

FREEPRESS 101:

What do “on the record” and “off the record” actually mean?

Many of us know the phrase “off the record” from high-stakes movies, where a reporter and a source speak quietly in a shadowy location or over coffee in a diner. But what do the terms off the record, on background, and on the record actually mean?

If a reporter asks you, “Are open to speaking on the record?” they are asking if you are comfortable having the comments you make about a topic recorded and printed in an article. Those comments might be direct quotes, a paraphrasing of what you said, or both.

You would be identified as the person speaking – with your full name.

If a reporter pre-arranges an interview with you, say, by reaching out over email, the assumption is that it will be on the record, unless you ask to make a different arrangement, or they suggest one.

If a reporter walks up to you on the street, identifies himself or herself as a journalist, and asks if you are open to answering a few questions, the assumption is that your interaction will be on the record. Again, that’s unless you ask to make a different arrangement, or they suggest one.

WHATS IN A NAME?

Before or after you speak, a reporter typically will ask you to spell your full name, so they can print it accurately. Most reporters audio record their interviews using their phone or a microphone, so they can go back to the recording to make sure they are quoting you correctly.

If you don’t want your name printed in an article, but you have something you want to tell a reporter, you could say: “I am not comfortable having my name printed, can we speak on background?”



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Investigative reporter

Marsha McLoed
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Since 2017, Marsha has focused on corporate and government accountability reporting. She has researched traffic ticketing in Buffalo, N.Y., that targeted the city’s Black neighborhoods; investigated one of the largest correctional health care companies in the U.S. and the county governments that chose to use its services; and written extensively about the disturbing conditions inside the Thunder Bay District Jail.

Marsha has also maintained a specific focus on the commitments the federal government has made to Indigenous people — and the times it fails to meet those

ON BACKGROUND

An on-background comment is a way for information to be used by a reporter – without the name of the person who shared it attached. As an example, an on background comment might sound like:

“a source who works at the pizza parlour, but asked not to be identified because they were not authorized to speak to the media, said that...”

Sometimes, reporters will speak with a group of people on background to be able to form a composite picture of an event or situation. This might sound like:

“the Free Press spoke with six former and current city employees who each said the dog was often off-leash.”

The use of on background comments in stories is usually reserved for specific scenarios, like people who are concerned about losing their employment if they speak with media – or who have safety or privacy concerns, such as when speaking out as a survivor of abuse.

That said, different reporters sometimes have slightly different understandings of what on background means. You and the reporter you’re talking to should clarify what the term means to both of you. You will probably discuss a few questions, like: Can this conversation be recorded? How can you be identified, if not by your name, i.e. “a city employee”? Can you be quoted directly, or only paraphrased?

OFF THE RECORD

The term off the record means that certain comments are not to be printed in an article or otherwise shared, full stop – whether attributed to your name or not.

If you want to speak to a reporter off the record or on background it’s important to ask them if they are open to that before doing an interview. That’s because some reporters will not agree to speak off the record or on background about certain topics or with certain sources, such as with government or company spokespeople.

obligations. This has included stories on Jordan’s Principle denials, delays in the processing of status applications and the slow pace of spending by the Indigenous Shelter and Transitional Housing Initiative.

In 2024, Marsha won the Canadian Journalism Foundation’s prestigious CJF Jackman Award for Excellence in Journalism (in the large-media category) for **her reporting on inquests in Manitoba**. Her work has also been recognized by the Digital Publishing Awards and the Canadian Association of Journalists.

Prior to joining the *Free Press*, Marsha covered the federal government for *The Globe and Mail*, based in Ottawa. She has also written features for TVO.org, Xtra Magazine, and *The Atlantic*, as well as Investigative Post and The Trace, which are non-profit newsrooms based in the U.S.

Marsha has a master’s degree from the Columbia Journalism School in New York City, where she was a fellow at the Toni Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism and focused on health care reporting.