



Reporting That Wins – The Scholastic Journalism Playbook

Step-by-step craft, real award-level analysis, and workshop assignments for grades 9 to 12.

In this guide

08.1 What Counts as Journalism and What Judges Want

08.2 Reporting, Sources, and Fact-Checking

08.3 Writing the Lede, the Nut Graf, and the Story

08.4 Ethics, Editing, and Submission

08.5 Bonus Lab: Annotated Feature Clinic

Each part teaches the skill, shows how winning writers make their choices, and ends with workshop assignments. Coaching notes and model responses are at the back.

08.1 What Counts as Journalism and What Judges Want

Journalism here means fact-based writing on newsworthy topics, made for publication. Learn the story types and newsworthiness tests, study the few winners we could read, and turn a topic into a story.

Why This Matters

The Journalism category of the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards is for fact-based writing on newsworthy topics, written to be published. Entries run 500 to 3,000 words. Your sources go in the Work Sources field, which does not count toward the limit, and if the piece has been published you can include links there. Scholastic's published criteria for every category are originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision. It does not publish a journalism-specific rubric or tier percentages, so statements below about what tends to stand out are coach's inference from the few winning pieces we could read, not a Scholastic statement.

Where students lose points: they write an essay about a topic instead of a story about a situation. They report one source, usually a friend or an official handout. They bury the news under background. Or they pick a subject with no stakes: a general topic like cyberbullying with no person, event, decision, or question. Grades 9 and 10 are generally expected to deliver accurate, clearly organized reporting with named sources. Grades 11 and 12 are expected to add a real conflict, voices with different stakes, and prose that stays out of the way of the facts. Your final work must be your own idea and creation.

A frank note about our evidence. Only two journalism winners were readable in full or in part for this series: a National Gold Medal piece (we read about 700 words of it and never saw the ending) and a National Silver Medal piece (read in full). We add a third example from the Critical Essay category that reads like reportage. That is a thin base, so treat our observations as patterns to test, not laws.

Core Ideas

Journalism answers who, what, when, where, why, and how, and then asks so what? Its authority comes from verification: every claim traces to a person, a document, a dataset, or your own observation. It is different from an essay in one key way. In an essay, you persuade the reader with reasoning. In journalism, you show the reader what is true by gathering evidence from others, and you let them decide.

- ◆ **News story:** a recent or developing event, led by the most important facts.
- ◆ **Feature:** a person, place, or trend told with scene, character, and a narrative arc.
- ◆ **Profile:** a close portrait of one person, built from interviews and observation.
- ◆ **Explainer or issue story:** how something works or why a debate matters, with sources on more than one side.
- ◆ **Opinion or analysis:** a point of view backed by reporting. A risk in this category, because the category description emphasizes fact-based writing.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

Is it newsworthy? Seven tests

Timeliness (why now?). Proximity (does it affect this community?). Impact (how many people, how deeply?). Conflict (is there a real disagreement?). Prominence (does a known person or institution matter?). Human interest (is there a person with something at stake?). Novelty (is something unusual or new happening?). A story that passes three or more usually works.

Journalism versus essay

Essay: the writer's reasoning is the evidence. Journalism: other people's words, documents, and data are the evidence, and the writer is nearly invisible. If you can write your piece from your desk with no interviews or documents, it is probably an essay.

Question	Strong journalism answers it	Weak journalism skips it
Who is affected?	Names real people, with permission	Says many students or some people
What is the conflict?	Presents at least two sides in their own words	Only one voice, or the writer's voice
How do you know?	Sources named and checkable	Because everyone knows
Why does it matter now?	A news hook or a decision pending	A general topic with no trigger

Case Studies

Our research notes cover two journalism winners and one crossover essay. Analyses come from second-hand extractions, not verbatim copies. We paraphrase and avoid line-level claims. We found no readable regional Silver Key or Honorable Mention journalism, so tier contrasts are labeled inference.

CASE STUDY 1: "ONLINE SAFETY, OR OVERPROTECTION?" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY AND NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, 2016; THREESIXTY JOURNALISM, STORY IN THE JUNE 2015 ISSUE) - PARTIAL READ

What it does: reports on the tension between a school district's right to filter student internet access and students' right to information.

SOLUTION

Development: the lede is a concrete example, in which two innocuous searches are blocked because a keyword trips the filter. The reader sees the absurdity before the issue is named. The nut graf, in paragraph two, frames the conflict as a two-sided question: students claim a right to receive and express information, administrators claim a duty to protect and ownership of the devices. The deck mirrors it.

Craft: the structure is issue-driven narrative, not strict inverted pyramid. After the lede and nut graf comes the official's response, then a subhead for a viral student dispute, then a second subhead widening to the policy debate. Four named, labeled sources carry it: a district technology director, a protesting junior, a sophomore who interns at a major tech company and helped review the filter, and a technology director from a neighboring district. Sentences are plain and medium length, quotes carry the color, and the reporter stays invisible.

Effect and gaps: the student's sanction claim is handled fairly, as his account, with the district declining to comment and citing privacy law. We did not see the ending. The legal explanation rests on the subject's reading plus a funding summary, with no court case or data on how much is blocked. Inference: lower-tier work would likely lack the outside expert, the insider critic, and a lede that dramatizes.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

CASE STUDY 2: "TRUMP'S PROPOSED BUDGET CUTS THROW THE FUTURE OF RESEARCH INTO QUESTION" (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL, 2018 AWARDS; HARKER AQUILA) - FULL READ

What it does: a news-led argument about a proposed federal budget, explaining what deep cuts to public research funding could do.

SOLUTION

Development: it leads with facts (the date, programs eliminated, a percentage cut to a major biomedical research agency), adds that it is only a proposal, then turns to opinion. Next comes the mechanism: multi-year grants mean a deep cut halts new awards. A specific program at risk follows, then a drug-development example and two historical breakthroughs, then a turn to private philanthropy with a concession about its risks, and a closing of cautious optimism.

Craft: medium-to-long accessible sentences, advocacy-flavored diction, first-person plural. The mechanism explainer and concrete cases are what make a complex policy readable.

Effect and flaws: the school paper filed it under Opinion. It has no interviews and no named experts, some numbers carry no link, the agency name is misstated in the lede, and one sentence is a fragment. Yet it reached a National Silver Medal. Coach's inference: timeliness, a clear explanation of a hard mechanism, concrete examples, and a committed point of view in a school press that rarely tackles national science policy. We do not recommend copying its sourcing gaps; a version with named experts and verified figures would be stronger.

CROSSOVER CASE: "BITTERSWEET: THE GRUESOME PRICE FOR WEST AFRICA'S MOST DECADENT EXPORT" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY IN CRITICAL ESSAY, 2026, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

Why include it: it was entered as a critical essay but reads like a reported feature, so it shows what reporting-style choices look like, and why category choice matters.

SOLUTION

Development: an opening scene with a named teenage worker, economic context, a recruitment pipeline across a border, corporate pledges and loopholes, the paradox that industry can trace flavor but not labor, reforms and limits, direct testimony, and a circular ending. No explicit thesis is stated.

Craft: dense statistics, a monitoring report, a named case, a first-hand voice, and emotive sensory diction. Heavy reliance on one investigation is the main weakness.

Lesson for journalists: a named person plus testimony plus data is the formula. Lesson on category: if your piece has no thesis and relies on interviews and documents, Journalism may fit better than Critical Essay. If your strength is an arguable claim, choose the essay category. Each work can be entered in only one.

Step-by-Step

- 1 Find a story, not a topic** Replace 'school safety' with 'why the district approved metal detectors in two high schools but not the third.' Ask what changed, who decided, and who is affected.
- 2 Run the newsworthiness tests** Score your idea on the seven tests. If it scores under three, look for a sharper hook.
- 3 Name the conflict in one sentence** Write: 'X says A; Y says B; the question is C.' If you can't, you don't yet have a story.
- 4 List the voices you need** An affected person, an official or decision-maker, an expert, and someone who complicates the story. Aim for four people with different stakes.
- 5 Plan the documents** Which records, data, policies, or reports will you check? Note where each lives.
- 6 Check the category fit** Confirm the piece is fact-based and publishable. Start a Work Sources list now, because you will need it when you submit.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: TOPIC TO STORY

Weaker (coach sample): "Cell phones are a big issue in schools today. Many schools have different rules about phones, and students have different opinions."

SOLUTION

What changed: the weaker version names a general topic, gives no person, no event, and no question. It reads like a textbook introduction.

Stronger (coach sample): "When Principal Reyes announced that every phone at Lincoln High would go into a locked pouch from first bell to last, sophomore Maya Chen lost her way to check her mother's dialysis schedule. The district says the policy raised attention in class. Parents say it cut a lifeline."

Why it works: a decision, a named person (a made-up example for illustration), a stake, and two sides appear in the first lines. Use fictional names for real people in nonfiction unless they are public figures, as the rules require.

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: THE CONFLICT SENTENCE

Weaker (coach sample): "This story is about school lunch and why it matters."

SOLUTION

What changed: the sentence promises a topic, not a conflict.

Stronger (coach sample): "The cafeteria says its new menu meets state nutrition rules; students say half of it ends up in the trash, and the district's own waste logs show the plates coming back full."

Why it works: each side is attributed, the evidence is specific, and the question the story will answer is implied: who is right, and why does it matter?

Tier Check

Scholastic does not publish a journalism rubric or tier percentages. The table is coach's inference from the two winning pieces and one crossover essay we could read, and the lower tiers are hypotheses.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized	
Story	A real conflict or question with a named protagonist and a news hook	A clear subject with some stakes	A general topic with no trigger
Sources	Multiple credible voices with different stakes, plus documents or data	Two or three sources, mostly similar	One source, or none named
Fairness	Both sides in their own words; claims attributed	Mostly balanced	One-sided or opinion presented as fact
Prose	Plain, accurate, restrained; the reporter stays out of the way	Clear but flat or cluttered	Editorializing or wordy

Common traps

1. Choosing a topic with no person, decision, or event. 2. One-source reporting, especially a single official or a single friend. 3. Putting your opinion in news sentences. 4. Entering an essay as journalism, or journalism as an essay, without checking the category description.

Coach's Playbook

Do I have a hook (why now)? A conflict sentence? Four voices with different stakes? At least one document or dataset? Can a reader tell where each fact came from? Is my piece fact-based and suitable for publication? Have I started my Work Sources list?

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, list five stories in your school or community. Score each on the seven tests, write a conflict sentence for the top two, and list the first three people you would call.

Practice

WORKSHOP What Counts as Journalism and What Judges Want

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. List ten possible stories from your school or town. Score three on the seven newsworthiness tests.
2. Write conflict sentences for your best two ideas: 'X says A; Y says B; the question is C.'
3. Rewrite a topic ('teen mental health') as a story idea with a hook, a person, and a decision.
4. Read a published news feature. Label the lede, nut graf, and each source. Note which source complicates the story.
5. Make a source map for one idea: four voices with different stakes, and what each can tell you.
6. Decide whether an idea belongs in Journalism or Critical Essay. Write two sentences defending the choice.
7. List five documents or datasets that could support one story and where you would find them.
8. Write a 60-word lede that opens with a concrete scene or example, not a general statement.
9. Write a short note: how do you keep your own opinion out of a news story, and where might it creep in?

08.2 Reporting, Sources, and Fact-Checking

Reporting is the work judges can feel. See how winners used named voices with different stakes, then practice building a source map, interviewing, attributing, and fact-checking before you write.

Why This Matters

In the Journalism category, reporting is the work. Scholastic describes the category as fact-based writing on newsworthy topics, intended for publication, at 500 to 3,000 words, with sources listed in the Work Sources field (not counted toward the limit; include links if published). Its stated judging criteria are originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision, and it publishes no journalism rubric. In the two winning pieces we could read, the standout strength of the National Gold Medal piece was its reporting: several named voices with different stakes. Coach's inference: judges can tell when a writer called someone.

Students lose points when the research is thin: one interview, a few web pages, an official statement, and the rest filled with the writer's own commentary. They also lose points through carelessness: a misspelled name, a wrong title, a number that doesn't match the source. Grades 9 and 10 are generally expected to interview at least two people and attribute every fact. Grades 11 and 12 are expected to bring in documents or data and sources whose interests differ, and to verify claims before publishing. Everything must be your own work; list every influence and collaborator in Work Sources.

Core Ideas

Reporting has three layers: people, documents, and observation. People give you quotes and context. Documents (records, reports, data, policies) give you checkable facts. Observation (what you saw and heard yourself) gives you scene and detail. Strong stories use at least two layers, and the best use all three.

The source ladder

Primary sources are firsthand: the person who did or saw it, the original document, the raw dataset. Secondary sources interpret primary ones: articles, reports about reports. Anonymous or unnamed sources should be a last resort, and rules vary by publication. Climb toward the primary source whenever you can.

Attribution rule

Every fact that a reader could dispute needs a source named in the sentence or the next one. Common knowledge needs none. A figure from a report is attributed to the report and its date. A claim about someone should offer that person the chance to respond.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

- ◆ **Interview in three stages:** prepare (research, 10 questions), listen (follow the surprise, ask why and how), confirm (spell the name, check the title, repeat key numbers).
- ◆ **Ask open questions:** tell me about the day it happened; what did you expect; who disagrees and why.
- ◆ **Always ask last:** is there anyone else I should talk to, and what should I have asked?
- ◆ **Record accurately:** get permission to record; write exact quotes in quotation marks, paraphrase the rest.

Voice you need	What they give you	Example (coach sample)
Affected person	Human stakes and scene	A student blocked by a filter
Decision-maker	The reason for the policy	A district technology director
Insider or critic	A complicating angle	A student who helped review the system
Outside expert	Context and comparison	A technology director from another district
Document or data	Checkable facts	Policy text, budget, public records

Fact-checking is a separate step from writing. After the draft is done, go through it with a highlighter and verify each name, title, date, number, quotation, and claim against a source. A good newsroom habit is to check facts against the original document, not against another article that repeated it.

Case Studies

Our research notes cover two journalism winners (one partially read) and one crossover essay. Analyses come from second-hand extractions, so we paraphrase and make no line-level claims. Tier contrasts are inference, since we found no readable lower-tier journalism.

CASE STUDY 1: "ONLINE SAFETY, OR OVERPROTECTION?" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY AND NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, 2016; THREESIXTY JOURNALISM, JUNE 2015 ISSUE) - PARTIAL READ

The reporting design: four named, labeled sources, each with a different stake. A district technology director speaks for the policy, a junior who protested is the primary subject, a sophomore who interns at a major tech company and helped review the filter is the insider critic, and a technology director from a neighboring district is the outside expert.

SOLUTION

Development: attribution is specific and consistent across the sections. The reporter handles the junior's claim that he was sanctioned by noting that it is his account and that the district cited privacy law in declining to comment. The legal background is explained through the subject's reading plus a summary of the funding condition.

Craft: quotes carry the color, and the reporter's voice is nearly invisible. The prose is plain.

The gap: no court case, no legal expert, and no data on how much is blocked. The ending was not available to us. Inference: lower-tier journalism would likely have one or two sources of the same kind. The outside expert and the insider critic are what turn a school story into a debate.

CASE STUDY 2: "TRUMP'S PROPOSED BUDGET CUTS THROW THE FUTURE OF RESEARCH INTO QUESTION" (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL, 2018 AWARDS; HARKER AQUILA) - FULL READ

The reporting design: no interviews and no named experts. Figures and examples come from reports and general knowledge. The mechanism (multi-year grants, so a deep cut halts new awards) and the examples (a drug-development case and two historical breakthroughs) are explained, not quoted.

SOLUTION

Development: factual lede, a caveat that the budget is only a proposal, an argument for public funding, a turn to philanthropy, and a concession about its risks.

Craft: accessible medium-to-long sentences and advocacy diction.

The gaps: some numbers have no link, the agency name is misstated in the lede, and one sentence splices a number into the wrong place. Coach's inference: the piece placed nationally despite these errors because of timeliness, clarity about a hard mechanism, and a committed point of view. That does not mean sourcing is optional. A named expert and verified numbers would be the easiest upgrades, and errors in a lede are costly because readers stop trusting you.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

CROSSOVER CASE: "BITTERSWEET: THE GRUESOME PRICE FOR WEST AFRICA'S MOST DECADENT EXPORT" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY IN CRITICAL ESSAY, 2026, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

The reporting design: a named teenage worker, a monitoring report showing limited coverage, dense statistics, a recruitment pipeline described step by step, and a first-hand voice in direct testimony.

SOLUTION

Development: the human case opens the story; economic context and corporate pledges follow; a paradox (industry can trace flavor but not labor) turns the argument; the root cause is consumer demand.

Craft: sensory, emotive diction and short fragments.

The gaps: reliance on a single investigation, an unexplained citation label, and a blame shift between corporations and consumers.

Lesson: even heavily researched work gains from a second independent source for key claims, and an unexplained citation is the same as no citation to a reader.

Step-by-Step

- 1 Build a source list before you call anyone** Name four people and three documents you want. Add a backup for each.
- 2 Prepare interview questions** Write ten questions per interview, most open-ended, plus three you need exact answers for (spelling, title, numbers).
- 3 Run the interview** Ask permission to record. Start easy. Follow the surprise. Close with who else and what should I have asked.
- 4 Log everything** For each fact, record who said it, when, and how to reach them again. This becomes your Work Sources list.
- 5 Seek the other side** If anyone is criticized or accused, contact them. Give a deadline. Note if they decline.
- 6 Fact-check after drafting** Highlight names, titles, dates, numbers, quotes, and claims. Verify each against the original. Fix or cut what you can't verify.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: ATTRIBUTION

Weaker (coach sample): "Students are stressed about homework. Studies show it takes a lot of time and some teachers say it is too much."

SOLUTION

What changed: studies and some teachers are unnamed, the claim is general, and no reader can check anything.

Stronger (coach sample): "Eleventh-grader Jamal Brooks says he spends three hours on homework most nights. According to the school's own survey of 412 juniors and seniors last spring, a majority reported more than two hours. English teacher Ms. Alvarez says she assigns less than she did five years ago, but admits she doesn't know what her colleagues assign."

Why it works: each fact has a source in the sentence (names here are invented for illustration), the survey is specific, and the teacher's quote adds a limit, which is honest.

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: A VERIFICATION PASS

Weaker (coach sample): "The school board voted 6-1 last Tuesday to cut the arts budget by 30 percent, a figure board member Linda Park called reasonable."

SOLUTION

What changed: this draft was never checked against the minutes. The vote might have been 5-2, the date might have been Wednesday, and 30 percent may refer to a different budget line.

Stronger (coach sample): "The school board voted 5-2 on March 12 to reduce the arts line by 30 percent, from 410,000 dollars to 287,000 dollars, according to the approved minutes. Board member Linda Park said in an interview that the cut was 'a reasonable trade.'"

Why it works: after checking the minutes, the vote, date, and amounts are exact; the figure is tied to a document; and the quote is short and attributed. (Numbers are invented as a sample.)

Tier Check

Scholastic gives no journalism rubric. The table is coach's inference from two winning pieces and one crossover essay; the lower tiers are hypotheses.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized	
Sourcing	Several named voices with different stakes, plus documents or data	Two or three named sources, mostly similar	One source or unnamed sources
Fairness	Subjects get a chance to respond; disputed claims are labeled as accounts	Both sides mentioned	One-sided or unchecked accusations
Accuracy	Names, numbers, and titles verified against originals	A few small errors	Frequent errors or unchecked claims
Documentation	Work Sources list complete and links included if published	Partial list	Missing or vague

Common traps

1. Interviewing only people who agree with each other. 2. Using the phrase studies show with no study named. 3. Letting an accused person go uncontacted. 4. Trusting another article's number instead of the original document.

Coach's Playbook

Four voices? One document or dataset? Primary sources where possible? Every disputed fact attributed? Every name, title, number, and date verified against an original? A Work Sources list that matches what you used?

Do This Tonight

Spend 15 minutes drafting ten interview questions for the most important source in your story. Mark the three you need exact answers to. Add a final question: who else should I talk to?

Practice

WORKSHOP Reporting, Sources, and Fact-Checking

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Build a source map for a story idea: four people and three documents, each with the reason you need it.
2. Write ten interview questions for one source: seven open, three precise. Mark the one you most fear asking.
3. Practice an interview with a friend for five minutes. Write down the best follow-up question you improvised.
4. Take a paragraph from a news article and mark every fact that is attributed. Rewrite one unattributed fact with a source.
5. Write a short email requesting an interview, stating who you are, what the story is, and the time you need. Do not include identifying information if you will paste it in your entry; keep it separate.
6. Choose a dispute between two parties and write the fair response paragraph you would send the criticized party.
7. Fact-check a paragraph (yours or a model): list every name, title, date, number, and quote and how you would verify each.
8. Find a primary document for a local story (minutes, budget, policy) and summarize what it says in three sentences.
9. Write a Work Sources list for a hypothetical story: five entries in a consistent format, with links where available.

08.3 Writing the Lede, the Nut Graf, and the Story

The lede earns the read, the nut graf says why it matters, and the structure carries it home. Study how winners opened and organized, then draft ledes, nut graf, and endings of your own.

Why This Matters

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

A journalism entry is read by someone with a stack of others. The Scholastic Art & Writing Awards publishes only three judging criteria for every category (originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision) and no journalism rubric. Our observations about writing come from the few winners we could read, so they are coach's inference. In those pieces, the opening paragraphs did a lot of work: one dramatized the issue with a concrete example before naming it, another delivered the news and then said plainly what it was about. Entries run 500 to 3,000 words, and your sources go in the Work Sources field, not counted toward the limit.

Students lose points in three places. The lede is a throat-clearing generality (In today's society...). The nut graf, the paragraph that says what the story is about and why it matters, is missing or buried on page two. And the middle is a pile of quotes with no order. Grades 9 and 10 are generally expected to write a clear lede, state the point early, and organize by importance or theme. Grades 11 and 12 are expected to shape the story: choose a structure on purpose, pace quotes and facts, and end with something earned. Final work must be your own.

Core Ideas

The lede is the first sentence or paragraph. The nut graf is the paragraph (usually the second to fourth) that answers: what is this story about, why now, and why should I care? The rest is a structure that moves the reader from the nut graf to the end without losing them.

Lede types and when to use them

Summary lede: the most important facts in one sentence; best for news. Scene or anecdotal lede: a concrete moment that stands for the issue; best for features and issue stories. Contrast lede: two facts in tension. Question lede: use rarely, and only if the story answers it. Avoid weather, dictionary, and 'Since the beginning of time' openers.

Nut graf checklist

Does it say what is happening? Does it say who is affected? Does it say why now? Does it name the conflict or question? Is it within the first four paragraphs? A good nut graf lets a reader decide whether to continue.

Structure	How it works	Best for
Inverted pyramid	Most important facts first, details descending	Breaking news, short stories
Issue-driven narrative	Lede, nut graf, then sections that turn on contrasts, often with subheads	Policy and community conflicts
Narrative or chronological	Scenes in order, with reflection	Profiles and features
Explainer	Question, mechanism, examples, implications	Complex topics such as budgets or science
Hourglass	News summary, then chronological narrative	Events with a human story inside

Pacing matters. Alternate facts, quotes, and context. A quote should do what you cannot: show emotion or give an expert judgment. Do not use a quote to state a fact you can state yourself more clearly. Keep paragraphs short, one idea each. Use said for attribution; save dramatic verbs for when they are accurate.

Case Studies

Our research notes cover two journalism winners and one crossover essay. One winner was only partly read, so we say nothing about its ending. Analyses come from second-hand extractions, so we paraphrase and avoid line-level claims. Tier contrasts are inference.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

CASE STUDY 1: "ONLINE SAFETY, OR OVERPROTECTION?" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY AND NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, 2016; THREESIXTY JOURNALISM, JUNE 2015 ISSUE) - PARTIAL READ

The lede: a concrete, fragment-driven example. Two harmless searches are blocked because a single keyword trips the filter. The reader sees the absurdity before the issue is named. The reporter stays out of it and the reader sides with students before any adult speaks, yet nothing is editorialized.

SOLUTION

The nut graf: paragraph two states the conflict as a two-sided question. Students claim a constitutional right to receive and express information. Administrators claim a duty to protect and ownership of the devices. The deck mirrors that framing.

Structure and prose: lede, nut graf, official's response, then a subhead for a viral student dispute, then a second subhead widening to the policy debate. Each section turns on a contrast transition. Sentences are plain and medium length, and quotes carry the color.

Takeaway: concrete example first, plain statement of the conflict second, then sections that move from the personal to the policy. We did not read the ending, so we cannot judge the kicker. Inference: lower-tier work would likely open with a general sentence about technology in schools.

CASE STUDY 2: "TRUMP'S PROPOSED BUDGET CUTS THROW THE FUTURE OF RESEARCH INTO QUESTION" (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL, 2018 AWARDS; HARKER AQUILA) - FULL READ

The lede: a news-style summary of the proposed budget (the date, the programs eliminated, a percentage cut to a major biomedical research agency). A quick caveat follows, that it is only a proposal, and then the turn to opinion.

SOLUTION

The nut graf function: the stance is implied up front and stated outright near the end, so the lede does the news job and a later paragraph does the argument job.

Structure: facts first, then an explanation of how multi-year grants work, so a deep cut halts new awards. A specific program at risk is next, then the case for public funding with a drug-development example and two historical breakthroughs, then private philanthropy with a concession, then cautious optimism. It is a news-then-explainer-then-argument shape.

Prose and flaws: medium-to-long accessible sentences, first-person plural, advocacy diction. The agency name is misstated in the lede, a sentence is a fragment, and another splices a number in the wrong place. The structure carried the piece, but a lede with an error is the costliest place for one. Inference: its mechanism explainer and concrete cases separate it from a version that only says cuts are bad.

CROSSOVER CASE: "BITTERSWEET: THE GRUESOME PRICE FOR WEST AFRICA'S MOST DECADENT EXPORT" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY IN CRITICAL ESSAY, 2026, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

The lede: an opening scene with a named teenage cocoa worker. No explicit thesis appears, so the nut-graf job is done by the scene and sharpened by paragraph five, which states that child labor persists because the market depends on cheap labor and reforms have limited reach.

SOLUTION

Structure: a narrative-then-explainer pattern. Economic context, a recruitment pipeline, corporate pledges and loopholes, the paradox that industry can trace flavor but not labor, reforms and their limits, direct testimony, root cause, and a circular close.

Craft: dense statistics are placed after the human scene, so the numbers have a face. Short fragments land hard, and personified tools in the ending echo the opening image.

Takeaway: scene first, statistics second, a testimony paragraph near the end, and a closing image that returns. In journalism, state the nut graf clearly and early, which this piece delays; that delay is a risk, not a model.

Step-by-Step

- 1 Write the story in one sentence** X is happening, which affects Y, and the question is Z. That is your nut graf in seed form.
- 2 Pick the lede from your best scene or fact** Look through your notes for the single most vivid moment or most surprising fact. Write three versions, summary, scene, and contrast, and choose.
- 3 Place the nut graf** Put it in paragraph two, three, or four. State what, who, why now, and the conflict, in 40 to 60 words.
- 4 Choose a structure** Match the story to a pattern in the table. Sketch sections with one-line labels or subheads.
- 5 Alternate fact, quote, context** Walk through the draft. If three paragraphs in a row are all quotes or all background, rearrange.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

- 6 Write the ending last** End with a forward-looking fact, a returning image, or a quote that opens a question. Do not summarize.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: THE LEDE

Weaker (coach sample): "Technology has changed the way students learn, and many schools are now deciding how to handle phones in class."

SOLUTION

What changed: the sentence could open a thousand stories. No person, no event, no stake.

Stronger (coach sample): "At 8:03 on Monday, 214 phones slid into locked gray pouches at the front door of Lincoln High. By 8:10, a line had formed at the office: students who needed to reach a parent, a pharmacy, a ride."

Why it works: it opens with a specific time, a number, and an image. The reader senses the conflict before it is named. (This scene is an invented sample.)

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: THE NUT GRAF

Weaker (coach sample): "Phones are a big topic. Some people think they should be allowed, and others do not. This story will look at both sides."

SOLUTION

What changed: the paragraph announces a topic and promises balance without naming a question or its stakes.

Stronger (coach sample): "The district says the locked-pouch policy, in place since September, has raised attention in class. Parents of students with medical needs say it has cut off a lifeline, and a board vote on Nov. 14 will decide whether it expands to all middle schools."

Why it works: it states what is happening, who is affected, a news hook (the vote), and the conflict, all in two sentences.

Tier Check

There is no published rubric for journalism. The table is coach's inference from two winning pieces and one crossover essay; the lower tiers are hypotheses.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized	
Lede	Concrete scene, fact, or contrast that dramatizes the issue	Clear summary lede, accurate but familiar	General statement or background opener
Nut graf	Clear, early, names the conflict and stakes	Present but late or vague	Missing
Structure	Chosen on purpose; sections turn on contrasts; paced quotes and facts	Logical but predictable	Pile of quotes or chronological dump
Ending	Earned, forward-looking or echoing; no summary	Competent but flat	Summary or abrupt stop

Common traps

1. A lede that starts with the weather, a definition, or a generality. 2. A nut graf buried past paragraph six. 3. Quote after quote with no context between. 4. An ending that repeats the lede or summarizes.

Coach's Playbook

Does my lede show something concrete? Is my nut graf in the first four paragraphs and does it name the conflict? Do I know my structure? Do facts, quotes, and context alternate? Does my ending look forward or return, rather than summarize? Have I read it aloud?

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

Do This Tonight

Write three ledes for your story in 15 minutes: one summary, one scene, one contrast. Pick the one that tempts a stranger to keep reading, and draft a 50-word nut graf to follow it.

Practice

WORKSHOP Writing the Lede, the Nut Graf, and the Story

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write three different ledes (summary, scene, contrast) for the same story. Circle the strongest and explain why.
2. Rewrite a general opening sentence from a news article so it starts with a specific moment or fact.
3. Draft a nut graf of 40 to 60 words for your story that includes what, who, why now, and the conflict.
4. Take a published feature and label each paragraph: lede, nut graf, quote, context, scene, ending.
5. Sketch two possible structures for the same story and decide which fits better.
6. Edit a paragraph with three quotes in a row so that it alternates fact, quote, and context.
7. Write two possible endings, one that looks ahead and one that returns to the lede. Choose one.
8. Add two subheads to a draft story and rewrite the transitions so each section turns on a contrast.
9. Write a 100-word lede-and-nut-graf opening for a story about your school, without any of the words important or issue.

08.4 Ethics, Editing, and Submission

Trust is the currency of journalism. Learn the fairness and accuracy habits that show up on the page, run a four-stage edit, and check the official submission rules before your regional deadline.

Why This Matters

Journalism lives or dies on trust, and the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards describes the category as fact-based writing on newsworthy topics, meant for publication. Entries run 500 to 3,000 words, and your sources go in the Work Sources field (not counted toward the limit; include links if the work was published). Scholastic's published criteria are originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision. It publishes no journalism rubric and no tier percentages, so what follows about what tends to stand out is coach's inference from the two winning pieces we could read, plus the official rules.

Students lose points on ethics and polish in predictable ways. They quote someone out of context, accuse without asking for a response, leave errors in a lede, or break an entry rule at the last minute. Grades 9 and 10 are generally expected to deliver accurate, fair, clean copy. Grades 11 and 12 are expected to show judgment: whom to name, whom to protect, what to cut, and how to explain a hard choice. All work must be your own idea and creation, and you must follow the participation terms.

Core Ideas

Ethics in journalism comes down to a few habits: tell the truth, verify before you publish, be fair to the people in the story, minimize harm, and be open about how you got the story. These are not rules a judge checks off; they show up in the work itself, in attributed claims, offered responses, and corrected errors.

The ethical checklist

Accuracy: every fact verified against an original. Fairness: people criticized get a chance to respond, and their answer (or refusal) is reported. Context: quotes are not trimmed to change their meaning. Minimizing harm: ask if naming a minor or a vulnerable person is necessary. Transparency: sources named in the piece or in Work Sources; claims labeled as accounts when you cannot verify them.

Submission rules that matter for journalists

Put no identifying information, including your name, anywhere in the manuscript, so remove the byline. Type or paste directly into the Portal text box; PDFs and hyperlinks cannot be reviewed by judges, and jurors see roughly what appears in the box, including line breaks. Each work goes in one category only. List all influences and collaborators in Work Sources. Final work must be your own; AI may be used for brainstorming, outlining, research, and built-in features of standard software, but the final work cannot be AI-generated and use must be disclosed. You may edit until your regional deadline.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

A note on names. The participation terms in our notes say to use fictional names for real people in nonfiction, with public and historical figures exempt. Journalism normally names its sources. Our notes do not show a journalism-specific exception, so before you submit, ask your regional affiliate how they want sources handled, and consider whether a source is a public figure. Do not guess, and do not invent facts to solve the problem.

Edit stage	What you check	Tool
Structure edit	Does the nut graf lead? Is the order logical? What can be cut?	Reverse outline
Accuracy edit	Names, titles, numbers, dates, quotes against originals	Fact-check log
Line edit	Plain verbs, short sentences, attribution with said	Read aloud
Copy edit	Spelling, grammar, style consistency, formatting	Fresh eyes, a second reader
Rules check	Word range, no identifying information, sources listed, category, pasted text	Submission checklist

Timeline for the 2027 cycle, per official calendar notes: entries opened October 1, 2026; regional deadlines begin December 1, 2026 and vary, some as late as January 4, 2027; regional announcements are January 27, 2027; the national announcement is March 31, 2027. The fee is 15 dollars per individual entry, with a fee waiver on self-certified need. Check your own region's date and rules.

Case Studies

Our research notes cover two journalism winners (one partly read) and one crossover essay. Analyses come from second-hand extractions, so we paraphrase. Tier contrasts are inference.

CASE STUDY 1: "ONLINE SAFETY, OR OVERPROTECTION?" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY AND NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, 2016; THREESIXTY JOURNALISM, JUNE 2015 ISSUE) - PARTIAL READ

The ethical craft: when the protesting student said the school sanctioned him, the reporter noted that it was his account and that the district cited privacy law as the reason for not commenting. The claim was neither suppressed nor stated as fact.

SOLUTION

Fairness: four sources hold different stakes, so the official's side is in the story in the official's own voice. The reporter stays invisible and the quotes carry the color.

The gaps: the legal explanation rests on the subject's reading and a funding summary, with no court case, legal expert, or data on how much is blocked. A careful editor would ask for one of those. We did not read the ending.

Takeaway: label contested claims as accounts, report the refusal to comment, and give each side its strongest voice. Inference: lower-tier work would likely state the student's claim as fact or leave the district out.

CASE STUDY 2: "TRUMP'S PROPOSED BUDGET CUTS THROW THE FUTURE OF RESEARCH INTO QUESTION" (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL, 2018 AWARDS; HARKER AQUILA) - FULL READ

The editing lesson: a piece can place nationally and still contain errors. The agency name is misstated in the lede, one sentence is a fragment, another splices a number into the wrong place, and some numbers have no link. We also note that our match to the award was made by exact title only, and the published web version may differ from the version submitted.

SOLUTION

Fairness and sourcing: the piece briefly concedes that a proposal is not law and that private money can chase trends, but it does not seriously engage the efficiency and priority arguments of the other side, and it names no experts.

Category lesson: the school paper filed it under Opinion. Since the category is described as fact-based writing, an opinion-leaning piece is a risk. Reporting-heavy work is the safer lane.

Takeaway: copy-edit the lede last and hardest. Verify the one number everyone will read first. Inference: a version with an expert quote and verified figures would have been a stronger entry.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

CROSSOVER CASE: "BITTERSWEET: THE GRUESOME PRICE FOR WEST AFRICA'S MOST DECADENT EXPORT" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY IN CRITICAL ESSAY, 2026, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

The ethical craft: the piece puts a named teenage worker and direct testimony at the center. That makes the stakes real, but it raises the harm question, since naming a minor in a vulnerable situation needs a reason, consent, and thought about consequences.

SOLUTION

Editing lessons: an unexplained citation label, heavy reliance on a single investigation, inconsistent place names, and typos. The blame shifts from corporations to consumers without reconciling them, which a fairness edit would flag.

Takeaway: testimony gives power to a story and responsibility to the writer. Give every institution a chance to respond, use two independent sources for key claims, and make the copy clean enough that errors don't distract. Check your region's guidance on naming people.

Step-by-Step

- 1 **Do a structure edit** Read your draft cold. Does the nut graf lead? Cut anything that doesn't serve the conflict.
- 2 **Do a fairness pass** List everyone criticized or described negatively. Note whether you contacted them and reported the response.
- 3 **Do an accuracy pass** Verify every name, title, number, date, and quote against an original. Mark each verified item in a log.
- 4 **Do a line edit** Replace passive constructions with active verbs, cut adverbs, use said, and shorten sentences.
- 5 **Complete your Work Sources list** List every person interviewed, every document, and every influence, with links if the work was published.
- 6 **Run the submission checklist** 500 to 3,000 words. No name or byline. One category. Pasted as text. Deadline confirmed with your region. Fee or waiver handled. Final answer: yours.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: FAIRNESS

Weaker (coach sample): "The principal has ignored parents for months and refuses to explain the new pouch policy."

SOLUTION

What changed: the sentence makes an accusation as fact, with no evidence of an attempt to reach the principal and no response from the school.

Stronger (coach sample): "Three parents told the Gazette they emailed the principal about the pouch policy in September and had received no reply by Oct. 20. Principal Reyes, reached by phone Monday, said she had answered by letter on Oct. 3 and would resend it."

Why it works: the claim is attributed to parents, dated, and checked with the person accused, whose response is reported. (Names and dates are invented sample details.)

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: THE LINE EDIT

Weaker (coach sample): "It was determined by the committee that a decision would be made at a later time regarding the budget, which was very controversial."

SOLUTION

What changed: passive voice hides who acted, later time is vague, and controversial is an opinion word.

Stronger (coach sample): "The finance committee delayed its vote on the budget until Nov. 14. Two members said they wanted more data on arts spending before deciding."

Why it works: active verbs, a specific date, a reason attributed to named roles, and no editorial adjectives. It is shorter and clearer.

Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no rubric. The table is coach's inference from two winning pieces and one crossover essay; lower tiers are hypotheses.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized	
Ethics	Fair to every party; contested claims labeled; harm considered	Generally fair; some one-sidedness	Accusations without response; unlabeled claims
Accuracy	Facts verified; errors rare and small	A few errors	Frequent errors, especially names and numbers
Editing	Tight, active, plain; the story is cut to its best form	Clear but wordy	Draft quality; repetition and clutter
Rule compliance	All rules followed; sources listed; no identifying information	Minor slips	Missing sources or identifiers

Common traps

1. Leaving your name or byline in the text. 2. Submitting a PDF, or counting on hyperlinks that judges cannot click. 3. Publishing an accusation without contacting the accused. 4. Trusting your memory for names, titles, and numbers.

Coach's Playbook

Structure edit, fairness pass, accuracy log, line edit, copy edit, rules check, in that order. Get one reader who knows nothing about the story. Confirm your regional deadline and how to handle names. Make sure the final work is your own and any permitted AI use is disclosed.

Do This Tonight

Spend 15 minutes on the fact-check log. Highlight every name, title, number, date, and quote in your draft. Beside each, write where you verified it. Anything blank is tomorrow's first task.

Practice

WORKSHOP Ethics, Editing, and Submission

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Make a fairness list for a draft story: everyone criticized, whether you contacted them, and what they said.
2. Fact-check one page of your draft and record each name, title, number, date, and quote with its verification.
3. Rewrite a sentence with a passive verb and a vague time so that it is active and exact.
4. Find three opinion words (controversial, shocking, outrageous) in a draft and replace each with a fact.
5. Write a paragraph reporting that a person declined to comment, stating how and when you tried to reach them.
6. Decide whether to name a minor in a story. Write a three-sentence justification and one alternative.
7. Write a Work Sources list for your story, including interviews, documents, and any influences.
8. Run the submission checklist on a draft: word count, byline, category, pasted text, deadline, fee or waiver, ownership.
9. Ask a friend to read your story cold and tell you what they think it is about. Write what that reveals.

08.5 Bonus Lab: Annotated Feature Clinic

Study a complete original feature story in four annotated parts, then run six revision passes on your own draft. The story is a coach's sample, not a Scholastic winner.

Why This Matters

Reading about reporting only gets you so far. This lab puts a complete feature story on the table and takes it apart, so you can see how development, organization, syntax, diction and devices work together in one piece of fact-based writing. The story below is **Coach's sample (original, not a Scholastic winner)**. The school, the people and the quotes are invented for teaching. In your own entry every name, number and quotation must come from real reporting, and the work must be your own idea and creation.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?
Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

Scholastic names originality, technical skill and the emergence of a personal voice or vision as its criteria and publishes no journalism rubric, so the notes after each part are coach's inference, not a judge's statement. Grades 9 and 10 should aim for the clean structure you see here. Grades 11 and 12 should push further on conflict, on sources with competing stakes, and on restraint in the prose.

Annotated Draft Clinic: The Sample Feature

The piece is a feature of roughly 600 words, shown in four parts. Read each part first, then read the analysis.

PART 1: THE SCENE LEDE AND NUT GRAF (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

HEADLINE: The Library That Closes at 3:15

At 3:14 on a Tuesday, Marisol Vega is pulling a chemistry textbook out of her backpack when the librarian flicks the lights twice. The signal is gentle and final. Twenty-two students look up, then start zipping bags.

Since September, Lakeview High's library has shut at 3:15 instead of 5:00, a change the district says saves money. For the roughly 140 students who rode the late bus to stay after school last year, it has meant a quiet room that no longer exists. The question facing the school board on November 12 is whether that trade was worth it.

SOLUTION

Development: the story opens on one person doing one ordinary thing, which makes the policy feel like a human event before any number appears. The nut graf (the last paragraph here) then states the news, the change, who it affects, and the decision date. A reader knows within 90 words why the story exists and why now.

Organization and syntax: the lede uses a short, final sentence ('gentle and final' carries the mood) after a longer one. The nut graf is plain and front-loaded: subject, verb, fact. Note that every claim in it is attributable, so in a real story you would name the document or official behind 'saves money' and 'roughly 140'. Diction: 'flicks' and 'zipping' are concrete verbs from observation, not adjectives from opinion. Device: scene first, thesis second.

PART 2: CONFLICT AND SOURCES WITH DIFFERENT STAKES (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

District business manager Dale Okafor says the cut trims about 11,000 dollars a year from the building budget, money that otherwise comes from a tutoring line. 'We had to choose which hour to lose,' he said. 'No option was free.'

Librarian Ruth Amato disagrees about what was lost. Her sign-in sheets, which she shared, show the room averaged 58 students between 3:15 and 5:00 last spring. 'It was the only place some of them could do homework without a sibling asking for the laptop,' she said.

The board has not published a usage study of its own. A district spokesperson said one is not planned.

SOLUTION

Development: the story moves from scene to the disagreement that makes it news. Two sources hold different stakes, one money and one use, and neither is made the villain. Each claim carries a source: an official, a document the reporter was shown, and an explicit note about what has not been published. That last line is a strong reporting habit, because it tells the reader what is unknown instead of hiding the gap.

Syntax and diction: 'said' is used every time, which keeps your hand out of the quotes. Numbers are rounded honestly ('about', 'averaged') and tied to a source. The final two-sentence paragraph is flat on purpose. Devices: contrast between a budget number and a head count lets the reader weigh the trade without the writer saying which is right.

PART 3: THE HUMAN COST, SHOWN NOT TOLD (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

Marisol lives 40 minutes away, and the late bus leaves at 5:20. Her options now are a hallway bench or a ride she often cannot get. 'I used to finish everything before dinner,' she said. 'Now I start at nine.'

Her chemistry grade went from an A-minus in the spring to a B-plus on her latest progress report, she said, though she is careful not to blame the schedule alone. Her teacher declined to comment on individual grades.

SOLUTION

Development: one student stands in for the 140, which is the feature writer's central trade: depth of one person for breadth of many. The paragraph is honest about its limits. The reporter lets Marisol hedge ('not to blame the schedule alone') and notes the teacher's refusal rather than inventing a confirmation.

Organization and syntax: concrete logistics (40 minutes, 5:20, nine) do the emotional work. Short quotes carry feeling; the reporter's sentences carry fact. Diction: no 'heartbreaking' or 'unfortunately'. Devices: the repeated time marks echo the opening scene, quietly tightening the structure.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

PART 4: THE KICKER (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

The board meets November 12 at 6:30 p.m. in the district office. Amato says she plans to bring the sign-in sheets. Okafor says the board can restore the hours if it finds the money elsewhere.

At 3:14 the next day, the lights flicked twice again. This time, Marisol was already standing.

SOLUTION

Development: the ending gives the reader the next step (date, time, place) and then returns to the opening image with a small change. That is a circular kicker, a device where the last line echoes the first. Note the risk: it works only because the facts above it are solid. A neat ending cannot rescue a thin story.

Syntax: the final sentence is short and ends on a stressed word. Organization overall: scene, nut graf, conflict, human cost, next step, echo. Each part answers the question the previous part raised. Voice: restrained, specific and fair to both sides.

Revision Pass Plan

Do these passes in order, one purpose at a time. Combining them is how errors survive.

- 1 Pass 1: Verify** Highlight every fact, number, name and quotation. Beside each, write the source and how you confirmed it. Anything you cannot trace gets cut or re-reported.
- 2 Pass 2: Structure** Write one line per paragraph stating its job. Move or cut any paragraph whose job repeats another's. Check that the news appears within the first 100 words.
- 3 Pass 3: Sources and balance** Count voices. Does each side of the conflict speak in its own words? Is each person's stake clear? Add a call or an interview if one side is only described.
- 4 Pass 4: Sentences** Cut adverbs and opinion adjectives. Replace 'is' sentences with concrete action. Read aloud and vary length so no three sentences in a row match.
- 5 Pass 5: Lede and kicker** Rewrite the first and last paragraphs three ways each. Choose the version that is most specific and least cute.
- 6 Pass 6: Cleanup** Check spelling of every name, consistent tense, attribution verbs, and the word count against the 500 to 3,000 range. Remove your name from the manuscript and list sources in the Work Sources field.

Feature Story Checklist

The news and its date appear in the first 100 words.

Every fact, number and quote traces to a named source, document or your own observation.

At least two sources hold different stakes, and each speaks in their own words.

The story says plainly what is unknown or unpublished.

One person or scene gives the story a human face without standing in for proof.

Quotes are short and carry feeling; your sentences carry fact.

The ending gives a next step or an earned echo, not a moral.

No identifying information about you in the manuscript.

Common traps

Inventing quotes from this sample for your own work. Closing with a lesson ('in the end, we all...'). Letting the human-interest scene replace the evidence. Citing 'many students' or 'experts' with no names or numbers.

Do This Tonight

Pick a local decision happening within the next month. In 15 minutes, list the three people it affects, one document that would prove the facts, and one question each side would answer differently. Then write a 60-word nut graf from the list.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

Practice

WORKSHOP Bonus Lab: Annotated Feature Clinic

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Choose one paragraph of the sample and rewrite it as a flat summary with no scene. Then explain what the reader loses.
2. Write a 40-word scene lede about a real place near you where a policy is felt. Use only things you could observe.
3. Draft a nut graf for a local story in 60 words or fewer. Include the change, who it affects and why now.
4. List five claims from Part 2 of the sample and say what real-world document or interview would verify each.
5. Write two sentences that tell the reader what is unknown or unpublished about a topic you are reporting.
6. Take a three-sentence quote from any interview you have done, or invent a practice one, and cut it to eight words or fewer without changing its meaning.
7. Write a circular kicker for your own story. Then write a second ending that gives only the next step. Choose one and defend it.
8. Run Pass 1 of the Revision Pass Plan on a draft of your own and bring back a table of claims and sources.

Notes Coaching Notes and Model Responses

What a strong response to each assignment looks like, and why. Compare after you draft, not before.

08.1 What Counts as Journalism and What Judges Want

WORKSHOP · WHAT COUNTS AS JOURNALISM AND WHAT JUDGES WANT

1. Coaching note: stories with a pending decision (a vote, a policy start date, a closing) score high on timeliness. Hold on to the ones that score high on conflict and human interest.
2. Model: 'The school board says the new bus routes save money; parents on the east side say their kids will wait in the dark; the question is who bears the cost.' Notice that each side has a source behind it.
3. Model: 'After the counseling center lost two staff, the wait for an appointment rose from a week to a month. Who decided, and what happens to students in the gap?' It names a change, a decision, and a stake.
4. Coaching note: the complicating source is the one who disagrees with your emerging story. If you can't find one, you may not have finished reporting.
5. Model: Affected - a student; Decision-maker - the principal; Expert - a researcher; Complicator - a teacher who supports the policy for a different reason.
6. Coaching note: if your strength is reporting and your piece has no thesis, choose Journalism. If your strength is an arguable claim and close reading, choose Critical Essay. You can't enter the same work twice.
7. Model: school board minutes, state report cards, budget documents, a district handbook, or a public data portal. Note whether each is public and what you'd request.
8. Model: 'The first text came at 7:42 a.m.: the bus was late again. By 8:10, twelve students at the corner of Elm and 4th were still waiting.' Specifics replace the general claim.
9. Coaching note: opinion creeps in through adjectives and verbs (slammed, claimed, refused). Use said and attribute judgments to sources.

08.2 Reporting, Sources, and Fact-Checking

WORKSHOP · REPORTING, SOURCES, AND FACT-CHECKING

1. Coaching note: choose people with different stakes, not different job titles. If all four would say the same thing, replace one.
2. Model open question: 'Walk me through the morning it happened.' Model precise question: 'How do you spell your name and what is your exact title?' The one you fear is often the one that produces the story.
3. Coaching note: the best follow-ups begin with why, how, or what happened next. Write it down; it shows you were listening.
4. Model rewrite: 'Many teens are failing' becomes 'Twenty-one percent of sophomores failed at least one course last semester, according to the district's report to the school board.'
5. Model: 'Hello, I am a student reporter writing about the new bus routes. Could I have 15 minutes this week to ask how the routes were chosen?' Short, clear, respectful. Keep your own name out of the final entry text, as the rules require.
6. Model: 'The district's technology director did not respond to two requests for comment by Friday.' State the efforts you made. Give people a chance.
7. Coaching note: for each item, name the original. A date is verified by the minutes, not by a news story about the minutes.
8. Model: 'The June minutes show the board voted to cut the arts line. They list no reason beyond a budget shortfall.' Summarize, don't interpret.
9. Model: Interview with district technology director, March 3, in person. Board minutes, March 12, district website. Annual survey of students, spring, school office. Consistent formats matter more than which style.

08.3 Writing the Lede, the Nut Graf, and the Story

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →

WORKSHOP · WRITING THE LEDE, THE NUT GRAF, AND THE STORY

1. Coaching note: the best one makes a stranger need to know what happens next. A scene lede usually wins for features; a summary lede wins when the news is the draw.
2. Model: change 'Many schools struggle with budgets' to 'On Tuesday, the library at Eastside High turned off its lights at noon to save about 40 dollars a day.' The invented sample shows how a specific moment carries a general fact.
3. Model: 'The school board will vote Nov. 14 on whether to expand locked phone pouches to all middle schools, a move that parents of students with medical needs say would cut off a lifeline and administrators say would raise attention.' It names all four parts.
4. Coaching note: you'll often see the nut graf in paragraph three or four, preceded by an anecdote. Notice how many paragraphs pass before the reader learns why the story exists.
5. Model: Explainer - question, mechanism, examples, implications. Issue narrative - scene, nut graf, contrast sections. Choose based on whether the story's draw is people or process.
6. Model: put the fact first, then the quote that reacts to it, then one sentence of context. Avoid quotes that only repeat what you just said.
7. Model forward: 'The board will vote on Nov. 14.' Model return: 'Back at the front door, the pouches were locked again at 8:03.' Choose the one that leaves a question open.
8. Coaching note: subheads should name what the section does, not what it is about. A transition that begins with but or meanwhile signals a turn.
9. Model: 'Every morning at 8:03, Lincoln High locks away 214 phones. Parents of students with medical needs call it a lifeline cut. The district calls it a classroom reset. A board vote on Nov. 14 will decide which view wins.' Specific and conflict-driven.

08.4 Ethics, Editing, and Submission**WORKSHOP · ETHICS, EDITING, AND SUBMISSION**

1. Coaching note: a fairness list often reveals a person who appears as a villain but was never called. Call them before you publish.
2. Model log: 'Linda Park, board member - confirmed spelling and title on the district website, Nov. 3.' A log makes the unverified items visible.
3. Model: 'It was decided at a meeting last week' becomes 'The board voted 5-2 on March 12.' Specific, active, and checkable.
4. Model: replace 'a controversial policy' with 'a policy that drew 40 public comments, 31 opposed.' Facts let readers judge.
5. Model: 'The district's technology director did not respond to emails sent Oct. 6 and Oct. 9 or to a voicemail left Oct. 10.' It shows effort and fairness.
6. Model: 'I will use a first name only, with the parent's permission, because the story does not depend on the full name.' Alternative: describe him as a ninth-grader. Always check your region's guidance too.
7. Model: list each interviewee with date and method, each document with title and date, and any link if published. A list that matches what you used lets a reader trust the piece.
8. Coaching note: the usual misses are the byline left in the file, a PDF instead of pasted text, and an unconfirmed regional deadline. Fix them now.
9. Coaching note: if the reader's summary differs from your intent, the nut graf is not doing its job. Revise it before you polish anything else.

08.5 Bonus Lab: Annotated Feature Clinic**WORKSHOP · BONUS LAB: ANNOTATED FEATURE CLINIC**

1. A good rewrite will be shorter and sound like a press release. You lose the person, the stakes and the reason to keep reading. Name those three losses specifically.
2. A model: 'The gym floor still has painted lines from a sport the school no longer plays. At 7 a.m., a custodian sweeps around them.' Check that every detail is observed, not imagined.
3. A model: 'Starting October 1, the city will close the Eastside pool on weekends, affecting about 300 weekly swimmers, the council voted Tuesday.' If yours lacks a date, a number or a decision-maker, add one.
4. Examples: the savings figure needs a budget document; the 58-student average needs the sign-in sheets; the unpublished study needs a records request or an official statement. Expect to name a person or file for each.
5. A model: 'The district has not released attendance data for the library. A spokesperson said no study is planned.' Plain, sourced, and without accusation.
6. The goal is to cut words, not truth. A model cut: 'We had to choose which hour to lose.' If you cannot cut without distortion, use a paraphrase instead and attribute it.
7. Either can work. The echo is stronger when the opening image carries meaning. The next-step ending is safer and more useful. Explain which better serves your reader.
8. Expect surprises: a number you cannot source, a quote you cannot confirm. Fix them by re-interviewing, finding the document, or cutting. That discovery is the point of the pass.

Want a Scholastic plan built around **your** writer?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →