

Free Press 101: Early Years

WHAT DO “ON THE RECORD” AND “OFF THE RECORD” ACTUALLY MEAN?

Understanding and respecting the distinctions between “on the record,” “off the record,” and “on background” is critical to journalism as a profession and to maintaining journalistic integrity. These conventions form the ethical framework that governs how information is gathered, attributed, and shared with the public.

“**On the record**” ensures transparency and accountability by allowing information to be directly attributed to a named source. “**Off the record**” protects the confidentiality of sources, encouraging whistleblowers and insiders to speak truthfully without fear of exposure. “**On background**” strikes a balance, enabling journalists to inform the public while safeguarding a source’s identity.

Together, these practices are foundational to the credibility and veracity of traditional news media, reinforcing public trust and the journalist’s role as a responsible steward of information in a democratic society.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- Read through this webpage, [“What do “on the record” and “off the record” actually mean?” in Free Press 101.](#)
- Retrieve a print copy of the Free Press to use in the learning experiences.
- Print copies of the sample quotes (pages 3-5 or [PDF here](#)) and cut them out along the lines (or ask the learners to do this).
- Print copies of the voting cards (pages 5-7 or [PDF here](#)), enough for every student to have one of each colour.

GOALS OF THESE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

- Learners will actively produce and demonstrate understanding of using information from sources, including:

-Respect and trust

-When to share information, and when not to share

DEFINITIONS

On the Record: Someone gives information to the newspaper, and gives permission for the newspaper to publish their name.

On Background: Someone gives information to the newspaper that will be published, but without their name.

Off the Record: Someone gives information to the newspaper that cannot be published in any way.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE 1: WHAT REPORTERS CAN SHARE

1.
 - Explain the concept of each of the below terms, using the definitions on the previous page and/or the content from **"What do 'on the record' and 'off the record' actually mean?"** in **Free Press 101**.

1.	On the record: telling someone about something that happened and you don't mind if they tell everyone else.
2.	Off the record: telling someone about something that happened but making them promise to keep it a secret.
3.	On background: telling someone about something that happened but asking them to not tell anyone who they heard it from.

- Read from the sample quotes (Pages 3-4 or [PDF here](#)) one by one, and ask students to raise a voting card (page 5-7 or [PDF here](#)) to vote on what kind of statement is being read.
- If students disagree, have them defend their choices or try to gently get their classmates to change their minds.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE 2: TRUST AND ETHICS

2.
 - Using the same three categories above, ask learners to generate ideas about WHY certain people would like their information to be on the record, off the record, or on background. If prompting is needed, read some of the sample quotes from each category. Examples might include, among many more that the learners will identify, and depending on the context of the quote:
 1. To protect themselves or someone else (off the record).
 2. To make sure they are recognized for their work (on the record).
 3. They want you to know about something that affects a large group, but they don't want to be singled out (on background).
 - If desired, this is a useful frame for discussions and further learning about when it's appropriate to keep secrets, when it's appropriate to tell an adult about something that is happening in their lives, or when they should share information even if someone else wants them to keep it secret because it's the right thing to do. If in doubt about whether something should be "off the record" in their life, learners should be encouraged to ask a trusted adult. The [Canadian Centre for Child Protection](#) has [free resources](#) to help develop learning opportunities that help keep kids safe.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE 3: REAL WORLD APPLICATION

3.
 - View **"News for young children"** by clicking the link or clicking "News for young children" from the [education subject search page](#). Choose a story you feel your learners would enjoy hearing about and/or that has ties to curricular outcomes.
 - Read some of the article quotes to the learners and have them debate whether the quote is on the record or on background.
 - When learners meet with sources to discuss creating their own news stories, such as in **"How do reporters and newsrooms get their stories"**, they should be encouraged to use their new knowledge to sensitively credit their sources of information.

Questions for reflection:

- Why is it important for journalists and sources to agree on these terms?
- How these rules might apply to and impact their social media, texting, or sharing of information online or in person?
- What could/has gone wrong if these boundaries are not respected?

SAMPLE QUOTES

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<p>"You can say I said this: the pizza at lunch today was the best we've ever had!"</p>	<p>"Don't tell anyone I said this, but I think someone is sneaking treats to the classroom pet."</p>
<p>"A teacher told me the school might get a new playground soon, but I'm not supposed to say who."</p>	<p>"I'm super excited about the class trip! You can use my name! I don't mind!"</p>
<p>"This is just between us, okay? I saw someone sneaking extra crayons from the supply shelf."</p>	<p>"You can say a student in grade 3 started a comic book club, just don't say who told you."</p>
<p>"I'm, Alex Snow I'm the volleyball team setter and I believe our school's sports teams deserve more funding."</p>	<p>"I think the student newspaper is doing a great job covering real issues but there is more to that story."</p>
<p>"Yes, I was the one who started the book swap table in the hallway. I hope more people join!"</p>	<p>"Don't write this down, but I heard the principal might cancel field day if it rains."</p>
<p>"You can quote me! I think it's great we're learning about butterflies in science class."</p>	<p>"This is off the record, but I think someone forgot to lock the art room after school."</p>

SAMPLE QUOTES

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<p>"Feel free to say that a few students from our class helped clean up the playground."</p>	<p>"I don't want my name used, but I can tell you some kids were trading snacks under the table."</p>
<p>"Put my name in the paper! I won the spelling bee and I'm really proud!"</p>	<p>"You didn't hear this from me, but someone stuck googly eyes on all the classroom posters."</p>
<p>"You can say a teacher is starting a new lunch club, but she asked not to be named yet."</p>	<p>"Sure, I said the music concert was awesome! You can write that."</p>
<p>"It's okay to say a student brought cookies for everyone, just don't say who."</p>	<p>"Yes, you can say I painted the mural in the hallway with Ms. Lee."</p>
<p>"You can report that a group of kids are practicing a dance for the talent show."</p>	<p>"Don't include this in your story, but I think someone left their lunch in their backpack all week. There's a bad smell in my classroom."</p>
<p>"Go ahead and write that I helped set up the library display. It was fun!"</p>	<p>"Just between us, I heard someone accidentally set off the fire alarm while trying to hang a poster."</p>

VOTING CARDS

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Off the Record



Off the Record



Off the Record



Off the Record



Off the Record



Off the Record

VOTING CARDS

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On Background



On Background



On Background



On Background



On Background



On Background

VOTING CARDS

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On the Record



On the Record



On the Record



On the Record



On the Record



On the Record