

The commentary in the "rails" is designed to provoke further thought as you develop/revise your own Editorial Policy.

# the rock editorial policy

## There's a reason for everything we do, and there's a philosophy behind our decisions (and readers deserve to know what that is)

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Many schools reserve space in their first issue of the year to print their Editorial Policy in full. In succeeding issues, a scaled down version is often included in the mast or staff box. It is important that you publicize your Editorial Policy – readers need to know the basis for your decisions. On the other hand, they don't need to be involved in those decisions.

Consider having a copy on file in your school library, in your School Board office, and in your principal's office.

Make sure you revisit your Editorial Policy each year, and replace old versions.

Many readers lump all opinion content together and call it "editorial," even letters. Do your best to clearly label the different types of opinion content in the paper, but realize that some readers still won't see the difference.

**The goals** of *The Rock*, the monthly student newspaper of Rock Canyon High School, are to inform, educate and entertain its readers; to provide a forum for the Rock Canyon community to express attitudes and opinions; to provide an educational opportunity for both the students who produce *The Rock* and those who read it; and to provide a medium for commercial messages.

**The Rock receives** some DCSD funds, though a majority of its income comes through the sale of advertising at the basic rate of \$50 per 1/8 page unit.

**The newspaper is published** nine times per year, approximately once every four weeks beginning in late August. It is distributed to students and faculty free of charge, with a limit of five copies per issue. Possession of more than five copies of this publication with intent to prevent other individuals from reading an edition is illegal. Subscriptions are available for \$15 per year, and are mailed to subscribers. *The Rock* also participates in exchange programs with numerous schools throughout the nation. Extra copies of the newspaper are distributed to the general public through numerous local supportive businesses and our feeder schools.

**The Editorial Board** retains the right to choose all content and to determine story priority. This Board is made up of 13 students – Co-Executive Editors, Campus News Editor, World News Editor, Girls Sports Editor, Boys Sports Editor, Lifestyles Editor, Co-Opinion Editors, Reviews Editor, Education Editor, Art Director, Advertising Editor – with the adviser a non-voting member of the Board. This Board also oversees the finances of the publication as well as various production operations.

**Work on *The Rock*** is not limited strictly to members of the Newspaper Lab class, though anyone serious about staff membership must at least complete the Journalism course and at least one semester of Lab.

**All material** – writing (other than editorials), photography, or art – appearing in the newspaper will receive credit, with the method of credit being at the discretion of the Editorial Board.

**The Editorial Board will select** editorial topics. These editorials will not be signed by the writer, but will reflect the opinion of the majority of the Editorial Board. The Board takes full responsibility for all editorials.

**Commentaries and columns**, on the other hand, will be signed and reflect the views of the writer alone. They are not the official position of *The Rock*. Editorial cartoons fall into the same category as commentaries.

**Any person with an interest** in the Rock Canyon community who has an opinion to be voiced is encouraged to submit letters to the editor. All letters must be signed, but anonymity may be requested. It will be granted only if deemed necessary by the Editorial Board. Each request will be reviewed on a case by case basis. Letters may be submitted to a designated box in the school library, brought to room 3500, mailed to Rock Canyon High School, care of *The Rock*, or e-mailed to the publication. All signatures will be verified through a phone call or personal interview.

**Letters should be** fewer than 300 words in length. If excessive editing is needed, the letter will be returned to the author for corrections. It is preferred that letters be typed, although handwritten copies will be accepted, if legible. *The Rock* reserves the right to edit any letter for grammatical errors, libelous content or space limitations.

You may wish to reorder your paper's goals, or to add or delete specific items. This is simply a sample of one paper's Editorial Policy, sculpted to fit a particular location in a particular period of time.

Every paper will have its own editorial structure. In its first year of operation, **The Rock** staff was entirely composed of Journalism students, and page managers were named by the adviser on an issue-by-issue basis.

It is important to make clear the difference between a staff editorial (the official position of the publication) and more personal writing. All may appear in the opinion section of the paper, but should be clearly labeled to prevent reader confusion.

You can find the Statement of Principles of the ASNE at [asne.org](http://asne.org). There are a variety of other such documents, and you may wish to construct your own statement of principles unique to your publication.

Foul ups will happen, and when we publish only monthly there is a long time between papers. Corrections may not be effective, when the news is now weeks old. That's why we included this portion of the policy. Alternatives to corrections could include follow up stories, personal apologies, written apologies, etc.

We got the 240 number from statistical analysis and standard deviation theory. If your school is very small, this number may change, but larger schools need not expand this number. Your error rate will not improve much until you approach surveying everyone in the school!

It's important to not get in the habit of allowing sources to read your copy; it gets very close to prior review. This is true even for noncontroversial stories, like profiles. Just don't get this started.

**The Rock will strive** to present information in a fair, impartial, accurate and truthful manner. The newspaper will function in accord with all applicable laws, both in regards to the rights and restrictions of journalism. The Statement of Principles of the American Society of Newspaper Editors serves as the basis for the publication's ethical standards. The basis for the publication's legal positions include the DCSD policy and regulations pertaining to school publications and Colorado Rev. Stat. 22-1-120, student exercise of free expression.

**The Rock reserves the right** to refuse any advertising not found to be within the publication's standards, particularly in reference to good taste and to product and/or services that are illegal for the majority of high school readers.

**In the event of error** (omission, misidentification, etc.) the Editorial Board will attempt to mitigate the damage. Every reasonable precaution is made in avoiding errors, but some amount of error is perhaps inevitable. Each case will be evaluated on its own merit.

**Reporting on student, faculty and community deaths** can be sensitive, and the Editorial Board will confine its coverage to the News and Echoes (opinion) sections. The publication will always take into consideration the wishes of families, but maintains its responsibility to report truthfully on all aspects of life, and death, at Rock Canyon.

**As members of a student newspaper**, reporters and editors may find themselves aware of violations of the law committed by students which do not involve authorities. However, only crimes and transgressions that result in official charges will be reported in *The Rock*. It is not the Editorial Board's goal to embarrass any member of the Rock Canyon community, but that discretion must be balanced with the Board's responsibility to dispel rumors, report the facts and provide perspective on the community.

**The Editorial Board will** regularly survey the student body on topical matters. These surveys will always be conducted through a random selection of Advisement sections, and will strive to include a random sampling of all four grades and both genders. A minimum of 240 students will be surveyed, resulting in an error rate of plus or minus four percent.

**Reporters for The Rock** will always identify themselves as functioning in that capacity before any interview or survey. It is not our intention to catch people in embarrassing or misleading quotations. The editors reserve the right to correct gross grammatical errors in quotations, if the source's meaning will be distorted without such editing. Otherwise, quotations will be reported as stated by informed sources. **There is one exception** to this policy, and that is in the case of undercover reporting. This happens rarely, and only after considerable discussion within the Editorial Board. The Board recognizes that some stories cannot be adequately reported when sources are fully warned of the potential of publication. The authorities may be consulted prior to any undercover operation, and students will not be asked to break the law in pursuit of a story.

**Sources will not be allowed** to read the final text of any story to be published in *The Rock* prior to publication. Reporters may read back quotations to sources, and will follow up with sources who wish to supplement their initial interviews. The Editorial Board will consider the relative experience of the source in dealing with the press in each case.

**Sources may wish** to have their names withheld from a particular story, and some may have valid reasons for this. The Editorial Board will decide on a case by case basis whether anonymity may be granted to protect the source. The Board recognizes that a high school is a very confined community of young people, and that some topics, while important to the community, may involve public embarrassment and official sanctions if names are printed. Once anonymity is granted, the Board must stand behind its decision, whatever the pressure. This, therefore, is a weighty decision.

While you hope deaths occur infrequently, you had better be prepared. The key is to report in a consistent manner. You can't give one student special treatment just because she's popular.

Legal issues can be tricky, and there will be forces in your community which would rather such "bad news" not be published. Don't put yourself in a position where you "always" or "never" publish. Leave yourself room for a considered, ethical decision. But when in doubt, publish.

Our exception to this policy is controversial. You may wish to ban all undercover (or sting) operations. They are in an ethically gray area.

Professionals may have different rules, but when you are dealing with sexuality or with illegal activities, there are times when sources will simply not talk unless granted anonymity. You need to weigh just how important those sources are to your story.