

ALL-COLORADO

NEWS PUBLICATION CRITIQUE

News Publication _____

School Name: _____

School Address: _____

City & Zip Code: _____

Adviser: _____

Adviser Email: _____

Actual Student Enrollment: _____ Grades in School: _____

Publication's URL (for judging news coverage): _____

Judge: _____

- This guide is designed to be an educational device to improve the quality of your news publication. This judging guide is now in its third generation, and was originally based on the Kansas Scholastic Press Association guide.
- This guide is intended to point out positive aspects of your publication as well as to point out possible deficiencies.
- Judging comments are designed as suggestions for improvement. Keep in mind that these comments represent just one individual's opinion.
- Comments should represent current trends in newspaper, magazine, or news magazine publishing.

- Judge's comments may not apply to all school situations. Please understand that it would be impossible for your judge to be aware of the specifics of each school.
- Each of the five sections contained in this guide book has an overall evaluation where the judge must rate the section according to an overall set of criteria. The final ranking considers all aspects of a news publication.
- All five sections focus on a holistic narrative critique, after a listing of best practices, with opportunities for judges to specifically note both positives and suggestions for improvement.

Colorado Student Media Association

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Judge: attach a copy of this critique and email to:
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coverage evaluation criteria

If you are simply conducting a self-assessment using this critique document, please pay particular attention to the following questions. If your answer is **YES, the vast majority of the time**, then our advice is to keep doing that. If the answer is **YES, sometimes**, consider whether it is possible to be more consistent doing something you already value. If the answer is **NO or I don't understand**, we hope you will do some research, check out some other publications and otherwise educate yourself to move your news publication closer to **YES, always**.

If you are judging, these questions are meant to help you assess how this news publication is doing in its coverage. Some publications will be quite strong in coverage but will appreciate not only a pat on the back but any tips you can share to improve coverage even more. For publications that are clearly in transition or are struggling to get their coverage where it should be, please provide focused, specific advice. Please identify issues and page numbers clearly when you reference particular coverage from the past school year.

This critique is designed to be read on the computer screen, rather than printed, so the more narrative you can provide, the more specific ideas you can share, the better the students and advisers will be served.

Questions about coverage standards

- No matter the frequency, does this news publication capture life at this school? Do you feel a reader gets an “insider’s perspective” that no other publication could provide?
- Is most coverage of news and events in the school community focused on people involved and on what readers need to know NOW and in the FUTURE, as opposed to summarizing old news?
- Does news-feature coverage exhibit a wide variety of topics of interest to readers?
- Does the publication cover timely issues of interest to student readers, finding ways to localize national trend coverage?
- Does the newspaper exhibit a blend of feature/lifestyle and news coverage?
- Is feature/lifestyle coverage varied to include profiles as well as straight feature coverage?
- Are all issues covered from a student perspective?
- Do reporters place an emphasis on the “why” and the “how” of the story, and is this reader service clear in your coverage?
- Are there attempts to synthesize information, providing insights and perspective, beyond collecting facts and quotes?
- Does sports coverage place a premium on coming athletic events with an emphasis on feature angles?
- Do sports writers emphasize local sports scene by minimizing coverage of college and professional athletics?
- Is regular coverage of academics and co-curricular clubs and organizations included?
- Does coverage focus on the school community, but also demonstrate student connections to a wider world?
- Is there evidence that, given space restrictions, editors have exercised sound judgment in allocating space among all coverage areas?

coverage overall evaluation

All-Colorado: Coverage is complete and thorough and helps to tell the story of the school year in both words and visuals. The staff indicates an obvious awareness of what makes news and presents that information in each issue to its readers.

Award of Commendation: Coverage is generally complete and adequately serves the readership. The staff exhibits an awareness of unique coverage concepts and is generally capable of incorporating these concepts from one edition to the next.

Award of Merit: Coverage tends to be a bit shallow and lacks that necessary creative spark to entice the readership. The staff needs to place more emphasis on news events with a featurized angle to enhance coverage.

Judge's narrative comments on coverage (this narrative box can expand – please provide publication staffs with specific and clear advice, warnings, praise, questions, options, and more). Feel free to reference specific standards listed among the questions on the previous page.

writing evaluation criteria

If you are judging, we know there is not time to read everything, but please sample all the types of writing found in this news publication. Opinion writing will be critiqued in another portion of this document. Please look for improvement over the school year before your final remarks.

Questions about writing standards

- Is writing typically in third person, active voice, precise and concise? If first or second person is used, does that point of view pair with the content appropriately?
 - Do staff writers avoid editorializing in the news columns?
 - Are quotes the mainstay of most stories, allowing a variety of sources to have input in telling the story?
 - Do students avoid including quotes that state obvious facts? Are quotes used more to reveal personality than to simply describe?
 - Are synonyms for “said” as attribution avoided?
 - Does the staff emphasize leads that grab reader attention quickly?
 - Do writers generally avoid the use of quote leads? Do writers generally avoid “when” and “where” leads? Do writers use question leads with sophisticated restraint? (Some editors say you get one question lead per lifetime, so choose wisely.)
 - Are paragraphs generally limited to 35 words maximum and allow only one quote per paragraph?
 - Does writing attempt to show rather than tell?
 - Do stories follow a logical sequence?
 - Are features written in such a way as to draw the human interest out for the reader?
 - Does the staff avoid an overuse of the school name and mascot in reporting?
 - Do staff writers make effective use of narration when narration is called for in the story?
 - Do sports stories place an emphasis on upcoming sporting events or taking readers behind the scenes (to practices and off-the-field events)?
 - Do sports story leads avoid starting with the name of the sport in favor of an emphasis on people?
- ### Headlines & Cutlines
- Do headlines effective in encouraging readers to want more information?
 - Are headlines normally written in present tense?
 - Do writers avoid becoming “cheerleaders” for their school in heads and cutlines/captions?
 - Do writers avoid passive verbs, split phrases, and split modifiers in headlines?
 - Do headlines create a mood and help inform the reader?
 - Do staff writers avoid the use overuse of any one stylistic device in headlines, e.g puns, inside jokes, dependence on school mascots, etc.?
 - Do cutlines/captions answer reader questions of who, what, when, where, why and how?
 - Are all cutlines/captions written in present tense with a possible switch to past tense in secondary (following) sentences?
- ### Conventions
- Have convention errors been kept to a minimum, demonstrating effective proofreading, use of spell check, and mastery of punctuation?
 - Has the publication clearly established a mix of professional style (we recommend AP) along with local style rules to maintain some consistency in the voice of the paper?

writing overall evaluation

All-Colorado: Writing shows evidence of strong reportorial skills. Staff reporters understand the news concept and utilize quotes effectively. Writing focuses on the story concept and allows sources to tell their own stories. Writing is objective, varied and focused.

Award of Commendation: Reporting is generally strong but lacks some essential aspects of strong story telling. Writing is generally solid but lacks that special spark that distinguishes quality writing from good writing. Leads tend to be rather mundane.

Award of Merit: Writing lacks consistency and reporters fail to incorporate a wide variety of source quotes to strengthen their stories. Staff would do well to stress sources and lead writing that draws the reader into the heart of the story.

Judge's narrative comments on writing (this narrative box can expand – please provide publication staffs with specific and clear advice, warnings, praise, questions, options, and more). Feel free to reference specific standards listed among the questions on the previous page.

design evaluation criteria

If you are judging, please distinguish between desktop publishing errors/decisions, page architecture, and art choices. This section focuses on shapes on the page and typography. Quality of visuals (photographs, illustrations, etc.) is covered in another section of this document.

Questions about design standards

- Does the publication's personality match its design?
- Do internal and external margins help readers distinguish different coverage areas and enhance readability?
- Is the publication departmentalized as a reader service? Is it easy to navigate the publication?
- Are folios incorporated into the design of the newspaper and do they include the name of the news publication, the page number and the date?
- Is news judgment evident in the display of major stories, usually given dominant positions in the flow of the design?
- Do staff designers incorporate art and photos into related stories and are they positioned for reader convenience?
- Has column width variety been used with sophisticated restraint? In other words, is a grid system being used, or at least reader-friendly columns?
- Are short-item articles packaged into single, rectangular units?
- Have staff designers treated facing pages (DPS) as a single optical area and maintained balance? Is there art that anchors such large coverage areas?
- Does the front page design reflect the personality of the new publication, whether treated as a news magazine or newspaper?
- Has the designer incorporated a dominant element, or center of visual interest, for most pages/spreads?
- Has balance been struck between horizontal and vertical placement of elements?
- Is the nameplate clean and sophisticated, emphasizing the name of the publication rather than the school name or mascot?
- Does the nameplate include the school, city, state, zip, date of publication, issue number and volume number?
- If teasers and other graphic elements are included in the nameplate, do they complement rather than detract from the nameplate's appearance?
- Is the typography clean and readable and does it blend to create a total design package? Have designers kept to a small number of font families to enhance consistency?
- Are varying headline weights used effectively?
- Is there some consistency used in display elements such as nameplate, folios, masthead/staff box and standing heads to create a unified appearance?
- Are stories and related design elements (photos, artwork, type, infographic) packaged to provide readers with a variety of ways into the coverage?
- Is there some planned space separating text/content from the edges of boxes or screened boxes (keeping elements from running together)?
- Does the design of the news publication reflect choices that help readers navigate the news and the publication? Is information presented in varying forms?
- If coverage demands lengthier text, have subheads been used to divide gray text into reader-friendly "chunks"?
- Are alternatives to text (sidebars, infographics) designed to complement other content, with a consistent design philosophy evident?

design overall evaluation

All-Colorado: Design shows staff understanding of visual communication. Designers effectively present information with graphic emphasis to enhance the story and to draw the reader to the page. Design is clean, clear, and appealing.

Award of Commendation: Design is clean and appropriate to providing a personality to the paper. Design has some problems but these problems do not detract from overall reader communication. Design is generally clean and effective for reader appreciation.

Award of Merit: Staff gives evidence of some serious design flaws where graphics tend to become self-serving and designs lack dominance and a sense of creativity. Designs tend to repeat themselves with little attention paid to reader needs for creativity.

Judge's narrative comments on design (this narrative box can expand – please provide publication staffs with specific and clear advice, warnings, praise, questions, options, and more). Feel free to reference specific standards listed among the questions on the previous page.

visuals evaluation criteria

If you are judging, it is difficult to separate design (how elements are arranged on the page, in short) from visuals (usually photographs and other art). We have found that sometimes a publication can be poorly designed yet have quite impressive visuals (and vice versa). Of course, our vision is that both design and visuals are terrific. We are interested in challenging students to produce high-quality visuals, particularly since even basic smart phones boast quite fine cameras. We also recognize that there are many occasions when photo equipment will make a huge difference in success. Sports photos, in particular, are going to be limited when staffs do not have sophisticated lenses. Not every staff will have sufficient financial resources, so we appreciate any ideas you can share as to how to produce great visuals under tough circumstances.

We have also included a couple questions in this section regarding copyright issues. We have found that misappropriating photos and art from the Web is the single most common problem we see among student journalists. Even one instance of misuse of a copyrighted image should be enough to take a news publication out of All-Colorado consideration for this section.

Questions about visual standards

- Are photos carefully selected for maximum reader interest and reproduction quality?
- Are photos cropped to the center of interest / rule of thirds?
- Has staff avoided the use of posed photos as well as photo clichés (people shaking hands, an administrator on the phone, teachers at a desk, etc.)?
- Is the size of the photo relevant to the news value and to the technical quality?
- Has attention been given to framing, contrast and focus?
- Are most photographs taken by members of the staff, and are photo credits included to make this clear?
- If any photographs taken by professional photojournalists are used, has proper permission to reprint been obtained (“photo courtesy of...” is not enough – legal permissions must be obtained and those permissions must be included in the cutlines/captions)?
- If any material from social media is used, have proper permissions been obtained?
- Are special effects and graphic manipulations of photos used sparingly? Is type rarely placed over photographs?
- Have graphics and illustrations been well planned and incorporated to enhance communication?
- Is hand-drawn art, if present, sophisticated, with evidence of accepted illustration practices?
- Has the staff avoided sacrificing content for the sake of graphics?
- Are borders, reverses and screens used with restraint and effectively?
- Has color, if available, been used with sophisticated restraint?
- Has the staff avoided: irregularly shaped blocks of copy, stretched type, excessive underlining, unequal spacing, and exaggerated leading, tabs and indents?
- Do designers use artwork as part of a story package rather than as an element to merely fill space?
- Has staff included the use of typographical effects such as copy starters, pulled quotes and informational boxes for reader appeal?

visuals overall evaluation

All-Colorado: This news publication understands the need for readability and provides for such throughout. Visuals are intended to complement content and to enhance the overall appearance of the design. Photographs and other art are consistently excellent.

Award of Commendation: Staff does an adequate job in providing visuals that enhance the publication's content. Visuals are utilized within the design framework but lack a necessary spark. Photographs and other art show promise, but lack some consistency of quality and storytelling.

Award of Merit: Staff needs to place greater emphasis on this area of journalism. Little attention is given to reader needs for consuming the publication. Photographers may need to spend more time on assignments, for instance, so designers have a wider range of choices.

Judge's narrative comments on visuals (this narrative box can expand – please provide publication staffs with specific and clear advice, warnings, praise, questions, options, and more). Feel free to reference specific standards listed among the questions on the previous page.

leadership evaluation criteria

If you are judging, if this news publication does not include any staff editorials, it cannot earn an All-Colorado rating for this section. We accept that leadership comes in many forms, and that a compelling column may sway a community's views, but one of the few things that distinguishes a news publication from other forms of student media is the staff editorial. That voice of the publication is a value we cannot compromise on. We also value a diversity of student voices, of course, and we hope you will comment generously on columnists, cartoonists, etc. We have included entertainment reviews (and other coverage) in this section, assuming reviews are a valuable means of helping readers make choices.

Questions about leadership standards

- Have opinion pages been created that indicate a strong editorial voice for the publication?
- Do the editorial pages demonstrate breadth of coverage through strong staff editorials, columns, comment, cartoons and letters?
- Do most issues of the news publication contain at least one unsigned staff editorial, one that represents the publication's views on an issue of interest to the community?
- Are staff editorials generally written in third person or first person plural (as the position of the newspaper, not a specific person)?
- Have staff editorials avoided trite and trivial topics such as school spirit and senioritis?
- Whenever possible, have staff editorials been based on a news story covered elsewhere?
- Do staff editorials stimulate readers to take action, or at least change views?
- Is the lead staff editorial clearly distinguished by position and typography?
- Does the editorial staff exhibit an awareness that staff editorials may attack, defend, praise, endorse, instigate, advocate, entertain or predict?
- Have a variety of staff editorials been included in the publication over the year (e.g. criticism, problem solution, praise, etc.)?
- Do staff editorials show evidence of research?
- Are staff editorials logical, rational and mature?
- Do editorials target a specific audience, normally students?
- Has the staff included opinion columns, guest columns, opinion photography/art, ombudsman columns, letters to the editor and/or reader forums when appropriate?
- Do columns or commentaries exhibit a variety of writing techniques and a variety of tones?
- Does coverage on opinion pages provide a full range of student voices?
- Are editorial cartoons (if used) of high enough quality to warrant space allocated to them?
- Do responses to letters, when included, show respect and courtesy for dissenting points of view?
- Do photo opinions, if used, deal with mature or newsworthy issues rather than just fill space?
- Although entertainment/culture coverage may appear in its own section, have staff writers included reviews of things of interest to student consumers, such as concerts, books, restaurants, and cinema?
- Is entertainment coverage based on research and a wide range of topics?

leadership overall evaluation

All-Colorado: It is readily apparent to the reader that this news publication leads rather than follows. It is evident in the content as well as the style of the opinion pages. A full range of offerings, including staff editorials, enhances these pages for the readership.

Award of Commendation: Staff opinion coverage is strong but not thorough. Staff would do well to incorporate a greater variety of opinions for reader consumption. Each edition should carry a wide array of editorial opinion pieces, including at least one staff editorial.

Merit: This news publication appears to follow without providing the reader much leadership. Staff editorials fail to enhance each edition. Staff members appear to be going through the motions with little regard to the possibilities of providing leadership to the community.

Judge's narrative comments on leadership (this narrative box can expand – please provide publication staffs with specific and clear advice, warnings, praise, questions, options, and more). Feel free to reference specific standards listed among the questions on the previous page.

overall final evaluation

All-Colorado: This is a quality news publication that would compete well at any level. Staff demonstrates a solid understanding of the publication's place in the curriculum. The publication features solid reporting and writing skills. Staff designers are obviously aware of how to best enhance a news package and to present it to the readership in a most conducive manner. Clear leadership is a hallmark of this publication.

Award of Commendation: This news publication represents a work in progress. Staff members indicate an awareness of what a quality publication should include but fail to consistently carry out that mission. There are flashes of brilliance in all areas of your work but the publication lacks a necessary consistency to be truly effective.

Merit: Too many flaws keep this news publication from reaching the higher levels of recognition. Staff and adviser should concentrate on basic publication production concepts. This publication has obviously been produced as a "labor of love." You need to place more emphasis on the basic production concerns. Your primary goal is to become reader friendly.

Judge's final thoughts (this narrative box can expand – please provide publication staffs with specific and clear advice, warnings, praise, questions, options, and more). This is your opportunity to discuss issues that were not specifically addressed in the five sections of the critique.