Introduction

Journalism is, essentially, the collection, writing, editing, and presentation of news or news articles in the media—i.e., presenting information to the public. As a field of study, journalism is designed to train graduates to be ethical, objective, and critical writers, with the skills and knowledge needed to pursue careers working for newspapers, broadcast stations and magazines, publishing outlets in the online community, and any setting that involves the relaying and reporting of information.

Within journalism, you can learn a specialized role—public relations, marketing, publishing (often the sales end of media), investigative reporting, broadcast, activism, and political critique are a few of the most common. You also have the chance to focus on a specific field of interest such as public health, international affairs, public policy, or education. The diversity of options within, and versatility of, journalism training can make it an alluring option for grad students.

Journalism is a rapidly changing profession with many possibilities in new and traditional media. With a shift to more up-to-the-minute online format and the participation of everyday people in reporting, journalism is slowly becoming more egalitarian. Journalism-as-public-service has been the root of reporting since its early days. From Benjamin Franklin’s anonymous anti-colonial articles in revolutionary newspapers, to Edward R. Murrow’s on-site World War II reporting, to recent Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism on the war in Iraq—journalists expose truth and bring issues to light that might have otherwise stayed out of the public view.

Why a graduate degree in journalism?

For recent college graduates and established reporters alike, a graduate degree in journalism can elevate you to a higher level of professionalism. The degree may make you a more competitive job applicant because you’ll have created a body of professor- and peer-reviewed work that you can show hiring man-
ag ers, and you’ll have learned standards for professional and ethical conduct.

Journalism school, or “J School,” should introduce you to new networks of colleagues, such as your classmates, professors, and field experience supervisors, who can continue to serve as your allies throughout your entire career in media—important in a vocation known for being an insider’s industry.

Graduate training in journalism can help increase your knowledge of industry trends and your authority within the field, as employers see a graduate degree as a sign of expertise and dedication. A journalism degree should also improve your reporting and writing skills, and provide pathways for publishing your work.

A journalism graduate education can also give you a leg up in learning current trends in digital media—which may be essential to future career prospects. As more newspapers close shop, journalists with long careers in print are flooding the job market and working hard to update their own skills for a digital world. As a relative newcomer, you’ll be at a loss if you do not enter the field equipped with these latest skill sets, and are not fully aware of the ethical and professional implications of online media.

The issue of which degree is best for you depends on your professional goals, personality, and priorities. When considering a journalism degree, it is also important to consider whether you want to be a practicing journalist, or if you are more interested in mass communications research or teaching journalism at the university level. For a career as a print, online, television, or radio journalist, it may be wise to choose a masters program oriented toward professionals. For a position in teaching or research, you will probably want to obtain a Ph.D.—if not in your immediate graduate studies, then at some point in the future. If you decide to do a masters level program first, look for one that will provide the scholarly training you need in order to perform later at the doctoral level.

As one journalism school admissions staffer explains, “Students looking at journalism programs also look at communications and media programs, politics, and international affairs. What they are getting here that is unique is a broad understanding of technology and media and a course of study that can be tailored to fit their individual interests.”

A journalism degree will help you learn to communicate the complexities of your content area (or “beat”) through critical thinking and other essential elements of journalism—maintaining objectivity where relevant, reporting, interviewing, writing, and editing.

Other names for a degree in this area

The broader name for a journalism degree is “communications,” which often encompasses media relations and marketing. With numerous technological advances affecting the media industry, related fields such as digital media, marketing, and electronic communications are becoming more common.

A sample of specific journalism degree titles:

- M.S. in Journalism (CUNY School of Journalism)
- M.S. in Interactive Communications (Quinnipiac University)
- M.S. in Professional Writing (Carnegie Mellon University)
- Ph.D. in Communication and Information (University of Tennessee)
- Ph.D. in Mass Communication (Indiana University)

Whatever the name of the degree, research the program well to determine if it is a good fit for your personal and professional goals and needs.

What about a certificate?

A certificate in journalism is one valuable alternative to a graduate degree depending on your goals and circumstances.
A certificate may be a fit if you:

- want to enhance your professional skill set and academic training
- have limited time and/or financial resources to commit to a degree program
- want an introduction to or better understanding of the theoretical framework of journalism
- are interested in networking with other journalists
- would like to test out coursework before committing to a degree program
- want to transition into the journalism arena without committing to a degree program
- want an introduction to and better understanding of the journalism industry in relation to your work as a volunteer, board member, community member, or current graduate student pursuing another degree with the option to specialize

A certificate in journalism can also give you more flexibility in selecting the courses that most interest you, without having to take as many required core classes. A sample of certificate courses you can find include:

- Certificate in Economics and Business Journalism (CUNY School of Journalism)
- Intercultural Foundations Certificate (Intercultural Communications Institute)
- Certificate in Journalism (NYU School of Continuing Professional Studies)
- Cultural Journalism Certificate (Emerson College)
- Graduate Certificate in Narrative Journalism (Mayborn Graduate School of Journalism)

Certificate courses are meant to give you a solid grounding in and exposure to the field, usually within a shorter and more flexible time frame than a full degree program. Given the abbreviated nature of certificate programs, they will not give you the same theoretical foundation as, nor are they meant to act as a replacement for, a full degree program.

Also, as certificate programs are less than part-time student status, students enrolled only in certificate courses are not eligible for federal student financial aid.

Skills you can gain

As the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (www.apsia.org) states, international affairs graduate schools “prepare students for the global workplace of the 21st Century by combining multidisciplinary, policy-oriented, intercultural studies with career development.” Some skills you will develop include:

- Critical thinking and strategic planning about decisions and issues facing international organizations across all sectors
- Project/program development, management, and evaluation
- Relationship and consensus building, engaging diverse stakeholders
- Quantitative methods and analysis
- Financial accounting and analysis
- Cross-cultural and international communication
- Conflict resolution
- Policy development and implementation
- Foreign language proficiency
- Research and analytical skills

What can you expect to find in a program?

General structure of programs

In addition to a variety of program concentrations, universities vary in formats and timelines for education. Journalism graduate programs at the masters level run anywhere from ten months to two years. Many offer the option to study at a partner school, and internships within the industry are highly encouraged and sometimes required.

For mid-career professionals looking for an advanced program of study, some schools offer executive programs. Executive programs allow students who fulfill a minimum work experience requirement to complete the graduate degree in a condensed and/or more flexible schedule—usually one year full-time or two years part-time. The part-time program is ideal for students who prefer to work while studying in the evenings and on weekends.

Some typical dual-degree combinations with a masters or doctorate in Journalism include Law, Business, Earth and Environmental Science, Religion, International Affairs, and Public Affairs.

» Learn about the benefits of a joint-degree

Learn more about the benefits of a certificate

Read “Going to grad school part-time” to learn more about some pros and cons of part-time study
Usual coursework and concentrations

Journalism schools place a strong emphasis on connecting the theoretical basics of communications with the actual processing and presentation of information to the public. Schools do this by requiring field experience (like internships or participation in campus media), and fostering interactive classes and discussions with local professionals. Students of executive or part-time journalism programs who are full- or part-time working professionals have the benefit of applying what they learn in class to their daily work.

Read the challenges of working full-time while studying full-time www.idealist.org/en/psgerc/workstudyft.html

Some typical core curriculum offerings include courses that give you a foundation in:
- Journalistic values
- Reporting
- Editing
- New media and the digital revolution
- Narrative writing
- Strategy
- Marketing
- Ethical decision making
- First Amendment challenges
- Industry and ownership structures

Students usually develop individual concentrations for their study through elective coursework or a certificate. If the program is tied to a larger grad school, students can often fulfill electives in other departments or schools for an interdisciplinary curriculum, or, again, may take courses towards an additional certificate in another field. Typical concentrations include:
- Arts and culture
- Business and economics
- Health and medicine
- Urban studies
- Science
- International studies
- Environmental affairs
- Law
- Politics and government
- Divinity and religion

Most grad schools post their course offerings online for prospective students to view. Taking a look at the curriculum for your target school(s) will give you a clearer sense of how your graduate education could be structured and what you’ll learn. Comparing the curricula will also help you determine which graduate program may be a better fit for your interests. Here are some links to curricula from a few schools to give you an idea of what journalism graduate programs may be like:

» CUNY Graduate School of Journalism www.journalism.cuny.edu/academics/course-descriptions/#core

» Georgetown University of Communication, Culture, and Technology http://cct.georgetown.edu/program/courses/

» Intercultural Communications Institute www.intercultural.org

» Northwestern University Medill School www.medill.northwestern.edu/journalism/grad/page.aspx?id=125651

» The European Graduate School www.egs.edu/main/sitemap.html

Graduation requirements

To earn your degree, you may be required to complete a capstone project, thesis, or final production of a portfolio.

A capstone project is an opportunity for you to apply the education you’ve received throughout the program by addressing a real issue and need in the community. It usually culminates in a written report and presentation.

A thesis, on the other hand, is a written paper on research that you have conducted on a topic relevant to your area of interest.

Whatever the requirement, it usually requires in-depth research and the creation of a significant piece of journalism. The project is meant to exhibit the student’s ability to complete intensive research over an extended period of time, the capability to collect and compute substantial amounts of information, and the skill to communicate their findings effectively. Another purpose of the final task is to give the student experience going beyond a daily deadline and to give them practice in the highest level of long-form reporting, writing, and producing. Often schools encourage their students to submit the project for publication as a journalistic piece.

For example, at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism in 2009, students presented capstone projects on subjects with titles as varied as “Sun rising on solar careers,” which explores the developing demand for solar energy training for electricians, to “Merchants sour on lollipop meters,” a project investigating parking meter regulation in New York City. Some themes for theses at the Columbia School of Journalism have been “That’s obscene: Obscenity and discourse in Lady Chatterley’s Lover” and “Saigon to
Baghdad: A comparison of combat correspondents’ experiences in Vietnam and Iraq.” As is clear, the subject of your project or thesis can be as tailored to your personal interest as desired.

**Accreditation**

The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) ([www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/](http://www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/)) is the organization that accredits graduate programs offering degrees in journalism. The ACEJMC’s mission is “to foster and encourage excellence and high standards in professional education in journalism and mass communication.” Journalism schools must apply for accreditation and, once accredited, are considered members of the ACEJMC. You can learn more about their accrediting standards as well as ACEJMC’s core curriculum recommendations and process at their website.

Along with the ACEJMC, six regional accrediting bodies evaluate journalism programs in the United States:

- Middle State Association of Colleges and Schools [www.msche.org](http://www.msche.org)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges [www.acswasc.org](http://www.acswasc.org)
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools [www.ncacasi.org](http://www.ncacasi.org)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges [www.neasc.org](http://www.neasc.org)
- Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges [www.nwccu.org](http://www.nwccu.org)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools [www.sacs.org](http://www.sacs.org)

**Who gets this degree and what do they go on to do?**

**Prior experience**

Most graduate schools in journalism strongly recommend, and some require, between three to five years of work experience and/or demonstrated interest in journalism. However, this is not necessarily the case for all journalism schools. Since journalism is a field with such a wide range of concentrations, some schools instead look for applicants who have exceptional past academic success (though not necessarily in journalism), and have demonstrated a commitment to the field.

Admissions staff recommend that applicants with little or no experience do informational interviews with reporters and other news professionals, take introductory journalism courses, and apply for internships with news organizations in their communities before undertaking the challenge of a graduate degree. These experiences not only offer you background knowledge of the field and the work, but also a chance to confirm that journalism is a profession you can actually commit to before spending time and money on the degree.

Prior work experience of any kind can help define your professional interest and goals before entering a graduate program—affecting how you approach your studies, which classes you take, and which types of learning opportunities you look for both in and out of the classroom. Ultimately, the more experience you have and the sharper your goals, the more return you’ll get on your educational investment.

One communications degree admissions staff person says, “It is helpful for students to have some work experience prior to entering the program. On average, our students have 3-4 years of work experience beforehand. This simply helps to give them a better understanding of the direction they would like to take with this degree. The more our students understand what they want to achieve with this degree prior to entering the program, the more they take advantage of all of the opportunities the program offers.”

If you have not worked professionally in nonprofits or government, some ways to gain significant experience and insight into issues unique to journalism public service work include:

- Freelancing or stringing for a local paper. Take advantage of your content knowledge in other areas when you are looking for this kind of work. For example, if you have a background in the arts, you can seek ways to write about local arts events in your neighborhood paper, or the weekly entertainment newspaper for your town.
- Creating or contributing regularly to a professional blog where you write on a theme that you have expertise in. You can practice keeping up with the latest trends on a specific topic, and develop original posts that can serve as good examples of your best work.
- Participating in a national service program such as AmeriCorps. Full-time service is a good way to develop professional skills including writing, editing, and other communications skills, while gaining experience in issue areas like poverty, community development, or disaster relief. Search [www.americorps.gov](http://www.americorps.gov) for openings that use writing, editing, communications, and even computer or technical skills.
- Volunteering your skills for special projects with nonprofits
or local government. Volunteering is another way to explore a career in writing—e.g., editing or contributing to organizational newsletters, or serving as a media liaison to help spread the word about an organization’s events or activities.

- Launch your own podcast show. Especially if you are interested in audio communications, radio, and new media, starting your own podcast show is a good way to experiment with current technology trends while learning how to interview, craft a story, and speak professionally for mass consumption. Podcast technology doesn’t have to be expensive at all, and launching your show through iTunes is free. You can focus on topics, people, and stories important to you—and strategic for your career goals—while creating sample work to share with journalism school admissions.

- Taking courses. If you’re still an undergraduate student, look for nonfiction writing courses in professional writing, magazine writing, or journalism. Your school may even offer broadcast communications courses, or others that incorporate new media. Similarly, if you are a college graduate, you can try some courses as a continuing education, post-bac, or certificate student at your local university.

- Take advantage of college media. If you’re still in college, take advantage of campus newspapers, literary journals, radio, and other media outlets to get experience reporting, editing, and managing a small media organization. Use the body of work you create during college for your portfolio, including clips of printed work or recordings of broadcast work, to use in landing a first post-graduation journalism job, or to help you apply for journalism school later on.

- Find volunteer opportunities
  www.idealist.org/it/as/vol
- Read our series of articles offering tips on how to prepare for grad school

Career paths

Students of journalism use their degree to prepare for and transition into positions at organizations of all sizes across all sectors, perhaps even founding their own nonprofits or freelancing. The job market at the moment is flooded with people with newspaper skills, so J School graduates are finding varied and creative ways to use their educations. Some typical job titles that graduates may qualify for include:

- Editor
- Newscaster
- News Analyst
- Reporter
- Columnist
- Author
- Public Relations Specialist
- Freelance Writer
- New Media Specialist

The following are a few online job postings for management positions at a nonprofit, a business, and a federal government agency. A journalism graduate degree would help prepare you for the following responsibilities and duties (italics added for emphasis):

Research & Web Content Associate

FOR A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION

1. Researches and creates presentable and easily accessible web content on social and environmental issues, and causes and interactions between them. Researches consumerism and consumption and impact on the environment and communities. Investigates actions and solutions to reduce social and environmental impact and the cultural/social shift which needs to happen in the developed world towards living simply.

2. Generates other content such as biweekly newsletters, op-eds, and publishable articles targeted for the general public.

3. Presents information at communities, schools, cities, government, and other public events.

Qualifications:

- Graduate degree in Environmental Sciences, International Relations, Ecology, Economics, Political Science, Communications, or related fields.
- Very high and keen awareness and understanding of global
social/environmental issues, causes and interactions. Extremely well-read and familiar with writings of well known authors such as Lester Brown, Jeffery Sachs, Naomi Klein, David Korten, Maude Barlow, Paul Ehrlich, etc.

- Excellent presentation, writing, and verbal skills. Must be able to write and present complex issues for general audience and create an impact.
- 4+ years experience in environmental and social issues.
- Excellent interpersonal skills, self-starter, highly motivated.
- Good computer skills. Knowledge of graphic design, HTML a plus.
- Good understanding of how to disseminate information on the web (blogs, social networking, etc.)

**Technical Writer**
**FOR A CORPORATION**

Responsible for working with internal organizations to create internal and external online documentation. Work requires use of the appropriate editorial/logical methodologies and process management. Oversees departmental content workflow to ensure that content is developed timely and in such a way that customers with limited technical product knowledge can understand and use the documentation.

**Accountabilities:**
- Writes and proofs hardcopy and online documents for consistency
- Ensures all documents are technically and mechanically accurate
- Develops, documents, and maintains processes
- Defines processes for content modification, content service levels, tool and application access and account administration, and workflow administration.

**Experience:**
- 6+ years minimum directly related experience with high school diploma
- 2+ years minimum directly related experience with bachelors degree
- 1+ years minimum directly related experience with masters degree, focus in English, Journalism, or Technical Communication

Writing samples requested

**Writer/Editor for the ABC and XYZ Inspection Service**
**FOR A FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AGENCY**

Agency needs bright, energetic, and committed professionals to facilitate the domestic and international marketing of U.S. ABC products and to protect XYZ in the United States. Agency offers an array of occupations and is committed to diversity in the workplace. We operate in domestic and global markets. Be part of an organization that protects the ABC and XYZ of the U.S. public.

**About the position:**
The incumbent of this position serves as writer-editor in an Agency concerned with ABC and XYZ, with particular responsibility for developing and writing materials dealing with legislative issues, the Agency’s authorities and regulations, and policy program concerns. This position is located in Washington, DC in… Legislative and Public Affairs, Government Affairs staff and reports to the Assistant Deputy Administrator for Government Affairs.

**Qualifications**
Applicants must have one year of specialized experience equivalent in level of difficulty and responsibility to the next lower level in the Federal service. This experience is typically in or related to the work of the position being filled. This specialized experience is demonstrated by developing and writing materials dealing with legislative issues, authorities and regulations, policy and program concerns, and by writing testimony and oral statements for witnesses participating in Congressional hearings.

**OR**
Successful completion of a Ph.D. or equivalent doctoral degree or three full years of progressively higher-level graduate level education leading to a degree in English or Journalism. Degree must have been obtained from an accredited college or university.

**OR**
Applicants may also use equivalent combinations of successfully completed graduate level education and specialized experience to meet total qualification requirements.

» Explore nonprofit careers in our Nonprofit Career Center [www.idealist.org/career](http://www.idealist.org/career)
» Explore journalism jobs at the JournalismNext, a job and community website for minority journalists and media professionals [www.journalismnext.com](http://www.journalismnext.com)

**What should you know about admissions?**

**Applying**

Different schools have different admissions requirements—for example, some schools require an English proficiency test, some require a minimum GPA, and others require a specific "Journal-
ism School Writing Test” to assess your writing skills.

In general, schools say that previous professional or campus experience in communication is useful but not required, although applicants with little reporting experience may want to consider doing informational interviews with a professional within the field, taking an introductory journalism course, or participating in an internship with a news organization in their community. A portfolio of past work can be highly valuable. Most importantly, applicants must demonstrate a strong commitment and dedication to the values of journalism.

Programs designed for working professionals may not require a graduate admissions test score if an applicant meets the minimum undergraduate GPA and years of work experience. For example, the Quinnipiac M.S. in Interactive Communications program (www.quinnipiac.edu/x4014.xml) only requires letters of recommendation, an updated resume, a letter of intent, a portfolio, and official transcripts from past schools attended. Others, like the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism (www.journalism.cuny.edu/admissions/how-to-apply/), require GRE scores, plus TOEFL scores from non-native English speakers.

Certificate program admissions may have a different application process and requirements.

Whichever program you opt for, admissions staff recommend that prospective graduate students have a distinct vision of career goals before applying to a journalism program. Applications require a personal statement or essay to describe these goals precisely. It is crucial that an applicant prepare essays and application materials meticulously, proving to the review committees that they can follow instructions and express their motivations to attend grad school, especially since journalism is a particularly detail-oriented career.

Your target school(s) should be very clear about admissions requirements and their application process. Call the school directly when you encounter questions that the website does not answer—that’s why the admissions staff is there.

Financial aid

As with any degree, admissions staff recommend that prospective students pursue many avenues of financial aid early in their graduate school research.

Many employers may help support graduate studies, whether through flexible scheduling, tuition reimbursement, or additional responsibilities (leading projects, etc.). If you plan to continue working during grad school, check in with your human resources director or your staff manual to learn about programs that can benefit you.

Universities and journalism schools often offer scholarships and graduate assistantships that help cover the cost of tuition, fees, and expenses. Your target schools’ websites should offer links to funding resources—even if your school does not, it’s a good idea to look at the links other schools provide their prospective students, especially “external aid” from institutions not affiliated with a school.

Professional journalism associations, such as the National Association for Black Journalists, also offer some scholarships for aspiring journalists. Some require that you be a paying member to apply, so you may want to explore the benefits of joining such associations not only for professional networking and development opportunities, but also potential financial aid for your graduate education.

Conclusion and further resources

A degree in journalism can help prepare you for public service across all sectors. It provides you with opportunities to gain experience in and connections within the field, both of which are increasingly necessary in the journalism industry. The ability for students to select from a wide variety of concentrations makes journalism versatile compared with some degrees that have a more narrow focus, especially since the options for expression in the media are constantly multiplying.
Journalism quick links

These links provide useful further reading on this degree area.

- The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications
  www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/

Professional associations and networks of journalists:

- American Society of Newspaper Editors
  http://asne.org
- Association for Women in Communications
  www.womcom.org
- National Association of Black Journalists
  www.nabj.org
- Radio and Television Digital News Association
  www.rtdna.org
- Society of Professional Journalists
  www.spj.org
- International Journalist's Network
  www.ijnet.org/ijnet/
- Environmental Journalism Network
  www.earthjournalism.net
- Religion Newswriters Association
  www.rna.org

People who look at this degree also consider

People interested in journalism also consider further education related to a specific area of expertise. For example, if you aim to cover Nigerian economics as a reporter, you might think about studying economics, African studies, Nigerian languages, or even comparative literature. Since communication is an integral part of any profession, you could prepare for a career reporting the news through a variety of degrees other than journalism, including but not limited to those below. That said, if you’re already steeped in content expertise and really want to sharpen your journalism skills, then Journalism School, or “J School,” might be best for you.

- International affairs
- Public interest law
- Public administration/policy
- Public health

- Get overviews of some of these fields at