

ALL-COLORADO HYBRID NEWS PROGRAM CRITIQUE

Print News Publication: _____

Program's URL and social media links:

School Name: _____

School Address: _____

City & Zip Code: _____

Adviser: _____

Adviser Email: _____

Judge: _____

- This guide is designed to be an educational device to improve the quality of your hybrid news media program. This judging guide is now in its fifth generation, and was originally based on the Kansas Scholastic Press Association guide.
- This guide is intended to point out positive aspects of your news program 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 online, 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 seven 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:

jpkjournalism@gmail.com

www.colostudentmedia.com



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 programs 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 hybrid news program is doing in its coverage. Some programs 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 programs that are clearly in transition or are struggling to get their coverage where it should be, please provide focused, specific advice. Please identify issues, page numbers, posts, links clearly when you reference particular coverage from the past school year. Please look for signs of print and online coordinating and supplementing the program's coverage, making best use of each medium to provide readers the news.

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 program 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 program cover timely issues of interest to student readers, finding ways to localize national trend coverage?
- Does the program 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?
- Is there a clear philosophy that controls where certain coverage appears within the program, from print to online?

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 feature 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.

online breaking news criteria

Most student media programs that choose a hybrid strategy to reach their communities have the goal of using each program platform (print, web, social media) most efficiently, with readers in mind. Many choose to emphasize most sports and campus news coverage in their online platforms, and that is the focus of this section of our critique. Monthly or irregularly published print publications rarely were able to include much breaking news, and the hybrid approach lets print do what it does best (more analysis, more depth, more features, more opinion) while online platforms can focus on more immediate reporting and include multimedia coverage that print just can't offer.

Questions about online breaking news

- Are important news events and sports reported in a timely way?
- Are photos, graphics, text, audio, video and interactive elements used to support breaking news events?
- Is breaking news updated as stories develop?
- Is the information presented accurate, even if incomplete?
- Is news covered with a fair and balanced approach?
- Does coverage include useful information for readers, such as notification of school closure in the event of bad weather or an emergency?
- Is coverage of national or international news obviously related to the school and surrounding community?
- Are social media platforms part of the breaking news reporting?
- Do most social media posts stand alone while also driving readers to other news program sites or platforms (or even to the print product)?
- Does the program appear to report ONLINE FIRST, leaving much of the in-depth reporting to print or to more complex website packages?

online breaking news evaluation

All-Colorado: A focus on online breaking news and daily updates encourages reader involvement and enhances website and social media content. Content is accurate and balanced, and editors consistently provide access to useful information. Larger national stories are localized to enhance community awareness.

Award of Commendation: Comprehensive coverage sometimes includes online breaking news. The site (and corresponding social media) is regularly updated (two to three times a week), and content is accurate and balanced. Editors make an obvious effort to provide useful information to readers, and sometimes link local news to national events.

Award of Merit: Staff does an adequate job of presenting stories that are important to its readers, but online breaking news does not seem to be a focus. Story updates are inconsistent, and most content appears to be recycled from printed publications.

Judge's narrative comments on breaking news (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 news coverage?
- 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

- Are headlines effective in encouraging readers to want more information?
- Are headlines normally written in present tense? And are they easy to find in searches?
- 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 program?

writing overall evaluation

All-Colorado: Writing shows evidence of strong reporting skills. Staff reporters understand the news and feature concepts and utilize quotes effectively. Writing focuses on the story concept or strategy 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/navigation evaluation

If you are judging, please distinguish between desktop publishing/WordPress theme 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 program's personality match its design?
- Do internal and external margins help print readers distinguish different coverage areas and enhance readability?
- Are print and online departmentalized as a reader service? Is it easy to navigate the program, from print to online platforms?
- Are folios incorporated into the design of the print medium 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 or the organization of the website?
- 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 print 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 print 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?
- Are the nameplate and homepage clean and sophisticated, emphasizing the name of the publication rather than the school name or mascot?
- Does the nameplate and website custom header include the school, city, state, zip, date of publication, issue number and volume number? Can a reader immediately find basic information on the school?
- 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? And do online posts provide internal links to related material?
- Is there some planned space separating text/content from the edges of boxes or screened boxes (keeping elements from running together)?
- 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/navigation overall evaluation ⁹

All-Colorado: Design and site navigation show 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. Web themes are easy-to-follow, with rich connections both within the site and to outside sources.

Award of Commendation: Design is clean and appropriate to providing a personality to the paper. Design, either online or in print, 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. The online platforms are challenging for readers and sometimes confusing or lacking needed links.

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 (other than environmental portraits) as well as photo clichés (people shaking hands, an administrator on the phone, teachers at a desk, etc.)?
- Has staff effectively incorporated environmental portraits that highlight an element of personality of the subject and that complement the related content/story?
- Is the size of the photo relevant to the news value and to the technical quality?
- Are photo illustrations clearly labeled as such?
- 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?
- Has the staff avoided “dumping” photos into online galleries, mostly without captions?

visuals overall evaluation

All-Colorado: This hybrid news program 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 hybrid news programs' 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.

multimedia & creativity criteria

If you are judging, this section focuses on websites and social media, where multimedia is not only available but easy to use, in many cases. The best online reporting incorporates multimedia into coverage as a matter of course, with reporters often handling all aspects of this reporting, from video to photo to interviews to narratives, from podcasts to interactive features.

Questions about multimedia & creativity

- Does the site use a variety of media, which *might* include audio, video, slide shows, podcasts and graphics?
- Are these media used to enhance content, rather than to dress up the site?
- Does each media element tell a story?
- Is video adequately lit and well-composed?
- Are a variety of shots used in photo and video reports – action, candid, long shots, close-ups and detail shots?
- Is sound quality clear in audio and video reports?
- Do audio reports make use of ambient and natural sound as well as interviews?
- Are graphics simple and informative? Are “lower thirds” used to identify those on camera?
- Are special projects and packages well-organized and easy to navigate?
- Are copyright laws understood and respected, with only original content or copyright-free material is used, including music, photos and video?
- Do online platforms offer regular features, such as weekly podcasts or profiles, that encourage readers to return regularly?
- Does the site make effective use of online tools to provide variety of coverage?
- Do readers have opportunities to respond, add information, subscribe and more?
- Do video and audio stories include well-written voiceovers, stand-ups, and intros in broadcast writing style?
- Is the broadcast writing short and to the point, but also colloquial? Does it help the connect the pieces of the story?

multimedia & creativity criteria

All-Colorado: Staff has successfully used a variety of media to enhance online content. Media elements tell individual stories; and photo, video and sound qualities are excellent. An abundance of original content adds to the richness of reader experience, and well-considered packaging of media elements adds creative interest.

Award of Commendation: Staff uses a variety of media to enhance online content. Photo, video and sound qualities are consistently good, and packaging of media elements is developing.

Award of Merit: Staff is experimenting with photo, video and sound to enhance its online content. Media quality might be inconsistent, but shows promise in engaging readers.

Judge's narrative comments on multimedia & creativity (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 program 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 or posts been created that indicate a strong editorial voice for the publication?
- Do the editorial pages or posts demonstrate breadth of coverage through strong staff editorials, columns, comment, cartoons and letters?
- Do most issues of the print 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?
- Are opinion pieces clearly labeled so that there is no confusion about reporting vs. opinion?
- Do columns or commentaries exhibit a variety of writing techniques and a variety of tones?
- Does coverage on opinion pages/posts or categories 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 hybrid news program leads rather than follows. It is evident in the content as well as the style of the opinion pages/posts. A full range of offerings, including staff editorials, enhances either print, online, or both 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 print edition should carry a wide array of editorial opinion pieces, including at least one staff editorial, and the online offerings should augment these efforts.

Award of Merit: This hybrid news program 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 hybrid news program that would compete well at any level. Staff demonstrates a solid understanding of the range of media the community needs and deserves. The program features solid reporting and writing skills. Staff designers/web managers 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 hybrid news program represents a work in progress. Staff members indicate an awareness of what a quality program should include but fail to consistently carry out that mission. There are flashes of brilliance in all areas of your work but the program lacks a necessary consistency to be truly effective.

Award of Merit: Too many flaws keep this hybrid news program from reaching the higher levels of recognition. Staff and adviser should concentrate on basic production concepts. This hybrid program 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 seven sections of the critique.