



Checklist for Publication

This checklist is intended as a set of concrete instructions for students, helping us to maintain a high standard for publication. The checklist is useful for planning a story: What will the finished product look like? And then use the checklist again while you're writing. Use the checklist to make your strongest-possible first draft, then make it even better with feedback from your peers, teachers, etc. At any point in your process you can reach out for support from the Underground Workshop's student editors. You can bring your story to a Thursday Workshop, at any phase. Email undergroundworkshop@vtdigger.org to get the conversation going!

An important note: this checklist is focused on the basics of reporting and writing and does not address the larger issues that often surround the most worthwhile stories. [The SPJ Code of Ethics](#) can act as a checklist of sorts, thinking about the big-picture questions. It's also helpful to look at published stories like the one you want to write. Professional journalists' stories are full of techniques to borrow (and sometimes pitfalls to avoid). The Underground Workshop may have published a story similar to yours, too... Our stories are [here](#).

Criteria	Requirements	Publication looks like...
Context	Before your reporting, do some research: read previous reporting on the issue, minutes of school board meetings, etc, depending. Being informed helps you identify sources, understand the context for your work, and make the most of your interviews.	Often a small amount of research is good to include in the finished article. Maybe a sentence or two, citing a statistic or referencing an earlier event, etc. Embed links to sources and articles.
Points of View	It's essential to present a diverse range of perspectives and to seek comment from all of the essential stakeholders. A successful story earns the respect of all readers, even if they may disagree with a lot of its voices. Thorough reporting= credibility. Often revision includes a last minute interview or two.	The finished story should never read like it's trying to prove a point. Think carefully about the order in which you present perspectives, and the amount of airtime you give each source. Use simple, neutral language (ex: Just use "said" for quotes). Don't paraphrase anything controversial: Let sources speak for themselves.
Consent	Record your interviews. Otter.ai is a good app that will make you a rough transcript. Begin the interview by confirming with the source that you're writing for the Underground Workshop and the story will appear in VTDigger. Do not use anonymous sources. (In rare cases this may be necessary—speak with an editor).	Introduce a source with her full name, and (when relevant) official title and/or date of the interview. After the first introduction, use her last name. If an important source won't talk to you, include in the story that they "declined to comment" or "did not respond to requests for an interview."
Images	The visual elements of your story should be a priority from the start. Seize every opportunity to take a high-quality photograph (oriented horizontally please). Make sure your photos are distinct from each other. Ask sources to share photos with you. Scan documents. Be creative.	If you take 40 photos, maybe the best 4-5 make it into the story. Together with their captions they should complement the text, add new information, and engage readers. Make sure to credit images in the caption. Keep the original files in a folder to share.

Checklist for Publication, continued: *The Written Product*

Criteria	Requirements	Publication looks like...
Lede	Most of the content on VTDigger is news, and derives its value from its timeliness, keeping readers abreast of the latest information. Most Underground Workshop stories are features, and we have to convince readers the story is worth their time. The key is to hook them with an engaging lede. Here's a resource looking at news vs. feature stories.	There's no one way to do this – look at examples. Two reliable formulas: Use an anecdotal lede (telling a little story) or a descriptive lede (developing a specific image). The goals are to bring your subject into focus, to hook your reader, and ideally to suggest an answer to the question, "Why should I read this?" Be concise! 2-5 sentences.
Pivot (AKA "nut-graph")	After your lead, you need to pivot to the main idea for the story, zooming out to introduce your subject & the angle you're taking. The pivot tells the reader what to expect, and ideally raises a question or suggests a conflict, etc– again:"Why should I read this?"	The pivot should be 2 sentences, 3 at the most, and these should be your most carefully crafted sentences in the story. Take care to find the precise key words. Keep it simple and direct.
Paragraphs	Each paragraph should be about just one topic. One reliable formula: a. Topic sentence – be direct: what is this paragraph about? b. Paraphrase more specific information. c. Introduce source and land on a quote.	Paragraphs are often short in journalism: 2 sentences, or even one. In general you shouldn't go beyond 4 or 5. Use active constructions: Subject, verb, object. Avoid adjectives and "telling" words. Clarity is the essential virtue.
Quotes	Paraphrase more; quote less. Remember you can paraphrase with attribution: <i>Jones said the hardest part was...</i> Be picky with quotes. Look for the moments when a source's voice comes through– their opinions and POV; don't quote information.	Generally use short quotes, chiseled down to the most engaging bits: 8-20 words is a sweet spot. Try breaking longer quotes for attribution. It feels boring to repeat the word "said," but unless someone actually "shouted," just use said!
Structure	The successful story is carefully organized, with a logical order. Make a simple outline before you write. Every section should have a clear purpose: what does the reader learn? Again, look at examples: try reverse engineering an outline for a story you admire. Try reordering your paragraphs: often you'll discover a more effective structure.	If the story's structure is sound, then you don't need to work too hard for transitions– try cutting them and see how it reads. In general, try to block your sources (everything from a given source in one section). Formatting-wise, you have flexibility. This isn't an essay: You can use headings for sections, bulleted lists, tables, graphs, etc.
Concision	Your reader's time and attention is scarce. Make every word count. When you finish a draft, check the word count and cut 10-15%.	A simple rule: only say anything once. Watch out for repeating words, or repeating info inside and outside quotes.
Endings	Many feature stories close with a "kicker" : a quote from a key source (often wrapping back to the person in your lede) that lands the story on a resonant note (look at examples).	Endings aren't a big priority until you see how everything shapes up. But don't write a "conclusion" or sum things up: the reader should learn something new.