

Assignment Sheet

Uncertain Learning: Inside Vermont's Schools

The Underground Workshop

Quarter 1 Collaborative Project, 2020

Word Count	600-800 Words
Authorship	A student can write individually, or a small group of students can share a byline. Journalists often collaborate, contributing sections to the same document, etc.
Style	Reportage (in a descriptive past-tense style, based on direct observation) Use the AP Stylebook for journalistic conventions-- when to capitalize, etc.
Skills	Observation, interviews, descriptive leads, and quotation.
Interviews	Minimum of 3 , from multiple roles / perspectives
Photographs	Minimum of 5 , not posed, High Resolution Please Each photo should accomplish a specific purpose, complementing the text. Take a lot, choose 5.
Deadline	First submitted, first published. This is an ongoing series. Try to submit in October if possible: things could change quickly, dating these stories.

Our Angle:

We should all agree that our schools are struggling to make the best of a terrible situation. There are difficult political issues in play as our schools reopen, involving tensions between state and local governments, teacher unions, etc.-- we'll leave those issues for professional reporters. Our goal is simply to bring our readers an "on-the-ground" view of this historic moment in our schools, and readers (including Vermont's educational leaders, politicians and voters) can draw their own conclusions.

Finding a Story:

When we meet for our **Reporting Workshop: 8pm, Thursday, Sept. 24** we'll discuss our goals for the year generally, then breakout groups will discuss our first project:

- 1. In general terms, what would readers want or need to know about our schools as they reopen?*
- 2. When it's your turn, you will "pitch" your story: Why is it interesting? How would you approach the reporting? What would your photographs add to the story? What are the potential obstacles?*

Every ordinary school activity is extraordinary this year. A discussion in a classroom, a soccer game, lunch, the school bus: almost anything school-related could be interesting to describe. The key is to personally witness a specific event, and to observe carefully, noting the details that can bring it to life for a reader.

Social distancing obviously limits our ability to move between groups, enter certain spaces, or join many events. This presents a challenge, but should not be insurmountable. Take time observing school in the first few days. Which moments stand out, and why? What's different? When do you see people enjoying themselves, or frustrated, adapting or struggling to adapt? Where could you safely position yourself and take in

a scene? Students entering school in the morning, practicing with their team after school, band practice-- there are many opportunities.

It's not ideal, but given the circumstances it is also ok to write about a moment when you would already have been present-- visiting the library, or a chemistry lab in your own class, etc. You could also attend an online event (a zoom class, a school board meeting, etc.) and write descriptively about it-- it just requires some imagination. Many students are staying home-- could you document a moment in their experience somehow? Your creative challenge is to bring your reader into a specific moment, to capture the details that will make your writing vivid and interesting.

Our reporting process is first to document the event, then to interview some of the people who were there. A teacher and a few students might offer their thoughts after a socially-distanced discussion, athletes might discuss a game, cooks in the cafeteria might reflect on serving lunch, etc. These quotes will form the "so-what" of the piece, giving some sense of how people are coping with this compromised version of school, what's working and what's not, etc. Your interviewees' thoughts will carry more weight when readers have been witness to their experiences.

Consent is essential, of course. The school is a public space, and you are free to describe situations in general terms. Once you use people's names, and especially when they are quoted, you need formal consent. You should record every interview, and at the start you should ask the person whether they are comfortable being quoted in VT Digger, published online for a statewide audience. Make sure you confirm the person's name, spelled correctly, and their age / grade / role in the school. Ask permission for photographs, too, from any individual who is a focus in the photo. You don't need to worry with anonymous crowds-- a long-distance shot of a soccer game, for example. Ethics are essential to journalism. It is a good idea to read and if possible discuss the SPJ Code of Ethics with your class or reporting partners.

Writing the Story:

Due for our writing workshop, October 8th: a draft you're willing to share with other students for feedback.

We want all of these pieces to work together as a series. They don't need to be uniform, but they should share a general approach. These stories aren't breaking news: they're features, working to engage readers through vivid description. They should give a sense of how the larger statewide story is playing out in local terms, in the experience of specific people. VT Digger has been publishing profiles of the 58 Vermonters who have died from covid-19, bringing home the enormous scale of grief and loss behind a number that can sound small after months of reading about a global pandemic. We are trying to do the same thing, humanizing the issues surrounding our schools.

Once you've organized your reporting (we recommend a two-column "notes and quotes" strategy) it's time to start writing. Begin by bringing your reader into your scene, the moment you witnessed in your reporting. Use the past tense, choosing a handful of specific details from your notes to build the images. Take time to establish the moment, but don't overdo it-- maybe two paragraphs, six to eight sentences. Make sure you include the basics-- what was the date? Which town? (Always keep your reader in mind. This is for a statewide audience: they may not know much about your school.)

Next you need what we call a "pivot" paragraph, zooming out to situate this moment in its larger context. For example, if you open with two custodians cleaning a hallway after school, you might follow with a paragraph

explaining that the school has had to double its buildings and grounds staff, along with the budget for cleaning supplies, and give a quick overview of the new standards for preparing for a school day. You could close with a sentence that gives some sense of the larger issues in play: "So far the custodial staff seems able to meet these new demands, but they are understaffed and concerned about sustaining this pace." This kind of sentence sets up the reader to follow your story as it unfolds, almost like a thesis in an essay.

From there you can move into your body paragraphs. Make sure that each has its own distinct purpose, a strong topic sentence, and at least one quote. Usually journalists try to "block sources" hearing from one person at a time, rather than bouncing back and forth. What was the most interesting portion of a given interview? The answer should give you a topic for a paragraph, then you need to choose the most compelling quotes. As a general rule, quotes that include specific details or ideas ("That first night I ended up with blisters") are more interesting than general statements ("It's harder than last year, but we'll make it").

Don't worry too much at first about finding an order for the story's sections. Write them first, then experiment by moving them around: cut and paste.

One ambitious writing choice, depending on the nature of your reporting, could be to maintain your opening "scene" through the whole piece, describing your interview subjects in action as context for your quotes. You could walk the reader through the custodians' process, paragraph by paragraph, mixing in their quotes.

Endings can be left for the last minute. One strategy is to look at what's left from your reporting after you've written the body sections. Is there a powerful quote left unused, something that sums up the tone of the piece as a whole, or leaves the reader with a poignant thought? Journalists call this a "kicker." You could also use a "bookends" strategy, wrapping back to your opening scene, giving your piece symmetry and balance. Just make sure you end with something specific and fresh, not repeating an idea or making a general statement.

This approach is just one of many styles in journalism. It's formulaic, but it should not be confining. Music is a good analogy. Think of the different genres: hip hop, country, etc. Each genre has its conventions-- a common rhythmic vocabulary, a bridge, a chorus, etc. The artist innovates within these structures.

Always remember, your reader's time is precious: make every word count. When you've finished your draft try to chisel out as many words as you can-- aim to cut at least 50 words, like these you're reading now in this sentence, that don't add up to much, use wordy constructions, or repeat ideas unnecessarily with extra words.

We can briefly discuss writing questions at the end of our reporting workshop, then address the finer points when we share our drafts on Oct. 8th. You have three weeks to accomplish your reporting and write a draft.

Other Stories About School:

These shouldn't be the only stories we publish about school. As we get underway and this strange year unfolds, there will be many opportunities to report stories from your specific community that would be relevant for a statewide audience, and these stories could take other approaches-- you could tackle a more investigative project, etc. We'll brainstorm about the possibilities during our writing workshop October 8th.

Be proud of this work. We face serious challenges and choices in the coming years, across all aspects of our society, including our schools. Your reporting has real civic value, helping to educate Vermonters and shape our future decisions. Thank you for joining this effort.