Basic techniques](#)
- [Volume 2: Advanced Reporting](#)
- [Volume 3: Ethics and the Law](#)

Journalists are the major group of people in most developing countries who make their living from writing. Many young people who see themselves as future novelists choose journalism as a way of earning a living while developing their writing skills. Although writing for newspapers and writing for books require different qualities, the aspiration to be a great writer is not one to be discouraged in a would-be journalist.

The desire to be known

Most people want their work to be recognised by others. This helps to give it value. Some people also want to be recognised themselves, so that they have status in the eyes of society. It is not a bad motive to wish to be famous, but this must never become your main reason for being a journalist. You will not be a good journalist if you care more for impressing your audience than for serving their needs.

The desire to influence for good

Knowing the power of the printed or spoken word or image, especially in rural areas, some people enter journalism for the power it will give them to influence people. In many countries, a large number of politicians have backgrounds as journalists. It is open to question whether they are journalists who moved into politics or natural politicians who used journalism as a stepping stone.

There is a strong belief that journalists control the mass media but the best journalists recognise their role as servants of the people. They are the channels through which information flows and they are the interpreters of events. This recognition, paired with the desire to influence, can produce good campaigning journalists who see themselves as watchdogs for the ordinary man or woman. They are ready to champion the cause of the underdog and expose corruption and abuses of office. This is a vital role in any democratic process and should be equally valuable and welcome in countries where a non-democratic government guides or controls the press.

There is a difference between the desire to influence events for your own sake, and the desire to do it for other people. You should never use journalism for selfish ends, but you can use it to improve the life of other people - remembering that they may not always agree with you on what those improvements should be.

There is a strong tradition in western societies of the media being the so-called "Fourth Estate". Traditionally the other three estates were the church, the aristocracy and the rest of society but nowadays the idea of the four estates is often defined as government, courts, clergy and the media, with the media - the "Fourth Estate" - acting as a balance and an advocate for ordinary citizens against possible abuses from the power and authority of the other three estates. This idea of journalists defending the rights of ordinary people is a common reason for young people entering the profession.

The desire for knowledge

Curiosity is a natural part of most people's characters and a vital ingredient for any journalist. Lots of young men and women enter the profession with the desire to know more about the world about them without needing to specialise in limited fields of study. Many critics accuse journalists of being shallow when in fact journalism, by its very nature, attracts people who are inquisitive about everything. Most journalists tend to know a little bit about a lot of things, rather than a lot about one subject.

Knowledge has many uses. It can simply help to make you a fuller and more interesting person. It can also give you power over people, especially people who do not possess that particular knowledge. Always bear in mind that power can be used in a positive way, to

improve people's lives, or in a selfish way to advance yourself.

[^^back to the top](#)

What does it take?

Most young men and women accepted into the profession possess at least one of the above desires from the start. But desires alone will not make a successful journalist. You need to cultivate certain special qualities and skills.

An interest in life

You must be interested in the world around you. You must want to find things out and share your discoveries with your readers or listeners - so you should have a broad range of interests. It will help if you already have a wide range of knowledge to build upon and are always prepared to learn something new.

Love of language

You cannot be a truly great journalist without having a deep love of language, written or spoken. You must understand the meaning and flow of words and take delight in using them. The difference between an ordinary news story and a great one is often not just the facts you include, but the way in which you tell those facts.

Journalists often have an important role in developing the language of a country, especially in countries which do not have a long history of written language. This places a special

responsibility on you, because you may be setting the standards of language use in your country for future generations.

If you love language, you will take care of it and protect it from harm. You will not abuse grammar, you will always check spellings you are not sure of, and you will take every opportunity to develop your vocabulary.

The news story - the basic building block of journalism - requires a simple, uncomplicated writing style. This need for simplicity can frustrate new journalists, even though it is often more challenging to write simply than to be wordy. Once you have mastered the basic news story format, you can venture beyond its limits and start to develop a style of your own.

Do not be discouraged by a slow start. If you grow with your language you will love it all the more.

An alert and ordered mind

People trust journalists with facts, either the ones they give or the ones they receive. You must not be careless with them. All journalists must aim for accuracy. Without it you will lose trust, readers and ultimately your job.

The best way of ensuring accuracy is to develop a system of ordering facts in your mind. You should always have a notebook handy to record facts and comments, but your mind is the main tool. Keep it orderly.

You should also keep it alert. Never stop thinking - and use your imagination. This is not to say you should make things up: that is never permissible. But you should use your imagination to build up a mental picture of what people tell you. You must visualise the story. If you take care in structuring that picture and do not let go until it is clear, you will have ordered your facts in such a way that they can be easily retrieved when the time comes to write your story.

With plenty of experience and practice, you will develop a special awareness of what makes news. Sometimes called news sense, it is the ability to recognise information which will interest your audience or which provides clues to other stories. It is also the ability to sort through a mass of facts and opinions, recognising which are most important or interesting to your audience.

For example, a young reporter was sent to cover the wedding of a government minister. When he returned to the office, his chief of staff asked him for the story. "Sorry, chief," he replied. "There isn't a story - the bride never arrived." As his chief of staff quickly pointed out, when a bride does not turn up for a wedding, *that* is the news story. The young reporter had not thought about the relative importance of all the facts in this incident; he had no news sense.

A suspicious mind

People will give you information for all sorts of reasons, some justified, others not. You must be able to recognise occasions when people are not telling the truth. Sometimes people do it unknowingly, but you will still mislead your readers or listeners if you report them, whatever their motives. You must develop the ability to recognise when you are being given false information.

If you suspect you are being given inaccurate information or being told deliberate lies, do not let the matter rest there. Ask your informant more questions so that you can either satisfy yourself that the information is accurate or reveal the information for the lie that it is.

Determination

Some people call it aggressiveness, but we prefer the word determination. It is the ability to go out, find a story and hang on to it until you are satisfied you have it in full. Be like a dog with a bone - do not let go until you have got all the meat off, even if people try to pull it out of your mouth.

This means you often have to ask hard questions and risk upsetting people who do not want to co-operate. It may be painful but in the end you will gain their respect. So always be polite, however rude people may be. The rule is simple: **be polite but persistent**.

While you are hunting for your story, you may drive it away by being too aggressive. Sometimes you may have to approach a story with caution and cunning, until you are sure you have hold of it. Then you can start to chew on it.

Friendliness

You need to be able to get on well with all sorts of people. You cannot pick and choose who to interview in the same way as you choose who to have as a friend. You must be friendly to all, even those people you dislike. You can, of course, be friendly to someone without being their friend. If you are friendly to everyone, you will also be fair with everyone.

Reliability

This is a quality admired in any profession, but is especially valued in journalism where both your employer and your audience rely on you to do your job. If you are sent on an interview but fail to turn up you offend a number of people: the person who is waiting to

interview but fail to turn up you offend a number of people: the person who is waiting to be interviewed; your editor who is waiting to put the interview in his paper or program; your readers, listeners or viewers, who are robbed of news.

Even if you are late for an appointment, you will upset the schedules of both your interviewee and your newsroom and risk being refused next time you want a story. In a busy news organisation, punctuality is a necessity. Without it there would be chaos.

[^^back to the top](#)

To summarise

There are many reasons for becoming a journalist and many types of journalists to become. It is a career with many challenges and rewards.

Journalists must:

- Have an interest in the world around them.**
- Love language.**
- Have an alert and ordered mind.**
- Be able to approach and question people.**
- Be polite but persistent.**
- Be friendly and reliable.**

[^^back to the top](#)

[>>go to next chapter](#)



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