

The Seven Deadly Sins

Ethical pitfalls that can lead to trouble . . . or termination.

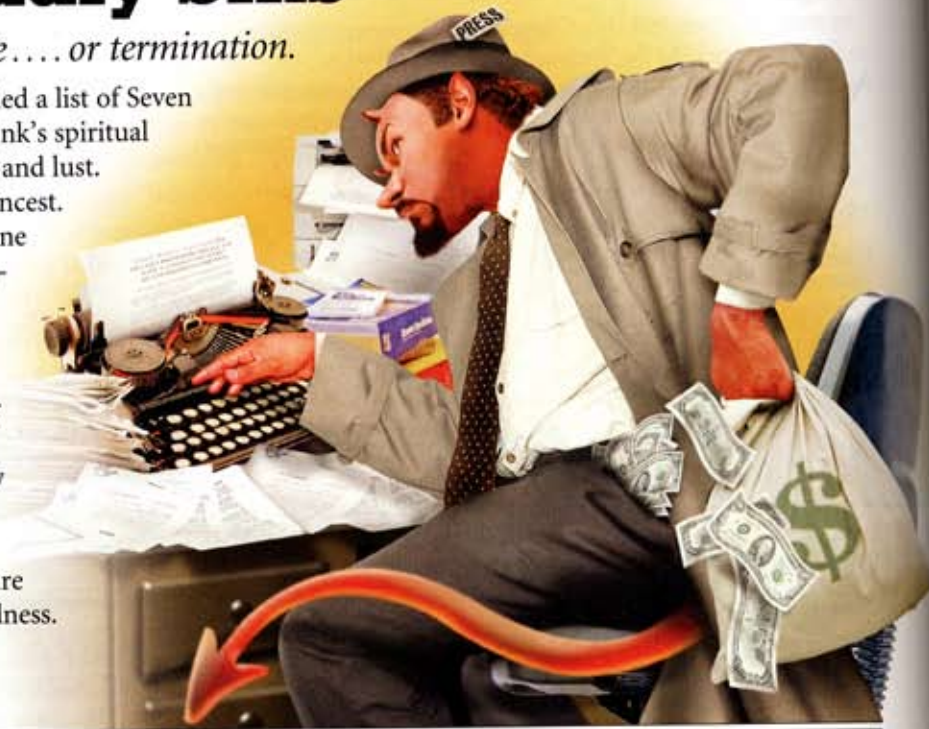
In the Middle Ages, Christian theologians compiled a list of Seven Deadly Sins, those vices most destructive to a monk's spiritual growth: pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust.

There are worse sins, of course: rape, murder, incest. But what makes the 7DS so universal is that, as one theologian explained, "they are found on particularly slippery moral slopes." Though we all may flirt with these sins to some degree, when we get in too deep, the consequences start snowballing.

The same is true for journalism's Seven Deadly Sins, those vices most destructive to a reporter's career. Many journalists dabble in these sins now and then — but if you indulge too much, your integrity and your reputation will nosedive.

Some might argue that other journalistic sins are just as bad: gullibility, for instance. Long-windedness. Or brown-nosing politicians and celebrities.

They're bad, it's true. But these can be *deadly*:



DECEPTION

Lying or misrepresenting yourself to obtain information

Is it ethical for reporters to disguise their identities? Many editors say no — never. "Credibility is our most important asset," Henry McNulty once wrote in *The Hartford Courant*, "and if we deceive people in order to do our job, we've compromised that credibility before a word is written."

Some editors do make rare exceptions. Restaurant reviewers, for instance, can pretend to be ordinary diners, and if you're investigating a con artist or social injustice, it *may* be OK for you to pose as an ordinary citizen. But the rest of the time, you've got no license to lie.

EXAMPLE

- ◆ Chicago police reporter Harry Romanoff was famous for his deceptions. When eight nurses were murdered in 1966, he tricked a policeman into divulging information by claiming to be the county coroner, then scored an interview with the mother of murder suspect Richard Speck by pretending to be Speck's attorney. For other stories, Romanoff made phone calls where he pretended to be a bishop, the chief of police, a White House official, even the Illinois governor.
- ◆ In the late 1800s, Nellie Bly pioneered the art of undercover reporting by posing as a chorus girl, working in a sweatshop, getting herself imprisoned and being committed to a mental institution. (For an excerpt, see page 206).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Accepting gifts or favors from sources or promoting social and political causes

How much bribery does it take to corrupt a typical reporter? Free meals? Movie tickets? Stock-market tips? How about a cozy job as my "media adviser" after you help elect me?

Gifts and graft can compromise your objectivity and ruin your news outlet's reputation—which is why editors often insist that reporters avoid any favors, business dealings or political activities that even *appear* to taint their objectivity. TV newscaster Keith Olbermann claims he doesn't even *vote*: "I don't believe journalists covering politics should," he says.

EXAMPLE

- ◆ In 2005, columnist Armstrong Williams was scorned and shamed by media colleagues after it was revealed that he accepted \$240,000 from the Bush administration to promote the "No Child Left Behind" education-reform law in columns and TV appearances. "I should be criticized," Williams said. "I crossed some ethical lines." (He *did* keep the \$240,000, however.)
- ◆ In a controversial 2004 decision, *The New York Times* fired freelance writer Jay Blotcher because he'd been a "public spokesperson for an advocacy organization" (an anti-AIDS group). Though Blotcher hadn't specifically written about AIDS or gay issues, the *Times* said it acted to avoid any appearance of conflict of interest.

BIAS

Slanting a story by manipulating facts to sway readers' opinions

Columnists can take sides. Cable-news pundits can take sides. But reporters should *never* take sides. Reporters have a duty to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Deviate from that — by rigging the facts to advance an agenda — and you risk losing the trust of both readers and editors.

In the words of veteran journalist Michael Gartner: "If you have an agenda, you should not be in the newspaper business. . . . If you want to change the world, become a teacher or a politician or a sociologist or a mom. Do not be a reporter." ▼

EXAMPLE

- ◆ In 1998, two investigative reporters were fired by a Fox television station in Florida for refusing to distort facts in a news story. The reporters discovered that Florida milk was tainted by the secret use of a bovine growth hormone linked to cancer. When Monsanto, the hormone maker, threatened to sue, the station managers told the reporters they'd be fired unless they either buried the story or edited it to satisfy Monsanto.
- ◆ CBS News created a scandal during the 2004 presidential campaign when it used dubious documents to dispute George W. Bush's military service record. Many accused CBS of "liberal bias," alleging they had failed to verify the documents because they were too eager to "get" Bush.

FABRICATION

Manufacturing quotes or imaginary sources, or writing anything you know to be untrue

"There is one sacred rule of journalism," reporter John Hersey once wrote. "The writer must not invent. The legend on the license must read: *None of this was made up.*"

Ages ago, reporters were urged to fabricate stories to sell more papers. In a famous 1835 hoax, the New York Sun told of a fantastic new telescope that revealed winged creatures on the moon "engaged in conversation."

Try that today — try fictionalizing *anything* in a news story — and you'll be vilified. Every quote, character and event in everything you ever write *must* be verifiably true. Period.

EXAMPLE

◆ In the most famous case of journalistic fraud, Washington Post reporter Janet Cooke was forced to return her 1981 Pulitzer Prize for a story profiling "Jimmy," an 8-year-old heroin addict. Cooke confessed that the boy was a fabrication, a composite of several child addicts.

◆ Stephen Glass, a reporter for The New Republic, was fired in 1998 after an investigation revealed that 27 of 41 stories he'd written for the magazine contained fabricated material.

◆ In 1998, two award-winning Boston Globe columnists — Patricia Smith and Mike Barnicle — left the paper after it was discovered that each had invented quotes, characters and stories.

THEFT

Obtaining information unlawfully or without a source's permission

As a journalist, you need to be sure about the accuracy and authenticity of every document you use. You also need to be aware of the legal fallout that can result from printing material of unknown or unlawful origin.

Beware of stealing notes, hacking e-mails, snatching papers from a wastebasket. Theft is unethical. It's *illegal*. However, if you legally obtain material without a source's consent, *and* if there's legitimate public interest in the material, *and* if it's not available any other way — then you can evaluate whether the benefits outweigh the potential harm.

EXAMPLE

◆ In 1998, The Cincinnati Enquirer published an 18-page report exposing corrupt business practices at Chiquita, the banana producer. Editors then found that, in researching the story, reporter Michael Gallagher had stolen 2,000 voice-mail messages from Chiquita. The paper paid Chiquita \$14 million and printed an apology; Gallagher was fired. (He later enraged fellow journalists by revealing the name of his confidential source for those messages, who was then arrested.)

Many said Gallagher's Chiquita story was solid, and would have been just as solid without using those stolen tapes. But the debacle left readers distrusting what he'd written — and later led to even more firings, lawsuits and embarrassment.

BURNING A SOURCE

Deceiving or betraying the confidence of those who provide information for a story

A source confides in you; you promise confidentiality. But your story reveals her identity. She's fired. Or worse — arrested.

That's the most extreme example of burning a source. But there are lesser levels of betrayal: misleading someone into helping you with a story by distorting what you *really* plan to write, for instance. Or collecting quotes just to make someone sound stupid. Or seducing people into saying things they'll regret, letting them repair the damage after the story runs.

Burn a source just once, and that person may never trust reporters again.

EXAMPLE

◆ In 1998, a Raleigh News & Observer reporter spent six weeks researching a sensitive profile of Julio Granados — a typical young, hardworking, homesick Mexican grocery worker. Upon reading the front-page story, federal immigration officials realized Granados had no U.S. work permit. He was arrested and deported. The local Hispanic community felt betrayed and angry.

◆ During Minnesota's 1982 gubernatorial race, a Republican consultant leaked damaging documents about the Democratic candidate to two daily papers. They promised anonymity but later decided his identity was newsworthy, so they printed his name. He was fired, and later won a breach-of-contract lawsuit against both papers.

PLAGIARISM

Passing off someone else's words or ideas as your own

Of all the seven sins, plagiarism is the most loathsome, most shameful, most fatal to your credibility. If you don't understand plagiarism by now, please *put down this book* and go do some research. In a nutshell:

The original. Take these words, spoken by President John F. Kennedy:

"Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country."

The plagiarism. We've changed a few words, but they're still Kennedy's ideas:

Ask what you can do for America. Don't ask what America can do for you.

The solution. Attribute the ideas to Kennedy using quotes or paraphrases:

Don't ask what your country can do for you, Kennedy said; instead, "ask what you can do for your country."

Thus, to avoid plagiarism, either *rethink* it, *rework* it or *attribute* it.

EXAMPLE

In 2004, Seattle Times business columnist Stephen H. Dunphy resigned after editors found several examples of plagiarism in his work — in this travel story, for instance:

From the original story, by Robert Selwitz:

"Walk down St. Paul's steps and make a right turn onto the first busy main road. Suddenly you'll be immersed in a series of narrow streets full of shops selling clothing, Chinese art and artifacts, herbal medicines, jewelry, crafts and utensils."

From Dunphy's plagiarized story:

"Upon leaving, walk down St. Paul's steps and make a right turn onto the first main thoroughfare. Suddenly you'll be immersed in a series of narrow streets full of shops selling clothing, Chinese art and artifacts, herbal medicines, jewelry, crafts and household utensils."

JAYSON BLAIR: A "PROFOUND BETRAYAL OF TRUST"

He was a star reporter with a brilliant future at a prestigious newspaper. Now he's a lesson in lapsed ethics, his fall from grace a grim warning to journalists everywhere.

Jayson Blair was just 27 when he resigned in shame from The New York Times in 2003.

"I lied and I lied — and then I lied some more," he later admitted. "I lied about where I had been, I lied about where I had found information. I lied about how I wrote the story. And these were no everyday little white lies — they were complete fantasies, embellished down to the tiniest made-up detail."

Blair's scoops on a variety of national stories at first impressed his colleagues, but later aroused their suspicions. After the San Antonio Express-News caught him plagiarizing one of its feature profiles, Blair's deceptions unraveled. An investigation by Times editors revealed that Blair had committed journalistic fraud in dozens of stories.

"The widespread fabrication and plagiarism represent a profound betrayal of trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper," the Times admitted in a detailed front-page analysis of the Blair scandal. "He fabricated comments. He concocted scenes. He lifted material from other newspapers and wire services. He selected details from photographs to create the impression he had been somewhere or seen someone, when he had not."

Blair's "tools of deceit," the Times explained, were his cell phone, his laptop computer and his "round-the-clock access to databases of news articles from which he stole." Using those tools, any clever reporter could create a brilliant story anywhere, anytime — just like Jayson Blair.



Journalistic ethics

Reporters and editors must maintain a high standard of professional behavior.



*That's not actually true. We're exaggerating for comic effect. Is that unethical?

At left, you see an actual photo of a reporter taken in 1898, when the news business had sunk to an all-time low.* In that era of yellow journalism, the press's irresponsibility, sensationalism and warmongering dug a deep hole that reporters are still trying to crawl out of.

Nowadays, standards have risen. Journalists are better paid, better educated and painfully aware that public opinion will turn against them — swiftly, cruelly, even gleefully — anytime they're caught committing a journalistic sin.

Which is why it's essential to have a code of ethics: standards and values that guide your professional conduct. Tough dilemmas await you on the road ahead. How will you decide what to do?

DOING THE RIGHT THING: IT'S NOT ALWAYS AS EASY AS IT SEEMS

Suppose you learn that the mayor, a married 50-year-old, has a 19-year-old mistress. Does that deserve a story? What if he's wining and dining her with city funds?

Suppose you find out the mayor was busted for selling pot when he was in college. Does that deserve a story? What if he's currently leading an anti-drug campaign?

Suppose the mayor tells a tasteless, racist joke at a private banquet. Does that deserve a story? If you print the joke, won't it offend readers? If you *don't* print it, won't it seem like you're covering it up to protect him?

Reporters and editors often face tough choices like these: deciding whether to print or withhold damaging facts and quotes, weighing the public's right to know against the harm individuals may suffer as a result.

Answers don't always come easily. But when facing ethical dilemmas, it's essential to ask the right questions. What purpose does it serve if we print this? Who gains? Who loses? What's in the best interest of our readers?

Remember, doing what's *safe* or *legal* or *least likely to cause us headaches* isn't the same as doing what's *right*.

YOU MAKE THE CALL: THREE CASE STUDIES

What would you do if faced with these situations? Like most ethical dilemmas, these scenarios provoke debate and discussion but offer no easy answers.

A local grocer and his wife die when they're trapped inside their health-food store during a four-alarm fire. You're writing a follow-up story on the couple (Eaton Wright and Liv Good). You want to show how their family is coping with grief, how the neighbors are reacting to the tragedy, how the store became popular — and you find, while doing your research, that Wright once spent 10 years in prison for child sexual abuse.

Do you include that fact in your story? Is Wright's criminal record relevant here? How do you weigh the value of that information against the pain its publication may cause Wright's family?

An anonymous tip alerts you that someone is mailing gunpowder in letters to the president of a local Bible college, threatening to "blow all you bastard devil-worshippers straight to hell this Halloween." When you contact the president, he urges you *not* to print anything about the threats for fear of causing panic on campus. Local law-enforcement officials insist that publicity would jeopardize their investigation. Halloween is two days away.

Do you have a duty to warn the community of potential harm? Should you respect the authorities' wishes and hold the story? Or set your own deadline?

A famous major-league pitcher visits a journalism class as a favor to his friend, the class's instructor. While talking to the students, the pitcher says, "I used steroids for years. Why? Well, I needed the boost. Like all the times I've used cocaine and meth, too, in actual games. Is that really so wrong?"

Suddenly realizing what he'd just said, he added, "I'm speaking hypothetically, of course. I've always been clean."

Nobody asks a follow-up question. After the pitcher leaves, the teacher tells the class — some of whom write for the school paper — to disregard the drug remarks "out of respect for my friend, who did us a favor by visiting us today."

Should the school paper run a story that accurately quotes the pitcher, or pretend he never made those remarks?

QUOTED

"A newspaper's core business is integrity. News is not a product like a tire or a paper towel. It is what we journalists say it is. The reader has to believe. A newspaper's 'brand' is trust — trust in its judgment, its independence, its values. That's what remains constant. The news changes every day."

Richard Cohen, columnist

"We are never to publish anything, never to have something written, for a hidden reason: to promote somebody or something, to pander to somebody, to build somebody up or tear somebody down, to indulge in personal friendship or animosity, or to propagandize."

William Shawn, editor, *The New Yorker*

"Every journalist is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance and loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse."

Janet Malcolm, *The New Yorker*

"If you fudge or lie on a blog, you are biting the karmic weenie. The negative reaction will be so great that, whatever your intention was, it will be overwhelmed and crushed like a bug."

Steve Hayden, advertising executive and blogging consultant

"I consider my ethics to be my journalistic underpants. I put them on every day and I feel very uncomfortable without them. They need to fit me well and move as I do. If they are too tight they will bind and chafe. If they are too loose they will droop down, either tripping me up or exposing my butt."

Bob Williams, writer, The Center for Public Integrity

"It's OK to screw the elephants. Just don't cover the circus."

A.M. Rosenthal, *New York Times* editor, on firing a political reporter who had an affair with a politician

A CODE OF ETHICS: ESTABLISHING GUIDELINES FOR JOURNALISTS' CONDUCT

Most respectable professions — doctors, bankers, lawyers — set high standards for the behavior of their members. If they step out of line, they lose their credentials.

Journalists, on the other hand, have always included rebels and renegades. Throughout history, many unscrupulous reporters have worked for untrustworthy newspapers.

But in the late 1800s, journalists began to grow a conscience. One of the first was William McKean, managing editor of the Philadelphia Public Ledger, who issued a set of ethical guidelines for reporters to follow, with advice such as:

"Let the facts and reasoning tell the story, rather than rhetorical flourish."

"Take care to be right. It is bad to be late, but worse to be wrong."

"Do not say you know when you have only heard."

Other newspapers and press organizations soon followed suit. And today, nearly every newsroom has formalized a system of ethical guidelines for its staffers to observe.

One of the best examples is the code of ethics reprinted below, which was created in 1996 by the Society of Professional Journalists.



IF THE PRESS IS SO DARN WONDERFUL, THEN WHY DOESN'T EVERYONE LOVE US?

Americans love to hate the media. Everybody's a critic — admit it, even you — when it comes to the way journalists do their jobs. Consider:

◆ **62%** of Americans say they don't

trust the press.

- ◆ **59%** think newspapers are more concerned about making profits than serving the public interest.
- ◆ **58%** don't think journalists care about complaints of inaccuracies.
- ◆ **21%** rate the honesty and ethical standards of newspaper reporters as "high" or "very high." (That same 2004 poll rated 21 professions by their "honesty and ethical standards." Newspaper reporters ranked 16th, behind car mechanics — but ahead of lawyers, at least.)

What's driving this distrust? Is it a sense of betrayal brought on by a steady stream of media scandals?

Is it a reaction to the inaccuracies that plague too many news stories?

Is it a result of the endless assault on the "mainstream media" from bloggers and partisan pundits?

Is it a "shoot-the-messenger" response to the nonstop disaster and scandal-of-the-week melodramas some news outlets feed upon?

Or are Americans becoming unable to distinguish between serious, objective journalism and the polarizing bombast of the loudmouths on talk radio and cable TV?

Whatever the reason, journalists are stuck with a negative image — and raising our ethical standards may be the best way to change that.

CODE OF ETHICS

The Society of Professional Journalists

SEEK TRUTH AND REPORT IT

Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Journalists should:

- ◆ Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate

- ◆ Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to let them respond to allegations of wrongdoing.

- ◆ Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.

- ◆ Make certain that headlines, photos, graphics and quotations do not misrepresent, oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.

- ◆ Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story.

- ◆ Never plagiarize.

- ◆ Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.

- ◆ Avoid imposing their own cultural values on others.

- ◆ Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.

- ◆ Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.

- ◆ Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information

can be equally valid.

- ◆ Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.

- ◆ Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.

- ◆ Recognize a special obligation

is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

MINIMIZE HARM

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.

Journalists should:

- ◆ Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.

- ◆ Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.

- ◆ Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort.

- ◆ Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.

- ◆ Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.

- ◆ Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.

- ◆ Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.

- ◆ Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

ACT INDEPENDENTLY

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.

Journalists should:

- ◆ Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.

- ◆ Refuse gifts and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.

- ◆ Disclose unavoidable conflicts.

- ◆ Be vigilant about holding those with power accountable.

- ◆ Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.

- ◆ Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

BE ACCOUNTABLE

Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.

Journalists should:

- ◆ Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.

- ◆ Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.

- ◆ Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.

- ◆ Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.

- ◆ Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.