

# The Falcon

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## SUCCESSFUL INTERACTION WITH STUDENT PRESS:

### A GUIDE FOR ADMINISTRATORS, FACULTY AND STAFF AT SEATTLE PACIFIC UNIVERSITY



“A critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy. The press must be free from state interference. It must have the economic strength to stand up to the blandishments of government officials. It must have sufficient independence from vested interests to be bold and inquiring without fear or favour. It must enjoy the protection of the constitution, so that it can protect our rights as citizens.”

-Nelson Mandela

## Table of Contents:

<i>Starting Points</i>	page 3
<i>Common Faculty, Staff and Administrator Concerns</i>	
Fear of Being Misquoted or Misunderstood	page 4
1. Research First	
2. Recording	
3. Fact Checking Sheet	
4. Editing Sheet	
Fear of Speaking Out of Turn or Getting Things Wrong	pages 5-6
1. Ask What Type of Info is Needed	
2. Ask for Key Questions	
3. Allow Recording	
4. Go “Off the Record” as Needed	
5. Ask to Review Quotes Afterward	
Fear of Drawing Attention to Yourself	page 6
Fear of Unprepared and Unprofessional Student Reporters	page 7
1. Ask for an Editor to Come with a Junior Reporter	
2. Limit Your Time	
Fear of Not Speaking Eloquently	pages 7-9
1. Practice	
2. Get Help from the Pros	
3. Do a Dry Run	
4. Other Tips	
5. Follow Up	
6. Take Nothing Personally	
<i>Additional Resources</i>	page 9

# Starting Points



Developing a culture of mutual respect between student media and university employees requires effort and understanding on both sides. There is no reason for administrators to go into a defensive crouch when they see student reporters coming, nor any reason for reporters to assume administrators do not want to assist them. It is far easier to build trust if both sides are well informed about how to interact.



Many university administrators, faculty and staff find it intimidating to interact with student media. They often cite concerns such as:

- I am concerned that students will misunderstand or misquote me, and despite the fact that it was not my error, my superiors will hold me accountable.
- I am concerned that I will speak out of turn or say something I shouldn't have, and it will land me in trouble.
- I am concerned that speaking up may make it look like I am trying to draw attention to myself.
- I am concerned that students will come unprepared or behave unprofessionally and it will waste my time.
- I am concerned that I will not speak eloquently, and that even if I am quoted correctly, I may come across as uninformed or foolish.

All of these are legitimate fears and they deserve to be addressed. As a member of an educational institution, you have a duty to help students learn and as a member of an educational institution, you are often called upon to help students learn and it is good to feel comfortable in this role as your job allows. That way you and the university can benefit from student media coverage by providing important information or needed perspectives on topics of concern to the community. Though it may take some time to get comfortable talking to student reporters, with a bit of information, it can be much less daunting. Let us address the typical concerns, one by one.

# Fear of Being Misquoted or Misunderstood

The burden of getting facts and quotes right is on the student reporter. News advisers and journalism instructors are obliged to work tirelessly to ensure students know how to get their facts straight and report in a fair and balanced way. This is drilled into them from the start. Nevertheless, students are learning on the job. Starting on the first day of the quarter they are required to begin covering newsworthy stories, and there is no way they will do everything correctly. Fortunately, there are fail-safes put into place to help prevent reporting errors.

Student reporters and media advisers are just as concerned as you are about getting the facts right. No aspiring journalist wants to have to run corrections, retract stories, or burn bridges with their contacts because they got a story wrong. As a result, there is a process at The Falcon that is in place to help reduce errors.

## 1. Research First

All Journalism students, as well as Falcon staffers, are instructed on how to do their research and learn as much about a topic as possible before heading out to do interviews. Senior staff and advisers work with junior staffers to vet questions prior to interviews as a means of preventing students showing up unprepared.

## 2. Recording

Student reporters at Seattle Pacific are encouraged to digitally record all of their interviews either using audio recorders built into their smart phones, or borrowing one of the digital recorders available to staffers for this purpose. Under Washington law, student reporters must identify themselves as members of the press and seek permission before recording. Faculty, administrators and staff are encouraged to allow recording as this is one way that editors can help ascertain if a quote has been given correctly. As an interviewee, **you** must also tell the reporter if you are recording. Even if this is for your own reference, Washington is a two-party consent state and both parties must know.

## 3. Fact Checking Sheets

Student reporters are required to sign and submit a fact checking worksheet to accompany every article they write for The Falcon. Advisers, instructors and editors work to impress upon all reporters the ethical necessity of careful, deliberate fact checking. These sheets are saved, should any questions about a reporter's work arise.

## 4. Editing Process

Not all stories see publication in The Falcon. Editors routinely “spike” stories that appear unbalanced or underreported. They are particularly hesitant to run stories where quotes from upper level administrators are used and where no audio recordings exist, so quotes cannot be verified. Every article goes through a drafting process, where students receive feedback from peer editors and faculty advisers. Then final drafts are line edited by the Editor-In-Chief (EIC). The final person to read each article is the copy editor. By the time an article appears in print, it has been read over and checked by **no fewer than five people**.

# Fear of Speaking Out of Turn or Getting Things Wrong

No one wants to be the person who gives out inaccurate information to student media, which can cause many people to feel hesitant about speaking at all. Here is the information you need to give you confidence that you will not speak out of turn:

## 1. Ask What Type of Info is Needed

When a reporter contacts you to set up an interview, ask if he or she is coming specifically to get your perspective and opinion on a topic, or if they are seeking specific factual information. In many cases they may be seeking both, but you can make them aware ahead of time if you are only able to render one or the other.

### ***Opinions***

Though you are under no obligation to render an opinion, you are always allowed to give your opinion to the press under the First Amendment to the Constitution. In fact, sharing one's views allows you to add to the public discourse and debates that concern the community. You are modeling thoughtfulness and engagement for the students. Also hearing multiple perspectives creates an informed and collegial dialog that is crucial to the mission of higher education.

### ***Facts***

In many cases a student reporter may ask you for factual information. If you only have partial knowledge of a topic, indicate that, then try to connect the reporter to whomever would have the complete information they seek.

## 2. Ask for the Key Questions

Reporters will have some prepared questions for their interviews. They will always be adding follow up questions during an interview, but you can certainly ask to see their basic questions ahead of time, so that you can figure out if you are the right person for them to talk to. They may still want your opinion on a topic, but you can let them know if they need to get the facts somewhere else.

## 3. Allow Recording

For everyone's sake it is a good idea to allow your interview to be recorded. It means students who can't write down every word you said fast enough can review the transcript to be sure they have it right. It also means editors can check quotes if they are concerned that a reporter may not have gotten it right. It means that you can challenge a quote that appears in print if you feel you were misquoted, and there is a record to check against. Finally, advisers and senior staff will sit down with junior reporters to review these recordings and use them to improve their interviewing skills for the future.

#### 4. Go “Off the Record” As Needed

If you are being asked a variety of questions and in some cases you feel comfortable answering, but others you don't, during the interview itself you can indicate that you want to respond “off the record.” This means that the student cannot quote any portion of your “off the record” comments. Students still appreciate the information as it may direct them to ask other important questions to other people they are interviewing. You can make the call on a question by question basis, right on the spot.

#### 5. Ask to Review *Quotes* Afterward

It is fine to ask to see the quotes used in an article prior to publication, but it is not customary to see the entire article. This is called “prior review” and puts censorship pressure on the student reporter. Because of the inherent power dynamics on a university campus, it is best to ask for quotes in order to clarify or correct any issues. They are not obliged to do so, but they often will if there's any concern. This gives you a chance to clarify or correct any inaccuracies before an article goes to press.



## **Fear of Drawing Attention to Yourself**

No one wants to look like they are trying to make themselves the center of attention, or that they think their point of view is more relevant or important than anyone else's. The good news is that simply speaking to a reporter does not mean you are drawing attention to yourself.

- Student reporters are required to seek perspectives from as many quarters as possible, to ensure balanced reporting, so your voice should never be presented in a vacuum. Yours is one voice among many. If, however, students ask you to speak on topic after topic, you may want to direct them to someone else to broaden their horizons and so your voice doesn't become more prominent than you intend.

## Fear of Unprepared and Unprofessional Student Reporters

Student Reporters or student journalists are learning on the job. Advisers, journalism instructors and editors are working diligently to train reporters and instill professionalism, but there are always those who will arrive to an interview unprepared. No matter how much you want to help, it is not your obligation to endure sloppy reporting, particularly when it is clear that these are the sort of reporters most apt to get quotes and information wrong. Here's how to handle the problem of unprepared or disorganized reporters should it arise:

### 1. Ask for an Editor to come with a newer reporter.

If even the process of setting up the interview with a student indicated to you that something was amiss or caused you to question her level of preparation, you may head off trouble by contacting the EIC and asking that an actual editor or senior staffer accompany the new reporter on the interview. These requests are taken seriously. Having a more seasoned reporter along, one who has a particular stake in getting it right and maintaining good relationships with faculty and staff, guards against your time being wasted.

### 2. Limit your Time

Give an unprepared reporter exactly 5 minutes of your time and no more. Tell them you have other matters to attend to, and that will be that. Naturally you do have other matters to attend to, and when it is obvious that your efforts to aid the student press are going to be in vain, you should not endure the distraction.

## Fear of Not Speaking Eloquently

University employees are seldom given any instruction or tools for how to handle questions from reporters - student or otherwise - and many are concerned that even at their best they will not be as well-spoken as they would like. Here are some tips and strategies for saying what you mean to say.

### 1. Practice

The best alternative to get some practice is to volunteer to come to a Journalism class or The Falcon weekly meeting, and let students practice their interviewing skills with you. Not only do you get to see their process of learning in action, you get to meet staffers, make a connection with instructors, demonstrate your interest in communicating to the press effectively, and have the experience of being interviewed while the stakes are low. Few university administrators or staff members ever take this opportunity, but it is well worth the 50 minutes you put in. Establishing a connection with the Falcon staff lets them know you take them and their work seriously, so when the time comes and you have to be interviewed for an article, you know there is already mutual respect. They will be extra motivated to ensure they get your quotes right. They are more apt to check in with you, unprompted, to follow up on loose ends and seek clarification if they know you already.



## 2. Get Help from the Pros

You can always ask to sit in when a colleague, whom you believe to be well spoken, is interviewed by the press. This gives you a chance to observe what works. But if this isn't a possibility, the next best way to watch how a pro handles an interview is to go online. Visit YouTube to see the best and worst of politicians, diplomats and even celebrities being interviewed by experts like Terry Gross, James Lipton, Rachel Maddow, Barbara Walters and Oprah. Watch what the pros do and get some ideas for your own interviews.

## 3. Do a Dry Run or Two or Three

Before the reporter arrives, give yourself a head start. Think about the kinds of questions a reporter might ask you about the topic, then decide how you would answer. In the peace and quiet of your own home you can work out answers until you have ones you feel good about. Practice. Give your answers to a patient family member, to your cat, to an imaginary Oprah sitting on your living room sofa. These tactics may seem unorthodox, but they can take the pressure off and allow you to build your confidence. If you are responding via email – **review it several times and possibly sleep on the answer.**

## 4. Other Tips

Pick a relaxing and comfortable space in which to be interviewed. Bring a notebook with you to interviews and jot down ideas for what you want to say, so you have them ready when the time comes. Bring a bottle of water, so you can stop and take a sip when you need to pause and think before answering a tough question. Remember, you don't have to know everything. It's okay to say, “I'm not sure,” or “I can look that up and get back to you.” Bear in mind that student reporters are probably more nervous than you are, and that, at the end of the day, everyone wants to do their job well. They are on your side. Do not be afraid to go back and rephrase something. You can always say, “I'm sorry, let me go back and say that again.” Student reporters know to use the latter quote, rather than the flub. If you get lost, you can always ask a reporter to remind you what you were saying or what the previous question was.

## 5. Follow Up

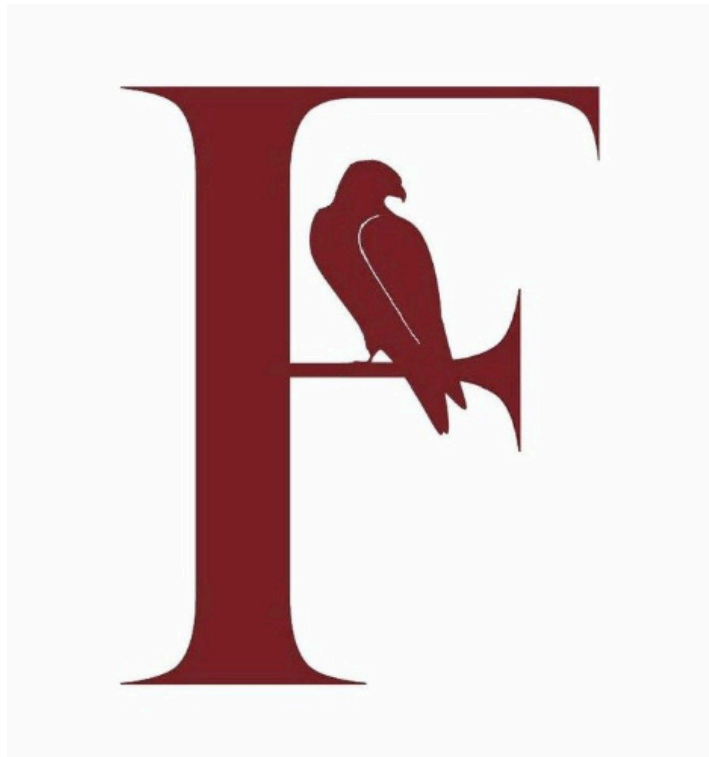
If things went well in an interview with the press, try to remember what you did and what it was that worked. If, by contrast, you feel like you were misquoted, or you didn't come off as well as you hoped, try to figure out what happened. If the error lies with the reporter, write a letter to the editor to explain how The Falcon got it wrong. Editors understand that they are ethically bound to run corrections and retractions and that their duty to their readers is to always be trying to improve and get stories right. They welcome feedback and letters to the editor. If, however, the error was your own, figure out where you went wrong so you can prevent the problem in the future. Do not swear off interviews altogether; just isolate the problem. Did you get nervous and bumble through questions? Were you the wrong person for the reporter to talk to, so you gave incomplete or incorrect information? Would it help to go do a practice interview or two with the reporters so you are better prepared in the future?



If you are planning to advance in your field, you will inevitably be doing more interviews in the future, so it’s worth it to get in the habit and get good at it, particularly when you can help fulfill the university’s mission of education by working to train the reporters of tomorrow.

## 6. Take Nothing Personally

Student reporters are not trying to corner you or make the university look bad. Their job is to provide fair and balanced reporting and to give their readers as much accurate, timely and newsworthy information as possible. Sometimes situations at the University don’t go well, and students will report on that, but they don’t actually enjoy “digging up dirt” or “reporting bad news.”



### **Additional Resources**

This document is a brief excerpt taken from the complete The Falcon Policy Manual 2020-2021. To understand how Seattle Pacific’s paper works in more detail, the full Policy Manual may be of use. Find it online at [thefalcon.online](http://thefalcon.online)

Another wealth of information is the Student Press Law Center. Their website, [splc.org](http://splc.org), contains vast resources on all aspects of university press. They also have a free legal hotline, staffed by lawyers, that you can call anytime you have a question: (202) 785-5450. The College Media Association is another key source for information about how the student press functions [www.collegemedia.org](http://www.collegemedia.org)