

Free Press 101: Middle and Senior 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).
- Have masking tape or whiteboard magnets available for learners to use.
- Highlighters, chart paper, and sticky notes of various colours may be useful also.

GOALS OF THESE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

- Learners will actively produce and demonstrate understanding of using information from sources, including:
 - Truthfulness and accuracy
 - Ethical content and respect
 - Synthetic media
 - Objectivity and unbiased reporting
 - Context and fact-checking
 - Professionalism and responsibility

DEFINITIONS

- On the Record:** The information and associated data provided can be quoted and attributed to the source by name.
- On Background:** The information and associated data can be used, but the source cannot be named directly. Instead, the journalist might refer to them in general terms (e.g., “a senior official” or “a person familiar with the matter”).
- Off the Record:** The information and associated data cannot be used in the story at all, not quoted, not paraphrased, and not attributed.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE 1: WHAT REPORTERS CAN SHARE

1.
 - On the whiteboard or three pieces of chart paper, write the three categories of quotes:
 1. On the record
 2. Off the record
 3. Background
 - Explain the concept of each of the 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**.
 - Cut out the **sample quotes (pdf)** from pages 3-5 (or ask the students to do this) and shuffle them well. In small groups or as a class, learners should try to organize the sample quotes into "on the record", "off the record" and "background".
 - Ask students to share how they organized the sample quotes into the three categories, by using magnets or tape to attach them to the whiteboard or chart paper.
 - Once all the sample quotes are displayed, ask students to find one or two that they disagree with the placement of. Have students debate and come to consensus about where the chosen quote belongs.

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 that they've sorted into each category. Collect these reasons into the same three categories on the board or chart paper. Examples might include, among many more that the learners will identify:
 1. To protect their job while still bringing media attention to an issue (off the record).
 2. They represent an organization or event (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).

LEARNING EXPERIENCE 3: REAL WORLD APPLICATION

3.
 - Divide your copy of the Free Press it into sections to distribute among individuals or small groups.
 - Working alone or in pairs, ask learners to find two examples each of "on the record" and "on background" sources in their section of the paper. They may identify these by using different coloured highlighters or by underlining and annotating their copy. They should also write a logical reason that the particular source may have wanted to appear on the record or on background. This can be done in the margins or on a sticky note.
 - Learners should identify two news stories where there could have reasonably been off-the-record sources. Because the sources are off the record, they won't be quoted or referred to in the paper. This may be difficult for students to conceptualize. An example is below:

Headline:	City delays sewer repair to 2026 (May 29, 2025)
Summary:	The aging sewers of Winnipeg need repair but the work keeps getting delayed. There are several sources that appear on the record, including city councillors and a spokesperson for the water and waste department.
Off the record:	It is plausible that someone from inside city hall sent this news tip in advance to the Free Press. In that case, that person would have specified that they want to be kept off the record, but wanted the issue to be noted in the media. Thus, the learners would identify the city worker as the person who may be "off the record" for the reason of "protecting their employment".
- 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?
 - What could/has gone wrong if these boundaries are not respected?

Free Press 101: MY and SY - What do "on the record" and "off the record" actually mean?

Cut out the sample quotes below and shuffle them well. Work in small groups or as a class to decide whether each is "on the record", "off the record", or "on background".

<p>"You can quote me — I saw Jordan Lee arguing with the trustee and I think the school board made the right decision."</p>	<p>"As a senior at East Gate High, I fully support the new mental health initiative and I'm Taylor Sloe student council president."</p>
<p>"My name is Samira Khan, and I believe students should have more say in curriculum choices."</p>	<p>"Yeah, me and Chris Smith wanted to challenge the new policy because we think the new dress code is totally unfair — you can print that."</p>
<p>"I'm Maya Setubal, and I want people to know I organized the climate awareness rally."</p>	<p>"I think the school's Wi-Fi needs serious improvement, we need to know if all communication is encrypted. You can use my name, sure. I'm Devon Grey, and this is Lily Chen."</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>"I'm Rooney Salander, and I want to speak out about the lack of accessible facilities at the cabin we rented. We were left out in the frigid temperatures, we could have died."</p>	<p>"We need fight back against these book bans, we need more not less diverse books in our school library, and you can quote me on that, I'm Leo Murphy".</p>
<p>"One of the parents, Harry Tasker who attended the school board meeting said the decision felt rushed."</p>	<p>"A senior who's a part of the GSA said they feel the school could be more inclusive."</p>

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"His sister who works part-time and she said balancing school and work is getting harder."	"The grad student who's taken multiple AP classes said the workload is overwhelming."
"A student who volunteers in the guidance office said more mental health resources are needed."	"At the athletics meet, the key players said they're frustrated with the lack of gym space."
"A student who's been suspended before said to Barry Speck the school principal that the discipline policy feels inconsistent."	"It's a constant problem for young people applying to university" they said, "they're stressed about transcripts being delayed."
"The young man in grade 11 who uses a wheelchair said the elevator is often out of service."	"A student who's been at the school for four years said they've seen a decline in school spirit."
"I'll tell you how it was stolen, and that Danni and Ariel were there, but it can't be used in your article at all."	"I just want you to understand the situation better, but you can't say you spoke to me."
"You can't quote me or even hint that I said this about the coach."	"This is only for context; I can tell you all the other people's names involved and what happened but not my name"

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'I don't want this shared in any way, but I know who set the fire"	"I'm trusting you to keep this between us."
"You cannot tell anyone I told you that Tony covered it up."	"I was with Alex Snow when they took the money raised for the sports teams, this is just for your background knowledge."
"I'll tell you what happened and how Craig was the ringleader if you can confirm everything that I say will be anonymous."	"I want to help you understand who was involved as it affected so many people, but my part in it can't be part of the story."