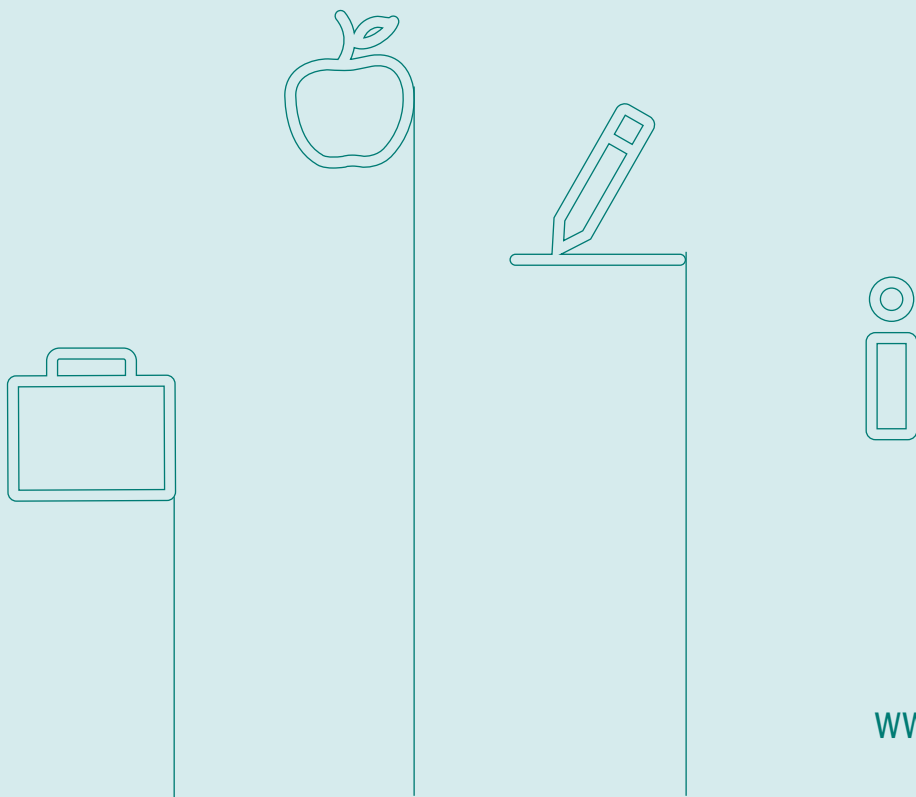


Poynter.

CORE SKILLS

for the Future of Journalism

By Howard I Finberg and Lauren Klinger
The Poynter Institute for Media Studies



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About The Poynter Institute

The Poynter Institute for Media Studies is an international leader in journalism education, and a strategy center that stands for uncompromising excellence in journalism, media and 21st century public discourse. Poynter faculty teach seminars and workshops at the Institute in St. Petersburg, Fla., and at conferences and organizational sites around the world. Its e-learning division, News University, www.NewsU.org, offers the world's largest online journalism curriculum, with more than 250 interactive courses and 290,000 students. The Institute's website, www.Poynter.org, produces 24-hour coverage of news about media, ethics, technology, the business of news and the trends that currently define and redefine journalism news reporting. The world's top journalists and media innovators come to Poynter to learn and teach new generations of reporters, storytellers, media inventors, designers, visual journalists, documentarians and broadcast producers, and to build public awareness about journalism, media, the First Amendment and protected discourse that serves democracy and the public good.

Core Skills for the Future of Journalism

Introduction

Creating a successful journalist is not like passing a recipe down through generations. There is no single fixed formula of core skills that journalists need to be successful. It is a list that is forever changing and evolving, just like journalism itself.

What was, in one era, an essential journalism skill might be utterly (or comically) irrelevant today.

*Wells Drury got just one answer when he asked the editor of the Gold Hill (Nev.) News for a job in 1874. Alf Doten looked up from his grimy desk and asked, "Can you shoot?"*¹

As newspapers and other media evolved, so did the skills of the successful journalists. Educators tried to identify the attributes of a successful journalist, while both editors and educators debated whether journalism was a trade or a profession. From the 1949 textbook "Newsmen at Work":

*Qualifications for success in the twentieth century are different from those even of the so-called Golden Age of journalism. To succeed today, the newsman should be an applied psychologist², resourceful researcher, facile writer, and responsible analyst. In addition, of course, he should have an unquenchable enthusiasm for his profession.*³



Journalists at Work. Photo taken between 1915 and 1923. Source: Library of Congress

¹Newsmen at Work. Reporting and Writing the News by Laurence R. Campbell and Roland Wolseley; Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949; page 11

²According to the authors, being an applied psychologist meant being a student of the science of human relations.

³Ibid

The advent of digital media means that the core skills for journalists are much more complex today than during the Gold Rush days of newspapering or the development of journalism schools in the first half of the 20th century.

Identifying the core skills that matter today is not an academic exercise or a trip down memory lane.

Identifying these core skills is of urgent importance for the future of journalism — and of vital interest to not only editor and educator, but also democracy. And this is not just a journalism issue; this is an economic issue that affects the viability of media organizations.

Journalists with the right skills are essential for journalism — and for preserving journalism’s role within society.

For editors and managers, it’s about ensuring that the people they hire have the skills necessary to produce successful journalism that can compete in an ever-more-crowded marketplace of news and information. For educators, it’s about teaching the appropriate skills to students. For citizens, it’s about having access to ideas, perspectives and facts gathered ethically and with context, not just a scattershot spray of information.

A shared sense of urgency in the industry and the academy is essential to ensure that today’s and tomorrow’s journalists have the skills to create journalism that is both meaningful and economically successful. The 21st-century journalists educators teach and editors seek will need a much wider range of competencies than professional journalists needed in the previous 150 years.

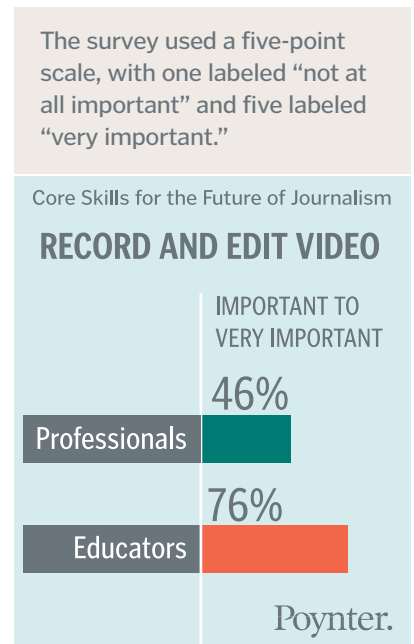
Unfortunately, that shared sense of urgency is absent.

New research from The Poynter Institute shows wide divergence between professionals and educators in their thinking on the importance of core journalism skills, especially those skills that are essential for multimedia storytelling on new platforms and new methods of gathering and delivering news and information.

Poynter’s Future of Journalism Competencies survey identified 37 key proficiencies and asked professionals, educators and students to rate the importance of those skills, attributes and knowledge areas to beginning journalists as they look toward careers in the digital and mobile age.

Professionals at media organizations rated the importance of all of the multimedia skills much lower than did educators, students and even independent or freelance journalists. The difference is remarkable:

- When it comes to the skills needed to **record and edit video**, less than half [46 percent] of the professionals who responded said that that ability was important to very important
- Yet more than three-fourths [76 percent of educators] regarded this skill as important to very important



Even photography, an essential skill since most reporters today are equipped with smartphones or cameras, is less important to professionals than to educators:

- 53 percent of professionals responded that the **ability to shoot and edit photographs** was important to very important
- 79 percent of educators responded that photography skills were important to very important
- Independent journalists, those working on their own or at organizations with fewer than five employees, rated this skill higher than other professionals, with 66 percent saying it was important to very important

There is also gap between professionals and educators regarding audio.

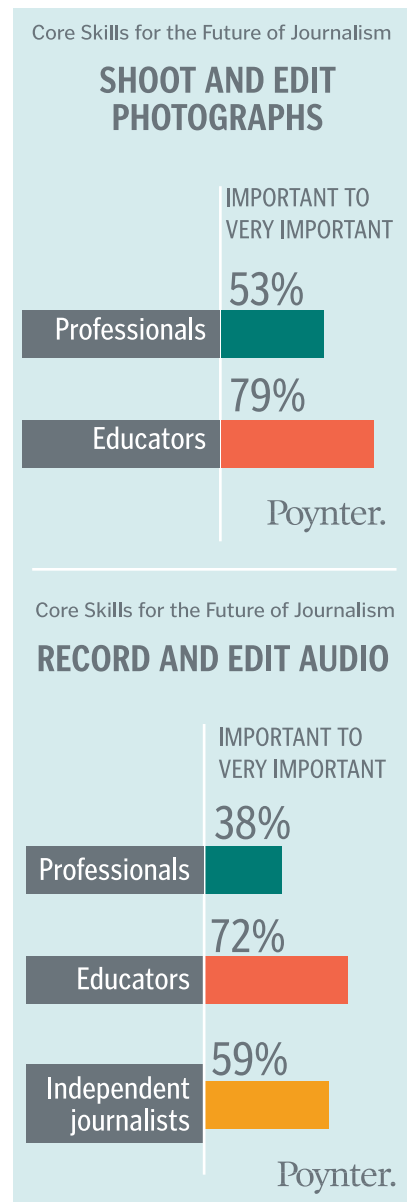
- When it comes to the skills needed to **record and edit audio**, more than a third [38 percent] of the professionals who responded said that that ability was important to very important
- Yet more than 70 percent of educators regarded this skill as important to very important
- And almost 60 percent of independent journalists also thought that the ability to deal with audio was important to very important

Given the evolving platforms for journalism — the Web, mobile, tablets — the gap between professionals and educators [and the other groups surveyed] in assigning importance to digital skills is noteworthy. After more than a decade of work interviewing or surveying nearly 30,000 journalists around the world, Lars Wilnat et al. argue that “With digitalization and convergence reshaping newsrooms and news practices, journalists increasingly need to be able to produce and process text, video, and sound in their reporting.”⁴

The gap may indicate that professionals in media organizations, both staff members and managers, have not fully embraced the digital skills so essential to online and other new forms of journalism. While not all of the core skills surveyed should be emphasized equally when it comes to training today’s beginning journalists, all are important. As more journalism is produced for the Web, for tablets and for mobile devices — not just published on them — it is striking that professionals who responded placed relatively little importance upon the skills necessary to shoot video, record audio, take photographs and tell visual stories. There were also gaps in other categories that are important to understanding the global digital media environment, including understanding different cultures and the media landscape.

Tom Huang, Sunday and enterprise editor of The Dallas Morning News, responded to a request for comment about the survey in an email:

“So while I recognize the importance of digital skills, if I had to choose, I’d first choose journalists with ‘traditional’ skills and then train them on digital skills, rather than the other way around. I think the point of the survey, though, is that we shouldn’t have to choose. New journalists should come equipped with a whole host of skills, both traditional and digital.”



⁴Wilnat, L., Weaver, D., and Choi, Jihyang. 2013. “The Global Journalist in the Twenty-First Century.” *Journalism Practice* 7:2, 163-183.

The educators who responded to Poynter's survey appear to value digital and multimedia skills. Educators also value knowledge about the business of media and the larger media landscape. To a greater degree than professionals, educators also appear to recognize the value of key newsgathering skills that have become more essential in the digital age, such as the ability to analyze and synthesize large amounts of data.

Perhaps, given the drumbeat over the past three years from various individuals, including this report's co-author Howard Finberg and the Knight Foundation's Eric Newton, the finding that educators are becoming more digital-savvy should not be surprising.

Sue Burzynski Bullard, associate professor of journalism at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln and former managing editor of the Detroit News, she said she wasn't surprised that educators rated digital skills highly in the survey.

“After the 2012 call for change in journalism education,” she wrote in an email, “the debate among educators about what journalism graduates need to know got louder. It became harder to ignore the need for change. Most educators would say it's important that our students understand digital skills and multimedia storytelling if they're going to find jobs in today's journalism world. Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean every journalism professor is ready or willing to incorporate those skills into their classes yet. That's still evolving. And in some cases, it's still a battle.”

It is important to remember that saying something is important, which was our survey question, is not the same as using or teaching those skills. However, the first step to doing something new is to acknowledge its importance.

Karen Magnuson, editor and vice president/news at the Democrat and Chronicle Media Group in Rochester, N.Y., expressed skepticism about whether these skills are being taught.

“Educators may think all of those things are important but the results coming out of colleges are very mixed,” she said in an email. “My personal experience with journalism grads is that they fall into one of two categories: solid writers/reporters with limited digital skill sets or multimedia journalists who are great with video but don't understand how to work a beat or dig much deeper than what's given in a press release or press conference. Both types are problematic in today's newsrooms. We need it all!”

However, the results of this survey suggest that educators have listened to the debate about the need to change, at least enough to acknowledge the importance of new skills. But the question remains about what professionals are hearing when it comes to the need to change what they do. And whether there is a disconnect between the staff members, as represented in the survey, and the senior management at various newspaper companies who are, in many cases, pushing their organizations to adapt to the digital age.

During the past 10 years, the media industry has seen the decline of the specialist and the corresponding rise of the generalist. It started in the broadcast industry with “one-man band” journalism, where the reporter is also the cameraperson and sound engineer, and it has spread to print publications. Print journalists are routinely expected to take pictures and record sound bites and even video to complement their text-based stories so that those stories make compelling content for digital platforms.

THE 37 CORE SKILLS

Curiosity

Accuracy

Handle stress and
deadlines well

Handle criticism well

Have broad general
knowledge

Have good social skills

Be a team player

Be acquainted with
journalistic ethics

Knowledge of other cultures

Knowledge of government

Understand the media
landscape

Be familiar with copyright

Be familiar with
journalism laws

Have knowledge of the
business of media

Have good news judgment

Have knowledge of
current events

Select information based
on reliability

Be a team leader

Ability to embrace change
and innovation

If professionals need another indicator that the workplace is changing, they only have to consider the disappearance of journalism jobs. Print media have lost 16,000 jobs in the past decade, a drop of almost 30 percent, according to the American Society of News Editors, reported in the [Pew State of the News Media 2014](#) report. The survivors are expected to take on new and increasingly digital tasks. In the same time frame, Pew estimates that about 5,000 new journalism jobs have been created—in digital-only news outlets.

It seems obvious that digital skills are essential for any journalist who wants to succeed in the 21st century.

Thus a discussion about skills is part of the larger debate about the future of journalism education. During the past two years, academics, foundation leaders and professionals have expressed a wide range of opinions about whether journalism education can be saved—and even whether a journalism degree is valuable.

Two Poynter studies on the topic showed an enormous gulf between professionals and professors about the value of a journalism degree. The first survey was conducted in 2012 as research for a [speech co-author Howard Finberg gave at 20th anniversary celebration by the European Journalism Centre](#). That survey had responses from more than 2,000 professionals and educators.

In a follow-up study on the [State of Journalism Education 2013](#), Finberg wrote:

- 96 percent of those who identified themselves as educators believed that a journalism degree was very important to extremely important when it came to understanding the value of journalism
- Editors and those who worked in journalism had a less favorable opinion, with only 57 percent of professionals saying that a degree was very important to extremely important

The 2013 report also identified a significant gap between educators' and professionals' views of the importance of a journalism degree when it came to "abilities in newsgathering, editing and presenting the news."

And while understanding the positions of the various stakeholders—students, teachers, hiring editors—is valuable in shaping the future of journalism education, both studies left questions about how to close the divide. With that goal, we conducted a new survey to provide more specific guidance to educators looking to reshape curriculum to meet the changing needs of the media industry.

Poynter's new research is based on the Future of Journalism Competencies survey, which was conducted in late 2013 and early 2014. The survey received more than 2,900 responses from media organization professionals, independent or freelance journalists, educators and students. The participation breakdown was:

- Professionals: 1,124, 39 percent; 425 participants identified themselves as managers or senior editors
- Educators: 996 participants, 34 percent
- Independent journalists: 356, 12 percent
- Students or recent grads: 426, 15 percent

Analyze and synthesize large amounts of data

Network, make contacts and develop sources

Search online information on an advanced level

Master interview techniques

Search for news and check sources without the use of the internet

Look at news with a historical perspective

Interpret statistical data and graphics

Storytelling

Write in a fluent style

Write using correct grammar

Master various forms of journalistic writing

Understand audience expectations and needs

Speaking skills

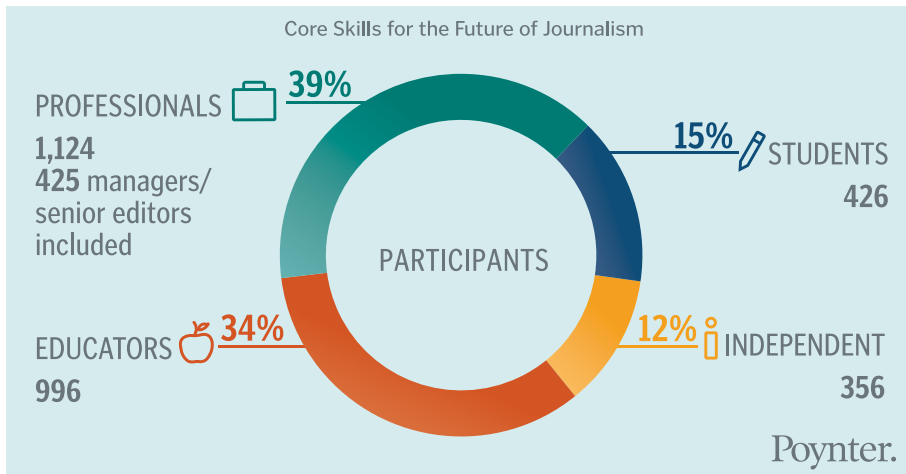
Ability to work with HTML or other computer languages

Shoot and edit video

Shoot and edit photographs

Record and edit audio

Ability to tell stories with design and visuals



Survey participants were asked to indicate the importance of 37 different skills and attributes for a “beginning journalist as he/she looks toward his/her career in the digital/mobile age.” The 37 skills were derived from academic research by Nico Drok⁵ and Michael Opgenhaffen et al.⁶, and the survey was viewed as a means of building on this work and extending the conversation. The survey used a five-point scale, with one labeled “not at all important” and five labeled “very important.” The skills were grouped into four categories:

- Knowledge, attitudes and personal features or values had 19 skills
- Newsgathering had 7 skills
- Basic news production had 6 skills
- Technical or multimedia production had 5 skills

This example is representative of how we asked survey questions: *At your organization, what newsgathering skills do you think beginning journalists need to have? Rate the following newsgathering skills from Not at All Important to Very Important.*

We used similar wording for the general attitudes, news production and multimedia topics.

Knowledge, Attitudes and Personal Features

Nearly all of the participants surveyed agreed on some essential skills and traits for today’s journalists. The number-one rated skill was “**accuracy**,” followed by “**curiosity**.”

- Professionals rated “**accuracy**” at 96 percent as important to very important; educators rated this skill at 99 percent
- Educators rated “**curiosity**” at 98 percent as important to very important; professionals rated this attribute at 93 percent

⁵Drok, N. 2013. “Beacons of Reliability.” *Journalism Practice*, 7:2, 145-162.

⁶Opgenhaffen, M., d’Haenens, L. and Corten, M. “Journalistic Tools of the Trade in Flanders.” *Journalism Practice*, 7:2, 127-144.

Survey Comments From the Professionals



“Like today’s journalists, future journalists would do well with a good liberal education, or equivalent life experience. A beginning journalist need not be fresh out of college. If the beginner is right out of college, we can’t afford to extend our precious few openings to graduates who have skimped on math and science courses. But I concede that we probably will, since the hiring editors of today are often the journalism students of the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s.”

John Campbell

“Don’t get too comfortable with the present. Journalism is ever-changing, more so than many other fields. Solid writing skills, flexibility and curiosity go a long way in helping one adapt.”

Sally Bahner

“The most critical skill necessary for a career in journalism is the ability to listen, to hear what’s being said and what’s not being said, and knowing how to test and confirm the information obtained. Listening, someone once told me, is an active pursuit, not a passive one. Too many young reporters spend too much time and effort thinking about the next question or pretending to understand an answer so they don’t look unintelligent. They’re incapable of recognizing contradictions or handling a media savvy interviewee. They are more stenographer than journalist.”

Chuck Haga, senior reporter, Grand Forks (N.D.) Herald.

“Modern journalists are expected to maintain an edge on a 24/7 news cycle, along with an understanding of the latest social network. As information continues to spread rapidly online, journalism education must be focused on teaching the fundamentals of accuracy and quality in storytelling while acknowledging and mastering the breakneck pace of modern media reporting.”

Justine Benstead

“The biggest thing I see lacking in some of the new grads that have come through our organization — and even in some more seasoned professionals — is the ability to think critically. By that I mean being able to judge newsworthiness and relevance, but it also means being able to perceive issues and events in their larger context, because only then can the writer understand and describe the relationship of seemingly disparate elements of a news story and identify gaps in coverage”.

Cindy Borgmeyer

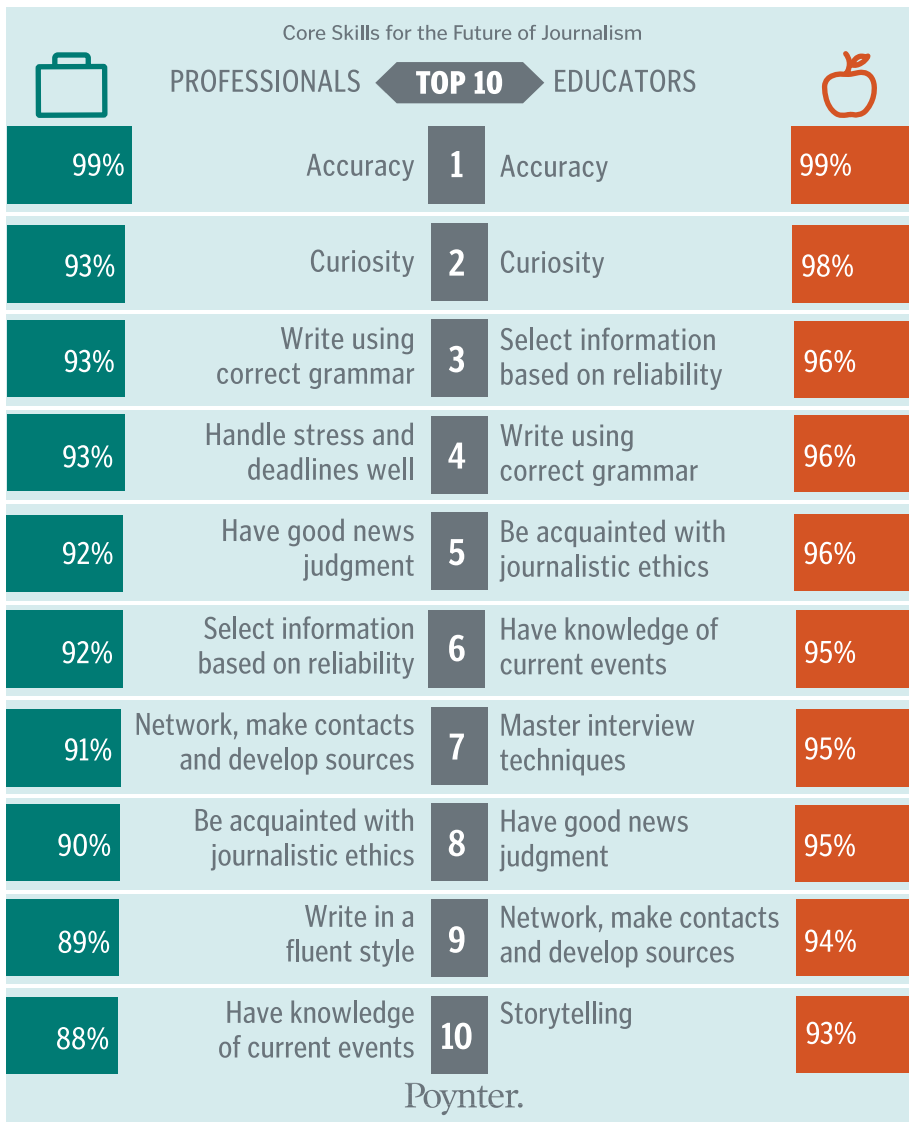
“I think job-hunting and networking skills should be included among the most important things beginning journalists need to know, as well as a “fallback” career skill in case they can’t find a job or get laid off. They also need to understand this is a low-paying profession and that they’ll likely need to work a second job, especially in the beginning of their careers if not throughout.”

Serenah McKay

“Above all else I value critical/analytical thinking skills, a strong work ethic, a passion for quality and accuracy and a willingness to accept and learn from feedback. Although it is convenient if entry-level reporters have the other skills and knowledge addressed in this survey, I can teach and they can learn any of it — as long as they have that critical foundation.”

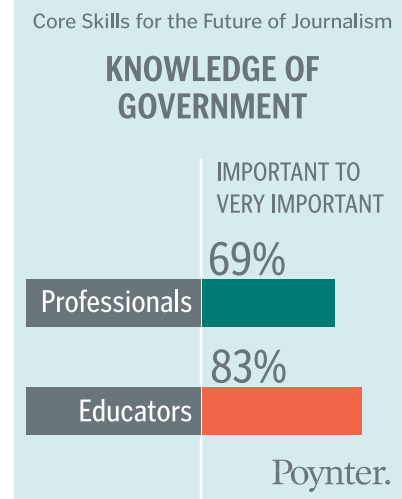
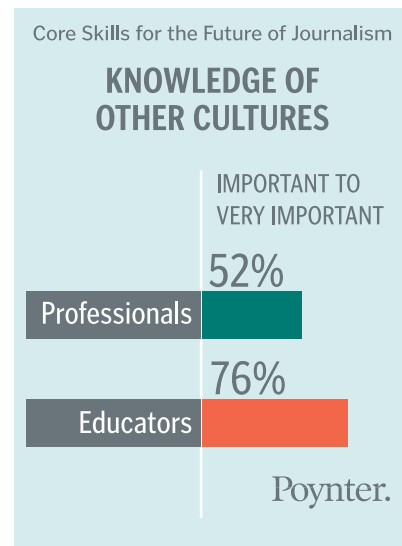
Gienna Shaw

The top-10 skills lists of both professional and educator survey participants included most of the same skills, although the order varied. Of the skills that didn't make both top-10 lists, only two ("Storytelling" and "Master interview techniques") diverged by more than a few percentage points.



However, significant differences were found between professionals and educators when it came to rating other knowledge, attitudes and personal features. For example:

- Three-quarters [76 percent] of educators said that “**knowledge of other cultures**” is important to very important; only half [52 percent] of professionals agreed
- The gap was a little narrower when it came to “**knowledge of government**,” with almost 70 percent of professionals rating this as important to very important versus 83 percent of educators



Both of these knowledge questions raise essential issues around effective coverage of institutions and communities. With the increasing diversity of the United States population, having some understanding of other cultures would make for more effective journalism — journalism where more individuals would see themselves within the stories being covered.

Aly Colón, former director of standards and practices at NBC News and now the Knight Chair for Journalism Ethics at Washington and Lee University, believes that the issue might be one of focus rather than importance. Colón wrote in an email that, “In general, professionals focus on what they do daily, and educators focus on what they see emerging: the practical versus the prescient.

“In newsrooms dominated by white males and fighting to survive, craft skills may trump cultural knowledge. And the decline of minority journalists, who lost jobs or sought employment elsewhere, leaves today’s shrinking newsrooms without advocates for expanding cultural knowledge. Educators, however, may see increasing cultural diversification in their classrooms and in their research. They recognize their students will enter a more multicultural world and need to learn about other cultures if they hope to provide more complete coverage of their communities.”

However, that doesn’t explain the fact that the gap between professionals and educator cut across a range of skills, including essential digital skills.

Skills for Innovation

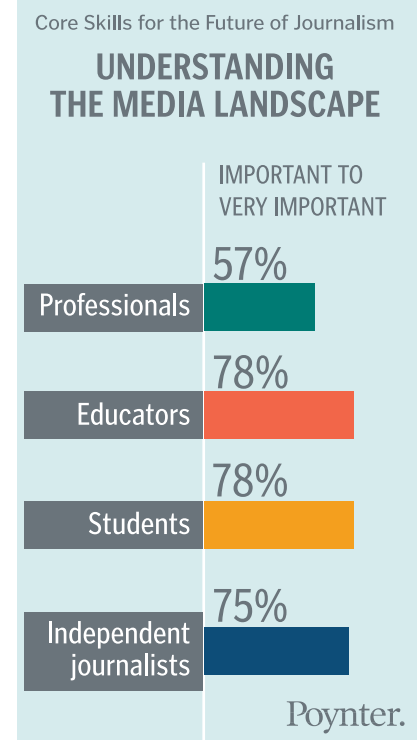
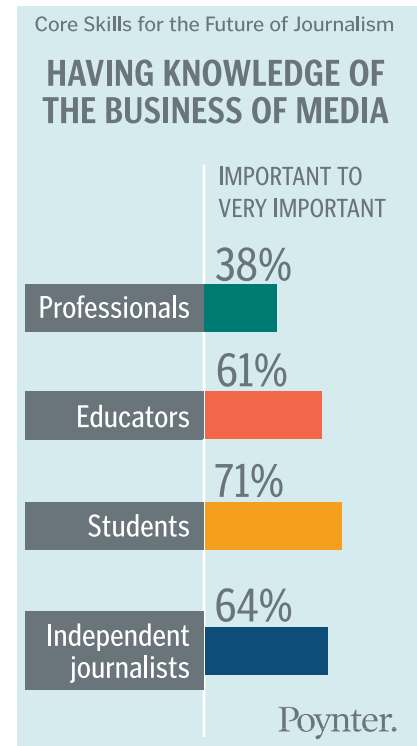
Today’s media landscape is littered with failed attempts at innovation. Traditional publications and broadcast stations struggle to find new audiences, as well as new approaches, for journalism that is increasingly affected by technology. In addition, many staff members are asked to think about ways to create new products that have both journalistic merit and revenue potential. Yet, professionals in our survey did not see knowledge about the business of media as important.

- More than a third of professionals in the survey [38 percent] said “**having knowledge of the business of media**” was important to very important
- But far more — 61 percent — educators said business knowledge was important to very important
- Students, at 71 percent, and independent journalists at 64 percent, agreed with educators, saying that business understanding was important to very important

Related to understanding the business is “**understanding the media landscape.**” This ability helps media professionals recognize the importance of emerging media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook —and anticipate the next Twitter and Facebook.

Again, the professionals found this skill to be less important than did educators..

- 78 percent of educators responded that understanding the media landscape is an important to very important skill
- 57 percent of professionals responded that understanding the media landscape is an important to very important skill
- Independent journalists, at 75 percent, and students, at 78 percent, were closely aligned with the educators



Jeff Jarvis, professor and director of the Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism at CUNY and a frequent critic of the lack of innovation in both the industry and education, proposed a possible explanation for the findings in an email requesting his opinion:

“One might suppose that journalism faculty would be behind on these questions of innovation and sustainability, given the conservatism built into the academy and given the fact that many professors have not been in the newsroom or the field in some time.”

Jarvis said one possible explanation is that the

“educators are closer to the future because they are closer to the students, who are worried about supporting themselves and thus about the sustainability of the field and who chose to come to journalism school now because they want to be part of the disruption. Thus it’s good to see the educators and the students and independent journalists in sync.”

Jarvis raised the concern that the professionals who responded to our survey don’t

“worry about the business of journalism as long as those who do worry about it continue to give them paychecks.”

One who does worry about the future of the business is **Mizell Stewart**, vice president/content, newspaper division, The E.W. Scripps Co., who sees organizations making this digital transformation.

Stewart wrote in an email that,

“The range of skills necessary to navigate this transition goes far, far beyond bread-and-butter competencies such as writing, editing and practicing the discipline of verification. Teamwork and collaboration, audience engagement, marketing, project management, data journalism, video editing ... the list goes on and on. Along the way, we also have to understand what it takes to build successful digital news and information businesses with revenue models that may be very, very different than the ones we know today.”

Randy Bennett, former vice president for digital at the Newspapers Association of America and newly named director of entrepreneurship at the University of Florida, believes that there may be confusion between understanding how to grow the business and media economics, although both are important. Bennett wrote in an email that,

“The relatively lower rating on ‘the media landscape’ may reflect continued denial about opportunities outside of legacy media”

Bennett continued,

“The media executives I talk to all acknowledge the importance of hiring journalists who understand and accept their role in not just reporting and editing, but also increasing consumer engagement and loyalty, in acquisition and retention. Further, there is increased support for, as former Washington Post executive editor Len Downie aptly described it, the newsroom and advertising department working together ‘in order to understand how to understand a business, how to enlarge a business, how to create an innovation.’”

While not as glamorous and future-focused as understanding the media landscape, understanding of journalism laws and familiarity with copyright were two additional knowledge areas that educators, students and freelancers rated higher in importance than did other professionals.

- Two-thirds [67 percent] of professionals said that being **familiar with journalism laws** was important to very important
- The educator response was 84 percent, with independent journalists at 82 percent
- When it came to being **familiar with copyright**, the gap was a little narrower: 61 percent of professionals said that this knowledge was important to very important and 74 percent of educators agreed

Some of the other core skills in this area, such as **news judgment, knowledge of current events** and **selection of information based on reliability**, did not show significant differences in importance for professionals, educators, students and independent journalists.

These results are heartening, as these skills are critically important in today's media landscape, where sorting information from the deluge of misinformation is increasingly challenging.

The core skills and traits in the knowledge, attitudes and personal features section of Poynter's Core Skills survey comprise an essential foundation for the development of successful journalists. Journalism departments and schools emphasize development of these aptitudes, while many of these skills and knowledge areas are reflected in model curricula for journalism education.

Teaching Teamwork and Leadership

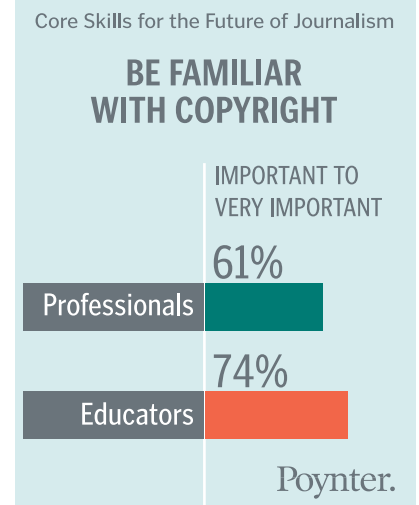
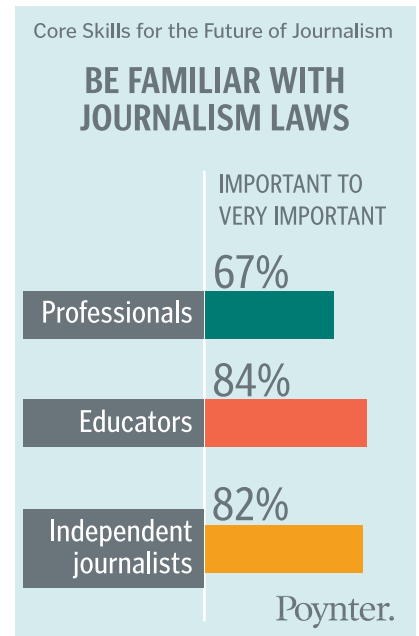
However, there's one area that isn't taught by most journalism schools. Yet, as today's newsrooms evolve and as new types of media organization emerge, it is increasingly important that journalists function effectively as team members and team leaders.

While much of journalism is an "individual sport," in most cases, many other individuals — such as the copy editor, designer or programmer — can help make a good story even better. And there are still times when groups of journalists come together to cover an event or topic. Being a good team member is an obvious skill that today's beginning journalist needs.

More than 80 percent of the professionals who responded to the survey said that being a "**team player**" was important to very important. That was higher than the 71 percent response by educators. Educators might want to think about how they can help students understand that journalism is not a "lone wolf" profession.

Collaboration is one of the hallmarks of digital journalism according to **Robert Hernandez**, a USC assistant professor of professional practice and Poynter Institute adjunct faculty member. Teaching students to value collaboration is essential.

"It's still very much that collaboration is a sign of weakness in our industry and in other industries,"



he says, but adds that he disagrees with that view.

“To feel confident about your skills and to also empower and respect the skills of somebody else, that’s the secret sauce that I’m going for.”

Educators’ and professionals’ responses to the question about being a “team leader” were similar to those for “team player”: Fewer than a third of professionals [31 percent] and a little more than a third of educators [39 percent] said that being a team leader was an important to very important skill.

This might be a missed opportunity, as today’s newsrooms have few middle managers, and often ad hoc or quick-hit groups are created to solve specific problems. Teaching journalists how to be good leaders is not about teaching them how to be managers; rather it is teaching them how to listen to colleagues, facilitate teamwork and provide encouraging direction to colleagues.

Jennifer Greer, interim dean at the College of Communication and Information Sciences at the University of Alabama, said in an email message that journalism schools are informally teaching these skills as part of the classroom work and assignments that require team projects. “That said,” she wrote, .

You’re right in that management and business classes focused on teamwork and leadership typically aren’t required. Many professionals and almost as many educators that I’ve talked to have argued that they should be, but we do face institutional roadblocks sometimes in partnering with our business schools and colleges, because the demand for those courses is so high, and they often have prerequisites.

“Many educators have been out of the profession for a while, and in earlier eras in the news business, teamwork wasn’t stressed as much it is today, especially in the old ‘print’ newsrooms. Also, in previous decades, educators weren’t programmed to think that we were producing students who would become team leaders upon graduation — as the idea of ‘entry level’ was more in our minds. In today’s environment, those concepts are fading, and people are hired with the idea that they may be leaders immediately or go back and forth in the leader role based on the task at hand.”

Perhaps, in the long run, the skills that contribute to teamwork will be identified as more important by both professionals and educators.

Newsgathering Skills

The ability to find and make sense of information is almost the definition of newsgathering, so it seems safe to call this an essential skill for the beginning journalist. We asked professionals and educators to rate the importance of two key aspects of newsgathering that require this ability. Both the ability to **analyze and synthesize large amounts of data** and **the ability to interpret statistical data** were rated as more important by educators than by professionals.

When it comes to the ability to “**analyze and synthesize large amounts of data**,” a little more than half [55 percent] of the professionals responded that this was important to very important. Almost three-fourths [73 percent] of the educators rated this skill as important to very important.

Survey Comments From the Educators



“There’s a lyric from an old song that comes to mind: “I used to be plastic. But now I’m elastic. I’m flexible.” Flexibility is a key trait for a beginning journalist. Obviously they will learn the basics of good journalism, enterprise and storytelling. But they will also have to learn multiple editing and camera systems and social media platforms that haven’t yet been invented. At newspapers, they will shoot and edit video and produce packages. At broadcast stations, they will write long form text stories for the Web. Many may never work for a traditional news operation but instead be entrepreneurs who must know how to develop a business plan, run a business, pitch concepts, create and run their own websites. We should also be teaching these skills.”

Mary Cox, Webster University

“I think that journalism education — and a lot of higher education — is poised to face the kind of disruption that has changed the music and television industries, and the media landscape, in recent years. What form that disruption will take is unclear, but the need for journalism education — not only for producers of news but for consumers as well — is critical; the ability to sort reliable information from erroneous and deliberately false information is vital for democracy to continue.”

Peter H. Martyn

“Besides the basic fundamentals of journalism — accuracy, relevance, story, ethics, etc. — we need to teach students how to be flexible. I mean “flexible” on many levels: flexible in platform approach, flexible in cultural approach, flexible in thinking what is journalism. The beginning reporter today is confronted not only with rapidly changing technology but also with transformative demographic evolutions, globalization, business model experimentation the likes of which were not (as) present even 20 years ago. I try to talk to my students how to approach new situations — be it a new digital feature or a new majority population — and how to learn on the fly. That constant change is now a constant reality in whatever kind of newsroom my students will enter.”

Sue Robinson, UW-Madison

“The essentials of curiosity, solid, fair and accurate reporting, accessible writing and ethics are at the heart of being a successful journalist. If you do not master those basics, there is no sense in pursuing a career. You have to love digging for a good story and finding out information the public does not even know it needs. The medium is the delivery method, but mastering technical skills will never replace looking someone square in the eye to ask a tough question.”

Arlene Morgan, recently retired
as associate dean, Columbia
School of Journalism

“I think if young journalists aren’t interested in audience engagement, they should probably find a new profession.”

Doreen Marchionni, Pacific
Lutheran University

“The challenge for the future of journalism education is developing the “proper partnership” between the industry and academia. Both sides need to really embrace the other. Right now, they give lip service to that, but they don’t do it. I am concerned that this analogy will come across as trite, but there is a journalism war being waged. People in the industry sometimes seem to think they are on the front line, looking for reinforcements from academia; and academics sometimes seem to think they are just providing cannon fodder in a fight where the cause is forgotten.” Whew, heavy stuff, I know, but it’s an analogy that needs to be confronted.”

Michael Castengera, Grady
College of Journalism

The response to the question about the ability to “**interpret statistical data and graphics**” was similar:

- 59 percent of professionals and
- 80 percent of educators called this skill important to very important

Given the large amounts of data available on the Internet and the growing importance of presenting information in a pleasing and informative visual manner, the gap between educators and professionals is disturbing. The ability to make sense of our complex world by distilling meaningful information from the vast river of data is one of the great values professional journalists can offer their audience.

Related to those newsgathering skills is the ability to “**search for news and check sources without the use of the Internet.**” Today’s journalism students have grown up with Google. It is an instinctive response: Have a question? Look it up online. But not everything is online, and not everything online is accurate or complete. Yet having the ability to find and verify information “offline” is seen as a much more important skill by educators than by professionals.

Fewer than two-thirds [62 percent] of professionals responded that this is a important to very important skill, versus 80 percent of the educators in the survey.

One other area in the newsgathering section is worth noting: the skill of interviewing. When it comes to the ability to “**master interview techniques,**” almost all educators [95 percent] said this was important to very important, while only 80 percent of professionals said the same.

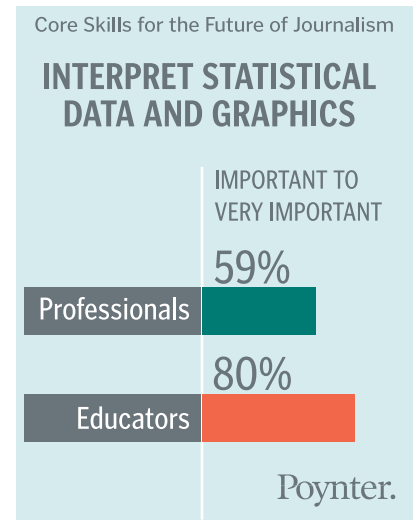
Placing less importance on interviewing skills may reflect a problematic willingness by too many journalists to rely on press conferences and news releases to “feed the daily beast.” It could also be a reflection of the lack of staffing at many organizations to allow for the time to conduct more than superficial interviews. Overall, this could be dangerous to the future of journalism as it doesn’t provide media organizations the context, in-depth reporting and thoughtful analysis that differentiates them from commodity news easily found on the Web.

News Production Skills

The good news with this area of abilities is the alignment between educators and professionals as to the importance of the skills needed to turn newsgathering into news production. Respondents in both groups attached similar levels of importance to such skills as storytelling, writing in a fluent style, using correct grammar and understanding audience expectations and needs.

A gap appeared in only one skill area: the ability to “**master various forms of journalistic writing.**” Again, professionals rated this skill as less important than did educators:

- More than two-thirds [68 percent] of professionals rated this skill as important to very important; managers were slightly higher at 70 percent
- But 84 percent of educators in the survey said the ability to “**master various forms of journalistic writing**” was important to very important



In the multiplatform media environment, the skill to write different types of stories would seem to be essential. Today, print journalists write for the Web and often prepare video segments; broadcast journalists need to write for the Web and provide additional material to support their video and/or audio stories. Few journalists work exclusively on one platform.

However, **Kathy Best**, editor of The Seattle Times, has a different perspective

“I don’t think it’s enough for traditional print newsrooms to offer audio, video and interactive graphics and databases,” she wrote in an email. “We need to offer quality experiences for our readers who are watching, interacting with or listening to those storytelling forms. While a sports reporter, for example, should be able to do the basic editing required to post a video clip of an interview on a blog, I would not expect that reporter to have the skill to edit a three- or five-minute narrative video. To do that well requires constant practice and special skills.”

The failure to recognize the importance of mastering a variety of forms might explain the results found in another skill area, though — technical skills. If professionals have not completely accepted the need for proficiency on multiple platforms, they are unlikely to appreciate the need for technical proficiency.

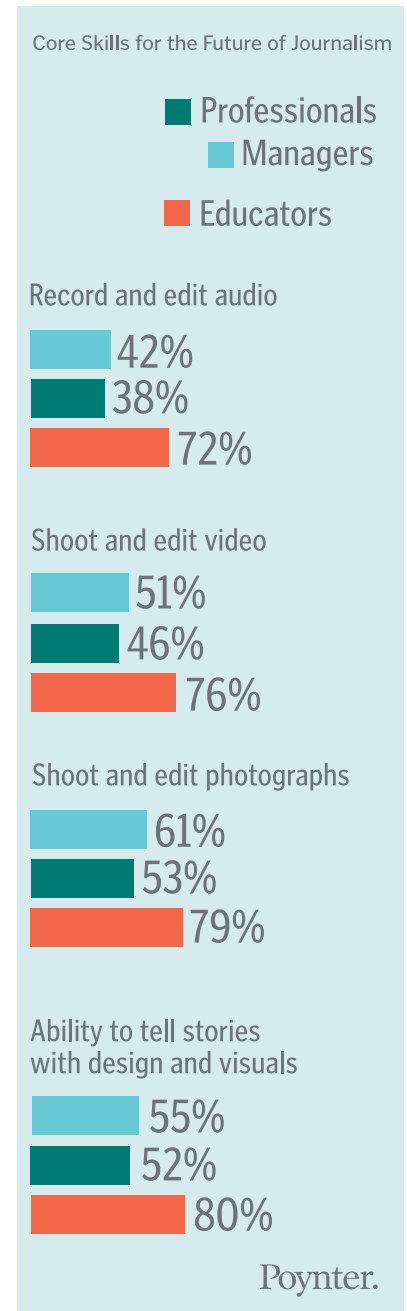
Technical or Multimedia Production Skills

This category showed the greatest gap between professionals and educators, especially around multimedia skills. The key skills and the differences were:

- **Record and edit audio:** 38 percent of professionals versus 72 percent of educators said this skill was important to very important; managers at media organizations responded at 42 percent
- **Shoot and edit video:** 46 percent of professionals [50 percent of managers] versus 76 percent of educators
- **Ability to tell stories with design and visuals:** 52 percent for professionals versus 80 percent for educators
- **Shoot and edit photographs:** 53 percent of professionals versus 79 percent of educators; media managers, at 61 percent, said this skill was important to very important

These results seem to indicate that, even after more than 15 years of discussions about how the media industry is going digital or the need for journalists to become “digital first,” professional respondents report a lesser sense of importance for digital and multimedia skills than educators, students and independent journalists. Of all the survey results, this area points most clearly to the lack of urgency among veteran professionals in the face of a rapidly changing media landscape. Considering all of the layoffs, and in the face of growing focus on publishing on multiple platforms, the persistence of this gap is difficult to explain.

In year-over-year comparisons from 2006-2012, the 2012 Annual Survey of Journalism and Mass Communication Graduates⁷ shows a steady rise in the number of newly employed bachelor’s graduates whose communications jobs routinely demand several of the following skills: using a still camera; recording



⁷Becker, L., Vlad, T., Simpson, H. and Kalpen, K. 2013. 2012 Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Graduates www.grady.uga.edu/annualsurveys/

video; producing content for mobile; writing, reporting and editing for broadcast; designing computer graphics; non-linear editing of moving images.

It's not only independent "backpack" journalists who are expected to have varied skill sets in the current environment. Sports journalists are under the same pressure, Ketterer et al. argued in their 2013 study on skills. "As desired job skills begin overlapping across media," they said, "talents that newspaper sports editors once believed unnecessary (e.g., ability to shoot and edit video) are now seen as advantageous in the convergent environment."⁸

Mindy McAdams, a journalism professor and Knight Chair at the University of Florida, says she believes that

“Educators are responding based on what they know about current job openings, and they learn about these from recent graduates and also from the hiring managers who come to campus job fairs and serve on advisory boards

She wrote in an email,

“The educators’ responses are more in tune with today’s media job market in the broad sense, across all media platforms. The professionals’ responses might be limited by their immediate surroundings, giving them a narrower perspective on the field. One example: Only 5 percent of your professionals came from radio, but I’ll bet all of those gave high marks to ‘Record and edit audio.’”

However, there’s difference of perspective from various editors. **Jeffry Couch**, executive editor and vice president, Belleville News-Democrat and bnd.com, responded to the results of the survey in an email.

“I disagree with some of your interpretations about the possible meaning of the survey results, especially that professionals may not grasp the importance of multimedia skills or that veteran professionals might have a lack of urgency to become ‘digital first.’

“Those conclusions are contrary to what’s happening in newsrooms that I am familiar with, including my own. Our publishing priorities in our newsroom and in newsrooms elsewhere start with digital first. Print is at the end of the line.”

The fifth skill in this category, the “ability to work with HTML or other computer languages,” was rated low by all groups except students. However, there was still a gap: Only 28 percent of professionals and 28 percent of managers said this skill was important to very important, while 41 percent of educators rated this skill as important to very important.

These low numbers are probably temporary, USC’s **Robert Hernandez** argues.

“The concept of coding and programming means different things to different people,”

he said in a Skype interview.

“So HTML is one level, but Python and Ruby is another level, and to create an app is yet another level.”

⁸Ketterer, S., McGuire, J. and Murray, R. 2013. “Contrasting Desired Sports Journalism Skills in a Convergent Media Environment.” *Communication & Sport*

When we talk about digital journalism, coding and programming, it can sometimes be confusing as to what we're really talking about. The reality that Hernandez tries to impress upon all students, though, is that digital is not going away. And no matter what, if you are graduating from a university, he says,

“You should know how the Web works.” The next level, for journalism schools, is to teach “modern journalism.”

For a long time, students at USC were taught both broadcast and print. This was an advantage, Hernandez says, because it allowed them to specialize but also to relate to the other craft, making them better all-around storytellers. The approach now is still an “everything shop” — with audio and digital thrown in. There are levels to the USC program, and while some graduates will go on to be digital journalists who code, many will practice what Hernandez calls “modern journalism” and be skilled at solving problems and telling stories using a variety of tools and as part of a team. Hernandez says his students “know what their role is, they know how to work with a developer, ideally.”

“My goal is for them not to put their foot in their mouth and say, ‘Hey, I don’t do this Web stuff. Someone else do it for me.’ They’re going to know the basics. Are they going to be the coders? No, but they know enough of how the Web works, if something breaks on their CMS during breaking news, they know how to handle it. Social media for journalists; they know that stuff. Regardless of your specialty, you know how to do modern journalism, which has digital baked in all the way around.”

A small majority — 52 percent — of student respondents said that the ability to work with computer languages was important to very important. Hernandez said that this makes sense because, when students arrive on campus, they are content creators already, to some degree.

“The know digital, and they can create content, but they’re not doing it in the name of journalism,” he says. “They’re consumers, and they play with digital content to create things, but not with purpose or with journalism in mind.”

That’s why this group may be the most attuned to the technical future of journalism, including working with databases — a skill, so important in today’s media environment that requires the ability to work with computer languages.

While the survey didn’t explore the challenges in newsrooms to doing multimedia journalism, one possible reason for the lack of importance that professionals attached to these skills is what they experience at work every day. The content management systems in operation at many of today’s media organizations are based on print technologies. Some of these systems are far from ideal production or delivery mechanisms for the video, audio and social media elements that are so important for today’s digital journalism.

If the systems they work on, day in and day out, don’t make it easy for professionals to do digital journalism that is native to the medium, perhaps they take it as a signal that this work is unimportant; that “digital first” is not yet the norm, despite the announcements from managers and media pundits.

Conclusion

Identifying a gap is one thing. That's something that we did in 2012 and 2013 as we looked at the future of journalism education and the value of a journalism degree. Finding ways to close that gap, to provide guidance for the future of journalism education, is a different challenge and the goal of the study.

This time, the disconnect between professors and professionals is more disturbing because professionals seem to place a low value on skills that are essential to multiplatform journalism and storytelling in the digital age. While the authors understand that the challenges of a shrinking newsroom might mean that professionals and managers are refocusing on essential coverage areas, it is confounding and defies common wisdom to deny that the future of journalism requires multiple approaches to storytelling.

Even as educators recognize the importance of digital skills, the teaching of those skills runs into the inevitable challenges journalism schools confront when defining their curricula. Recent changes by ACEJMC to increase the number of hours students might spend in journalism classes is an attempt to give more freedom to accredited schools to teach new digital skills. That's a welcome step toward equipping those students with more skills as they enter the workplace.

But what happens when those students graduate? If newsrooms continue to undervalue digital skills, the future of those organizations is dim. The challenge rests with management and senior leadership to realign their newsrooms with the strategic goals of providing news and information across multiple platforms. It means not just asking journalists to do something new but also explaining the importance of the changes and providing the training to enable journalists to do the job.

Multimedia and digital skills aren't the only new skills essential to the future of journalism. The gap between professionals and professions is evident in other areas:

- Understanding the media landscape and having knowledge of the media business
- Importance of knowledge of other cultures
- The low rating of teamwork and team leadership skills
- The ability to master various forms of journalistic writing

It is time to raise the level of importance of all of these skills because it is time for newsrooms, regardless of platform, to value journalists who have a depth of proficiencies and a broader vision of the media world they work in. These skills are not just for the future; these skills are needed today to create dynamic, engaged and audience-driven publications and broadcasts.

These skills are essential for the jobs of today and the future, not jobs of the past. The jobs of the past aren't coming back. Core Journalism Competencies are skills that provide a foundation for the future.

Comments from Students or Recent Graduates



“An aspiring journalist must be a writer, photographer, producer, Web designer and ethical decision-maker all in one. Training at J-schools should mirror the demands of the multimedia journalism world by propelling students into the field to acquire those skills.”

Steph Barnhart, Portland, Ore.

“Journalists really need to be able to do everything, from writing coherently; shooting and editing audio, video and photographs; having a basic understanding of the business side of the industry and all basic laws associated with the craft; and knowing where to get trustworthy information. While I do think a journalism degree is necessary, I do not think a student learns everything he or she will need in a classroom. I went to Kenya a few months ago just to have the opportunity to put the skills I read about into use, and I learned much more than I would have from even the most spectacular professor. I also take MOOCs to brush up on other aspects of reporting I would otherwise not learn from my J-school. I am passionate about what I do, and I also think that is a valuable trait. If a student is not passionate, it is impossible for him or her to actively pursue, recognize and take any and all opportunities.”

Rebecca Anzel, junior, Stony Brook University

“I think there should be more emphasis on what happens after you graduate — the realities of the job market, how to make your own brand for those that don’t land jobs in traditional media, how to freelance effectively and successfully, some coding/HTML/CSS, but really focus on the basics of journalism. I believe that there is still a lot lacking in that department from what I’ve seen out in the field.”

Carmel Delshad

“I’m extremely fortunate to have had a wide-ranging media experience during my time in journalism school. There, I learned how to think on multiple platforms, writing for multiple audiences, in an environment that embraced traditional journalism values and modern, multiplatform realities. While our school prepared us well for big-market experiences, it didn’t prepare us as well for the technologically slow-to-adapt smaller markets, which is where I currently work. It’s important to prepare journalism students for the realities of a new, tech-driven media environment, but it’s also important to encourage multigenerational audience building, because throughout their careers, the media landscape and audiences will continue to shift.”

Chris Linden, Northwest Quarterly Magazine, Rockford, Ill.

“Ethics and values of journalism need to be stressed more than anything else. A commitment to the truth and to serving the public should be impressed upon all journalism students.”

Rachel C Stella

“I fear that people are losing the definition of journalism. It isn’t who is sleeping with who, it isn’t people tweeting offensive photographs, or anything else that could incite giggles. That is gossip. Journalism is taking people into another life for the soul purpose of making them better humans at the other end of it. And I think that is fading.”

Jennie Barnes

“The problem with journalism education is that the professors are awesome journalists, just not awesome teachers. Because there are so many things to cover and teach, more journalism teachers need to focus on curriculum and make sure they aren’t teaching the same thing twice.”

Jennifer Wolan

How this Project Developed

By Lauren Klinger and Howard I Finberg

Poynter’s research into what skills journalists need in order to be successful emerged from the co-authors’ research in 2013 on what the future of journalism education would look like — but its foundation is academic.

Because Poynter’s 2013 survey confirmed a gap between educators and professionals, this report’s co-authors thought it would be helpful to both communities to have a common foundation about the skills needed in this new era of journalism.

Specifically, we were inspired by two 2013 studies: Opgenhaffen et al. surveyed nearly 600 journalists working in Belgium, asking them to rate 57 competencies. Nico Drok asked nearly 1,500 European journalists and students to assess 50 competencies.

To build on this work, we merged and modified these lists of competencies to apply to all respondents, regardless of geographic location. Poynter’s Future of Journalism Competencies survey asked journalists, educators and students to rate 37 skills, attributes and knowledge areas that could be important to beginning journalists who are looking toward careers in the digital and mobile age.





Drawing upon both professional and academic experiences, we reviewed each of the European core skills to decide which would apply most broadly.

The average ratings from our survey of professionals, educators and students are largely similar the average ratings in the Flanders study, with a few notable exceptions. The Poynter respondents rated familiarity with copyright, familiarity with journalism laws, and acquaintance with ethics markedly higher than did the respondents in the Flanders study. Opgenhaffen et al. noted that familiarity with journalism ethics is “highly valued by the sector but rather neglected in the curricula” in both bachelor’s and master’s programs.

The ability to shoot and edit video and photographs was also valued more among the Poynter respondents than among the Flemish respondents. This makes sense, given the makeup of the Flanders study’s sample; Opgenhaffen et al. describe 9 out of 10 respondents as working for only one medium at a time, calling them “monomedia” journalists. Generally, Opgenhaffen et al. argue, journalism education seems to set journalists up for serial monomedia careers, as digital and multimedia skills are taught to European university students in focused clusters of courses, rather than integrated into courses throughout the curricula.







The Core Skills: Comparing Important/Very Important Rating

Core Skills for the Future of Journalism					
	PROFESSIONALS		EDUCATORS	STUDENTS	INDY
KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PERSONAL FEATURES OR VALUES					
		MANAGERS			
Curiosity	93.44%	94.18%	97.94%	89.64%	96.15%
Accuracy	98.50%	98.49%	98.97%	97.41%	97.52%
Handle stress and deadlines well	93.31%	92.62%	92.56%	91.59%	90.94%
Handle criticism well	86.27%	84.48%	87.11%	88.35%	86.01%
Have broad general knowledge	80.49%	82.75%	89.60%	82.79%	85.86%
Have good social skills	79.91%	80.17%	76.06%	82.85%	75.17%
Be a team player	80.22%	81.61%	70.82%	72.49%	56.09%
Be acquainted with journalistic ethics	89.90%	91.16%	96.23%	92.21%	94.08%
Knowledge of other cultures	51.78%	51.84%	75.91%	75.73%	71.48%
Knowledge of government	69.49%	68.82%	82.86%	67.21%	73.34%
Understand the media landscape	57.40%	57.32%	77.91%	78.04%	75.26%
Be familiar with copyright	61.03%	63.85%	74.32%	77.53%	76.49%
Be familiar with journalism laws	66.92%	69.12%	84.36%	86.64%	82.23%
Have knowledge of the business of media	37.53%	38.57%	60.73%	70.87%	63.99%
Have good news judgment	91.83%	91.33%	94.61%	90.29%	91.23%
Have knowledge of current events	88.18%	89.43%	95.32%	93.51%	91.63%
Select information based on reliability	91.70%	92.44%	96.45%	89.90%	94.07%
Be a team leader	31.44%	32.40%	38.64%	53.72%	31.82%
Ability to embrace change and innovation	87.88%	89.44%	91.31%	89.61%	86.76%

Poynter.





The Core Skills: Comparing Important/Very Important Rating

Core Skills for the Future of Journalism

	PROFESSIONALS		EDUCATORS	STUDENTS	INDY
NEWSGATHERING					
Analyze and synthesize large amounts of data	55.03%	MANAGERS 55.69%	72.63%	70.04%	73.87%
Network, make contacts and develop sources	91.10%	92.04%	94.27%	91.83%	92.33%
Search online information on an advanced level	80.90%	81.04%	91.63%	87.99%	89.82%
Master interview techniques	80.04%	80.39%	95.19%	92.53%	89.19%
Search for news and check sources without the use of the internet	61.69%	67.03%	79.82%	59.74%	70.74%
Look at news with a historical perspective	55.78%	55.91%	70.42%	63.64%	73.86%
Interpret statistical data and graphics	58.97%	61.85%	79.63%	70.13%	69.23%





Poynter.

Core Skills for the Future of Journalism

	PROFESSIONALS		EDUCATORS	STUDENTS	INDY
NEWS PRODUCTION					
Storytelling	84.17%	MANAGERS 85.07%	93.24%	88.97%	92.63%
Write in a fluent style	89.05%	89.43%	92.99%	94.48%	94.41%
Write using correct grammar	93.34%	93.33%	96.33%	96.09%	93.73%
Master various forms of journalistic writing	67.56%	70.11%	84.31%	84.36%	77.01%
Understand audience expectations and needs	79.77%	81.07%	86.57%	88.31%	86.42%
Speaking skills	55.48%	57.97%	66.70%	71.76%	62.93%

Poynter.

The Core Skills: Comparing Important/Very Important Rating

Core Skills for the Future of Journalism					
	PROFESSIONALS		EDUCATORS	STUDENTS	INDY
TECHNICAL OR MULTIMEDIA PRODUCTION					
		MANAGERS			
Ability to work with HTML or other computer languages	28.11%	28.45%	40.93%	52.43%	39.86%
Shoot and edit video	45.83%	50.54%	75.51%	67.64%	54.00%
Shoot and edit photographs	53.38%	60.56%	79.48%	75.73%	65.50%
Record and edit audio	38.11%	41.72%	72.09%	67.21%	59.44%
Ability to tell stories with design and visuals	51.55%	55.48%	79.88%	73.47%	67.25%

Poynter.



Core Skills Ranking: Professionals

Core Skills for the Future of Journalism			
	IMPORTANT - VERY IMPORTANT		IMPORTANT - VERY IMPORTANT
Accuracy	98.50%	Knowledge of government	69.49%
Curiosity	93.44%	Master various forms of journalistic writing	67.56%
Write using correct grammar	93.34%	Be familiar with journalism laws	66.92%
Handle stress and deadlines well	93.31%	Search for news and check sources without the use of the internet	61.69%
Have good news judgment	91.83%	Be familiar with copyright	61.03%
Select information based on reliability	91.70%	Interpret statistical data and graphics	58.97%
Network, make contacts and develop sources	91.10%	Understand the media landscape	57.40%
Be acquainted with journalistic ethics	89.90%	Look at news with a historical perspective	55.78%
Write in a fluent style	89.05%	Speaking skills	55.48%
Have knowledge of current events	88.18%	Analyze and synthesize large amounts of data	55.03%
Ability to embrace change and innovation	87.88%	Shoot and edit photographs	53.38%
Handle criticism well	86.27%	Knowledge of other cultures	51.78%
Storytelling	84.17%	Ability to tell stories with design and visuals	51.55%
Search online information on an advanced level	80.90%	Shoot and edit video	45.83%
Have broad general knowledge	80.49%	Record and edit audio	38.11%
Be a team player	80.22%	Have knowledge of the business of media	37.53%
Master interview techniques	80.04%	Be a team leader	31.44%
Have good social skills	79.91%	Ability to work with HTML or other computer languages	28.11%
Understand audience expectations and needs	79.77%		

Poynter.



Core Skills Ranking: Educators

Core Skills for the Future of Journalism			
	IMPORTANT - VERY IMPORTANT		IMPORTANT - VERY IMPORTANT
Accuracy	98.97%	Knowledge of government	82.86%
Curiosity	97.94%	Ability to tell stories with design and visuals	79.88%
Select information based on reliability	96.45%	Search for news and check sources without the use of the internet	79.82%
Write using correct grammar	96.33%	Interpret statistical data and graphics	79.63%
Be acquainted with journalistic ethics	96.23%	Shoot and edit photographs	79.48%
Have knowledge of current events	95.32%	Understand the media landscape	77.91%
Master interview techniques	95.19%	Have good social skills	76.06%
Have good news judgment	94.61%	Knowledge of other cultures	75.91%
Network, make contacts and develop sources	94.27%	Shoot and edit video	75.51%
Storytelling	93.24%	Be familiar with copyright	74.32%
Write in a fluent style	92.99%	Analyze and synthesize large amounts of data	72.63%
Handle stress and deadlines well	92.56%	Record and edit audio	72.09%
Search online information on an advanced level	91.63%	Be a team player	70.82%
Ability to embrace change and innovation	91.31%	Look at news with a historical perspective	70.42%
Have broad general knowledge	89.60%	Speaking skills	66.70%
Handle criticism well	87.11%	Have knowledge of the business of media	60.73%
Understand audience expectations and needs	86.57%	Ability to work with HTML or other computer languages	40.93%
Be familiar with journalism laws	84.36%	Be a team leader	38.64%
Master various forms of journalistic writing	84.31%		

Suggestions for Teaching the 37 Core Skills for Journalists

We've gathered a collections of tips, techniques and resources for teaching each of the 37 core skills. Poynter faculty members have shared their insights as well. These ideas are just a jumping-off point for this conversation. What are your ideas? Keep the dialogue going by contributing your ideas and getting inspired by others' teaching tips in the Core Skills Discussion Forum on NewsU: newsu.org/journalism-core-skills

Curiosity

Teaching tip (Lauren Klinger):

When I was teaching audio, I assigned students to play with the NPR website. Search anything you're remotely interested in, I told them, and listen to the story. I had them do short presentations in class, telling me the title, topic, reporter, one thing they liked about the story and one thing that was different about the audio vs. text story. I heard a lot of stories that way, stories I would've never sought out otherwise, and some of which ([Planet Money's Rihanna](#) story for one) I continued to use in my teaching for years because they resonated so well with students.

Accuracy

Resources: [NPR's Ethics Handbook](#); [Verification Handbook](#); [Reuters Handbook of Journalism](#); [Reynolds Center Accuracy Checklist](#)

NewsU course: [Getting it Right: Accuracy and Verification in the Digital Age](#)

Handle Stress and Deadlines Well

Faculty insight (Al Tompkins, senior faculty for broadcasting and online): Most of the time, when people are struggling to get stuff done, it's because they don't know how to tell the story. The key is figuring out how to focus the story.

NewsU tutorial: [Find Focus for Your Video Stories](#)

Teaching tip (Vidisha Priyanka): For me, planning was the key when handling breaking news stories for an online newsroom. Preparation in advance on who will do what, when and where is crucial. That allows you to get over

crisis mode quickly and respond to the "breaking" part of the situation. Share a checklist for reporters, photographers and producers on what to do when a story breaks. The list becomes a quick reference guide on what is expected of them and what information they need to gather, which is immensely helpful in situations when you have only a few seconds before deploying. Assigning a project editor as the central point of contact for everyone also helps, as that person becomes the key editor who knows everything about the situation; with one contact point, no one is duplicating efforts, and there are no wasted resources. For a digital story reservoir, have a templated page and train everyone to use the content management system. Train staff to use their smartphones to send short blasts of text updates, pictures and ten-second video clips from the scene.

NewsU course and resource: [The Camera With You: How, and When, to Shoot with a Smartphone](#); [Investigative reporting/editing checklist](#)

Handle Criticism Well

Faculty insight: (Butch Ward, Poynter senior faculty): Too often this skill is intended to mean "I need to be able to tell you what's wrong with your work without worrying that you'll get upset." Regardless of whether the feedback I'm receiving is positive or negative, well-intended or mean-spirited, there might be something in it that will improve my work. So I try to think of this skill as "an openness to learning."

Resource (Jill Geisler, Poynter senior faculty, leadership and management): [Why Feedback Matters](#)

Resource: [How to Handle Criticism](#)

Have Broad General Knowledge

Tip (Vidisha Priyanka): Find time to do smart reading. Make a list of resources, and layer them by dividing them into three categories: in-depth reading, reading for awareness and scanning. In-depth reading materials would be information that you require to know about your beat or topic; reading for awareness is to update your knowledge of what is new and things you need to learn, like new tools or apps; and scanning would cover material that you need to know about so you can refer to it later. Allot at least an hour during the workday to catch up on reading. Do brown-bag lunches with your peer-experts in their topics or beats so everyone has a chance to learn about the uniqueness of particular situations and the relevant areas of interest. Aggregated news/information websites and bookmarking apps can be a great help to sort through information that is relevant to you.

Resources: [Zite](#); [Circa](#); [Mashable](#); [TED](#); [BBC Active](#); [NewsU](#); [spundge](#); [reddit](#)

Have Good Social Skills

Faculty tip: Poynter.org online reporter Kristen Hare sometimes pretends that she's writing a story, even when she isn't. "When I'm in big elbow-rubbing situations, those make me really uncomfortable, but about 10 years ago, what I learned to do is put my 'Reporter Hat' on," she says. "I ask people questions about themselves and genuinely listen to the answers."

Be a Team Player

Resource (Jill Geisler): [Getting to Know "Them"](#)

Be Acquainted with Journalistic Ethics

NewsU course: [Ethics of Journalism](#)

Resources: [Truth & Trust in Media](#); [Searchlights and Sunglasses](#)

Knowledge of Other Cultures

Teaching tip (Vidisha Priyanka): Encourage students to immerse themselves in the culture they are attempting to understand, even if it's a culture one neighborhood away. Start reading the local publications and attending community gatherings.

Teaching tip (Lauren Klinger): Assign students to cover a cultural group on campus with which they are not affiliated in any way. Have students attend one of the events organized by that cultural club or organization.

Knowledge of Government

Teaching tip (Al Tompkins): Advise young reporters to “go to things that don't seem interesting,” like council meetings, and figure out what the real stories are. He says that, when we think about government, we often think about the federal government, which is important, but it can be more relevant to the audience's daily life if you report on more mundane things. To do that, he says, you have to learn how things work. In the classroom, he suggests bringing in a bill for something. Tell students to look at the taxes collected and ask them to figure out where that money goes and what it's used for.

Understand the Media Landscape

Resources: [Searchlights and Sunglasses](#); [State of the News Media 2014 Report](#) and [Webinar](#)

Be Familiar with Copyright

NewsU course: [Copyright and Fair Use for Journalists](#)

Be Familiar with Journalism Laws

Teaching tip (Vidisha Priyanka): Invite an investigative journalist or a media lawyer to give a guest lecture covering copyright, fair use and freedom of information issues and requests. It is imperative that students learn the laws covering working with digital images, texts and video, and understand how copyright and fair use laws apply in the social media world. Have students research newsroom guidelines for procedures to follow when requesting to use an image, a video, some text, etc. from online sources.

NewsU courses: [Online Media Law](#); [Copyright and Fair Use for Journalists](#); [Newsgathering Law and Liability](#); [Freedom of Information](#)

Have Knowledge of the Business of Media

Resource: Columbia Journalism Review's [“Who Owns What”](#)

Faculty insight (Butch Ward): Understanding the business — operations, trends, new products — can enhance a journalist's ability to produce journalism that responds best to the community's interests, needs and preference for consumption. When I understand trends in use of video, for example, I can make a better judgment about when gathering video for a project is a worthwhile use of my time.

How can I get that understanding?

- Look for opportunities to join colleagues from business-side departments on groups or task forces charged with introducing new products or other initiatives.
- Working with other newsroom colleagues, identify important areas of your company's business (Web ad sales, audience demographics, household growth patterns, tablet usage in your market) and report on them as if

you were doing a story. Share the information with colleagues, along with what the answers mean to the newsroom's work.

- Read. Read. Read. Identify newsletters and blogs that routinely offer forward-looking coverage of media business issues. Share them with your colleagues.

Teaching tip (Rick Edmonds, Poynter Media Business Analyst & Leader of News Transformation): Role-playing and relevant case studies are key to getting students to understand the implications of how the media industry works. Edmonds uses this [case study](#) so students can model the reverberations of ownership for an organization.

Have Good News Judgment

Teaching tip (Roy Peter Clark, Poynter senior scholar and vice president):

- Ask students to evaluate each of the items in today's news according to three standards: interesting, important, both interesting and important.
- Ask students to match the important news of the day according to these traditional standards: timeliness, proximity, impact, prominence, currency, the unusual.

Teaching tip (Lauren Klinger): Give students some overly adverbial, jargon-y, stereotypically public relations ledes, and assign them to write news stories (for any medium) based on these ledes. Bonus points to the student who conveys the news in the fewest number of words. Silly example: Original Lede: *With a heroic blast of courage, a Pittsburgh man saved the day when he rescued a drowning “Terrible Towel” from the Ohio River on Sunday after the Steelers’ phenomenal victory over the Baltimore Ravens. The hero, private investigator Eric R. Stevens of Shadyside, risked his*

own life to scoop the token from the river after it had been swept tragically from the hand of a fan waving it from a speeding car. Dedicated to returning the towel, Stevens employed his Magnum P.I. skills and returned the yellow towel to the fan who had lost it.

Have Knowledge of Current Events

Teaching tip: No matter what kind of course he's teaching, Tampa Bay Times columnist and USF adjunct professor Dan Ruth starts each class with a current events quiz. "Having all manner of technical skills at a journalist's disposal is certainly critical," Ruth said, but more important "is having an understanding of the world in order to report accurately and understand the context of why things are what they are and their meaning. What good does it do have all the backpack journalistic training if you can't find France on a map?"

Select Information Based on Reliability

Teaching tip: For so many of these skills, what we're really after is critical thinking, Al Tompkins says. To teach how to ask critical questions about information you get, Al shows this ad and asks students to examine the offer and figure out what's really going on. (Turns out, one gram of silver is pretty small.)

Resource: [Verification Handbook](#)

NewsU course: [Getting it Right: Accuracy and Verification in the Digital Age](#)

Faculty insight (Jill Geisler): Critical thinking is essential, but what do we mean when we talk about critical thinking? Ask the [right questions](#).

Be a Team Leader

Teaching tip (Lauren Klinger): I love assigning roles to team projects. For some students, being officially

sanctioned by the teacher as the leader is the key to feeling comfortable assuming a leadership role.

Resource: [Jill Geisler on Power and Influence](#)

Ability to Embrace Change and Innovation

Faculty insight (Butch Ward): Let me say this up front. Not all change deserves embracing. Nor does every innovation. So our challenge is to embrace the **potential** for meaningful change, and to become adept at quickly discerning whether it adds value to our work.

My suggestion is: Try things.

Make at least small, albeit serious, investments of your time in learning about the change you're being asked to embrace, and then try it. The more seriously you approach the 'trial,' the more seriously your evaluation will be taken.

For example, when the boss asks you to jump into a comments stream on one of your stories, jump in a few times. Document what happens. If the tone of the comments improves because of your involvement, the effort might be worth it. If you pose a question to a commenter that leads to a story idea, the effort might be worth it. If, however, you make a serious attempt and the response is more vitriol and bad behavior, your newsroom has choices to make: dump the effort, or rethink comments altogether (maybe introduce more moderating, for example.)

Here's a really important point: People who give change a try not only develop reputations for openness to change, their critiques of the change are taken much more seriously. The observations of those who resist are often dismissed.

Try things. Some will work. Some won't. You'll get to help decide which ones survive."

DIGITAL AND MULTIMEDIA SKILLS

Analyze and Synthesize Large Amounts of Data

Faculty insight (Rick Edmonds): "To my mind, more of a core skill is basic math for journalists — comfort with percentages, fractions, etc. and how to write when numbers are the heart of a story."

NewsU courses: [Math for Journalists](#); [Using DocumentCloud: A Digital Tools Tutorial](#); [Document Mining with Overview](#)

Resource: [Data library at NICAR \(Investigative Reporters and Editors\)](#)

Ability to Work with HTML or Other Computer Languages

Resources: [Mindy McAdams](#); [w3schools](#); [Code Academy](#); [Khan Academy](#)

NewsU course: [Programming for Non-Geeks: Essential HTML](#)

Shoot and Edit Video

Teaching tip (Vidisha Priyanka): The best thing to do is to pick up a camera and start recording video around your comfort zone. This will give you a sense of time, will help you get your equipment and connecting cables together so you have a functioning gear kit. It will allow you to set up your own timeline of how much time it takes for you to set up your gear, how much time to shoot, download and log the footage, how long you spend recording narration, and, finally, how much time to edit the story and get the right settings to compress and publish the video. It allows you the luxury of practicing before you actually are required to do so on assignments. The first video you shoot, you will get a sense of how much you have over- or under-shot. Download free trials of editing software like Adobe Premiere, Final Cut Pro, etc. As for adding music to your stories — I have a

rule. Experiment with music only after you have shot and edited at least 10 stories. Follow the rules before breaking them to set your own style of video storytelling.

NewsU courses: [Reporting, Writing for TV and the Web: Aim for the Heart](#); [Video Storytelling for the Web](#)

Resources: [Aim for the Heart](#); [Lynda.com](#)

Shoot and Edit Photographs

NewsU courses: [Language of the Image](#); [Best of Photojournalism](#); [Photojournalism for Non-Photojournalists](#); [The Camera With You: How, and When, to Shoot with a Smartphone](#)

Record and Edit Audio

Teaching tip (Vidisha Priyanka): Storytelling is a little more complex in audio, as a listener has to visualize based on the descriptions in audio and nuances of the sound of voice of storyteller and sources. Start with editing sound that already exists, like 911 calls, audio extracted from video, historical recordings, etc. and master the art of audio editing. Listening to audio recordings gives you the best sense of how to go about storytelling. The next step should be to narrate a story in your voice. This will allow you to ease into the next step — telling a story completely in audio without the aid of visuals. Adding music should be the last thing, done only after you have a few stories under your belt. Layer the audio storytelling by adding voices, natural sound and narration. One step at a time till you have an audio story with complexities. Download Audacity, a free audio recording and editing tool for your computer, so that you can get started with recording your audio narration. Get an audio recorder or at least use your smartphone with an external microphone to get best audio.

NewsU course: [Telling Stories with Sound](#)

Resources: [Audacity](#); [Audio Storytelling](#); YouTube [Reporter's Center](#)

Ability to Tell Stories with Design and Visuals

Resource: Poynter [Teachapalooza](#)

NEWSGATHERING SKILLS

Network, Make Contacts and Develop Sources

Resource: [ONA Social Newsgathering Guide](#)

NewsU course: [Sources, Verification and Credibility](#)

Search Online Information on an Advanced Level

Resources: [IRE](#); [How to Use FOIA Laws to Find Stories and Deepen Sourcing](#)

Master Interview Techniques

Resource (Chip Scanlan): [How Journalists Can Become Better Interviewers](#)

Resource (Ann Friedman on CJR): [The Art of The Interview](#)

Resource (Casey Frechette for Poynter.org): [What Journalists Need to Know About Interviewing for Video](#)

Search for News and Check Sources Without the Use of the Internet

Teaching tip (Lauren Klinger): Create an activity for which students must hit the pavement or use the phone to find a piece of information or to verify it. Students may not be comfortable asking questions in person or over the phone, so role-playing can be helpful. For the University of Alabama's program with the Anniston Star, in which graduate students are embedded in the newsroom in the "teaching hospital" model, the staff organizes a "scavenger hunt" for students. Students must go into the community, talk to people and learn where places are. Also, sometimes in the digital age, we forget that librarians can be great

resources. Organize a library orientation for your journalism students, and assign a library scavenger hunt.

NewsU Courses: Several free NewsU courses cover cultivating sources and finding the information you need. Here are a few: [Covering Cops and Crime](#); [Beat Basics](#); [Covering Education](#); [Covering Courts](#); [Covering Hospitals](#)

Look at News with a Historical Perspective

Faculty insight: Poynter online reporter Kristen Hare says, "It's important to connect to institutional memory." Encourage students to find a mentor at their student media organization and to read what's been written before.

Interpret Statistical Data and Graphics

Teaching tip (Lauren Klinger): Take a story (on any medium) that relies on a number or set of numbers. Ask students to report on where these numbers came from and explain why they think the reporter has chosen to include them.

NewsU course: [Math for Journalists](#)

Resources: Center for Investigative Journalism handbook, [Statistics for Journalists](#); [mediabistro](#), [15 Resources for Journalists to Learn About Statistics](#); [journalism.co.uk's How to Get to Grips with Numbers as a Journalist](#)

WRITING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Storytelling

Teaching tip (Roy Peter Clark): Show students how to convert the elements of reporting into the elements of storytelling, so that Who becomes Character, What becomes Scenes, Where becomes Setting, When becomes Chronology, and Why becomes Motive.

NewsU courses: [Key Elements to Compelling Video Storytelling](#); [Telling Complex Stories Through Compelling Characters](#)

Write in a Fluent Style

Teaching tips (Roy Peter Clark):

- Have students underline verbs in their stories to detect use of the active and passive voice.
- Have students locate the position of subjects and verbs in a sentence to make sure that, in most cases, they sit together near the beginning.
- Have students look at the lengths of sentences to see if there is enough variation to create the right rhythm and pace.
- Have students examine words at the ends of sentences and paragraphs to make sure they are worthy of that emphatic position.

Write Using Correct Grammar

Teaching tips (Roy Peter Clark):

- During revision make sure that students have access to the necessary stylebooks and manuals so they can meet the required standards.
- Teach the importance of mastery of standard and nonstandard forms of English by studying the language used in direct quotations and dialogue.
- Teach punctuation as rhetorical devices, showing students how those tools create and enhance effects such as clarity, originality and suspense.

NewsU courses: [Language Primer](#); [7 Tools for Next-Level Writing](#)

Master Various Forms of Journalistic Writing

Teaching tips (Roy Peter Clark):

- Help students learn the difference between reports and stories by having them take the same set of notes and details and render them in different ways.

- Have students experience the news in various formats and then compile an “anthology” of the best work they see. They should write about what makes their examples stand out.
- Teach students the power of “focus” across all forms of journalistic writing. Have them answer this question about the different kinds of journalism they experience: What is this work really about?

Understand Audience Expectations and Needs

Faculty insight (Butch Ward):

I start by putting away the surveys. Some provide some good audience information — but not the ones that ask respondents whether they ‘want’ or ‘would read’ or ‘would watch’ more of this or that. (More ‘local news,’ for example.)

Instead, understand what your audience needs by **reporting the story**. As the innovator Clay Christensen suggests, find out what jobs people are trying to get done. He uses the classic example of the person trying to hang a picture on the wall. The person doesn’t need a drill, he needs a hole. You provide the drill so he can get his job done.

People don’t want more local news for its own sake. They might want local news to help them: make a more informed decision in the voting booth; answer their questions about the new construction on Main Street; help them build a marketing campaign for a new restaurant. Those are jobs you can help them get done.

So approach your audience the way you approach any story. **Report it.** Talk with people about their lives. Listen to conversations on the sidelines at soccer games. Talk with other parents about schools — I bet they’re more likely to be discussing homework

load than capital budget debates. And you can do a heckuva good story on homework.

Bottom line: Don’t ask your audience to decide what goes in the paper, on the broadcast, on the website. That’s your job. Ask what they’re trying to get done. Then you provide the help they need.

Speaking Skills

Faculty insight (Vidisha Priyanka):

Encourage students to train each other in small groups. Getting comfortable teaching on a small scale is key to feeling comfortable sharing ideas and standing behind them.

Teaching tip: USC professor and Poynter Institute adjunct professor Robert Hernandez has students facilitate conversations instead of doing presentations. This helps students learn how to participate in a discussion and collaborate with others on ideas, sowing the seeds of collaborative skills they will need in today’s newsrooms.

Teaching tip (Lauren Klinger): Encourage students to listen to their own voice by having them record narration for an audio story. Debrief after they’ve listened to their own voice on tape, and have them critique a partner.

NewsU course: [Writing for the Ear](#)

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