



Contributor's Guide

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Crosscut Contributor's Guide

March 2007

Introduction

This guide is for anyone who contributes editorial content to Crosscut — professionals, citizen journalists, staffers, and freelancers — whether they write regularly for the site or will do so for the first time. It is intended to save us all time by outlining Crosscut's expectations of writers and other contributors as well as its editors' practical needs.

If you have questions or think something here could be more clear, e-mail the editor at editor@crosscut.com.

1. What Does Crosscut Publish?

Crosscut finds and highlights the best local journalism and the best local commentary, whether it's the work of the biggest metropolitan daily newspaper or a part-time blogger. There is a multitude of worthy sources of information on the Internet, but few people have time to navigate them all.

Crosscut publishes its own journalism and commentary, too. These are stories and angles others have missed or ignored. Our news coverage aims to complement that of other providers, to extend exploration of events and issues, to encourage resolution.

Crosscut embraces new tools and tries new things as technology evolves, mindful of the relative strengths of textual, photo, audio, and video journalism.

Crosscut publishes news, commentary, news about commentary, commentary about news—just about anything that is non-fiction.

Our broad definition of news is anything people want or ought to know. Commentary is opinionated or rhetorical expression. Crosscut encourages content that suggests new ideas or ways of looking at problems.

We welcome contributions of words, photographs, audio, video, illustrations, charts, PowerPoint presentations, and anything else that is true to life. You don't have to be a professional, but whatever you provide should be a rendering of reality supported by facts.

Crosscut is a local Web site. We publish material that is endemic or has a significant connection to the Pacific Northwest states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, or Montana, or the province of British Columbia. Obviously, certain activity in Washington, D.C., is of local interest, too.

Written contributions can be short, blog-like items or longer stories. Brevity is a virtue.

Letters to the Editor

If you wish simply to express your opinion in a non-journalistic fashion, send a letter to the editor. It doesn't have to be about something on Crosscut. But it should be topical and relevant. And local. The e-mail address is letters@crosscut.com. Please include your real name, city of residence, and phone number so we can verify authorship. We won't post your phone number or e-mail address, but we will post your name and city, and you should be prepared to see people comment on your letter on the Web site. We will withhold a letter-writer's name for reasons that are compelling.

Submissions of Journalism

If you submit something more than a comment at the end of an article or a letter to the editor, please read the rest of this document carefully. You also must fill out a contributor information form, and if you are to be paid, you must sign a contract. Details are attached at the end.

2. Crosscut Content Standards and Practices

Crosscut's mission of highlighting and publishing the best local journalism requires some definition of the ideal. What follows are specific rules and resources that reflect broader values.

Crosscut is a guide to local news, a place to report and discuss local news, and a platform for new tools to convey local news. The journalism of regular citizens appears alongside that of professionals. News coverage with detachment, traditionally practiced by mainstream media outlets, coexists with advocacy journalism and opinion. A wide range of opinions are heard — and affirmed or challenged, with respect.

As an institution, Crosscut takes no stand except to encourage and strive for accuracy, fairness, civility, transparency, and creative solutions to important problems.

Transparency

With a wide range of expertise, perspective, and formats, imposing order on Crosscut's mix of news and commentary is challenging. Imposing standards is, too. But readers rely on Crosscut to lead them to journalism and commentary they can trust, or at least help them see evidence behind assertions.

The best way to build this trust, in the absence of absolute control of the content to which we link or the opinions we host, is through *transparency* and *context*.

Sticking to these principles requires fully identifying writers or sources of information and their stakes in a message or issue; raising questions when verification of something is in doubt; and calling attention to other sources of information and opinion.

Some Crosscut writers have a conflict of interest. Some have a conflict that is tangential and does not affect their integrity but could be perceived to, especially absent disclosure. In any case, Crosscut discloses conflicts or potential conflicts to serve the site's mission to clarify and inform. Disclosure appears within the text or other media, or in an attached writer's bio—or both, when deemed appropriate.

Disclosure Policy

We use real names. Except for staff writers, Crosscut runs a brief bio of every writer at the end of every article.

We expect all contributors to fully disclose anything in their lives that could constitute a conflict of interest or be construed as a conflict of interest — before publication. If such a conflict is not evident from reading, listening to, or viewing the article or media, we post that information adjacently. This is a reasonable standard in a time when anyone can practice journalism. (It should be noted that in some cases, conflicts of interest are a good thing, as when a contributor is able to share expertise or experience that would elude conventional reporting.)

Conflicts of interest that call for disclosure include but are not limited to:

- Financial or business interests that could be affected, favorably or not, by publication of the content.
- Family ties to the subject matter that are not transparent.

- "Axe-to-grind" history, such as animosity between the contributor and the subject of the content.
- Non-apparent financial support for a contributor's reporting, such as expenses paid by someone with a personal or business interest in the report.
- Political ties that would affect a reader's or viewer's judgment of the content.

The best place to disclose a conflict, or to explain its value, is within the article, photo, audio file, or video itself. Crosscut editors reserve the right to attach disclosures of conflict, or to more fully explain them, as they see fit.

Veracity

Where it has control, Crosscut strives to offer content that is 100 percent accurate. When errors are known, they are corrected as soon as possible. If warranted, a correction is noted — when and where changes are made.

Writers are expected to provide text that is accurate. Crosscut editors conduct no methodical fact checking.

Resources:

Poynter Guide to Accuracy

http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=36518

Libel

From the *First Amendment Handbook* (Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press):

Libel occurs when a false and defamatory statement about an identifiable person is published to a third party, causing injury to the subject's reputation. A libelous statement can be the basis of a civil lawsuit brought by the person or group allegedly defamed or, in rare cases, a criminal prosecution.

There is no uniform law for libel. Each state decides what the plaintiff in a civil libel suit must prove and what defenses are available for the media. However, constitutional law requires that plaintiffs or prosecutors prove fault before a news organization can be held liable for defamatory communications. When a news organization is sued, the court must balance protection of a person's reputation against the First Amendment values of freedom of the press. Generally, this requires an examination of six different legal elements — defamatory communication, publication, falsity, identification, harm and fault — as well as any of a number of defenses available to media defendants.

A good question to ask when considering fairness and legal exposure is, "Is this provably true?"

While Crosscut can scrutinize its own content for possible libel or factual lapse, it can't control what other sites do. We take no responsibility for content to which we link. When linking to off-site content, Crosscut editors should, when possible, call reader attention to factors that would challenge a report's integrity.

Resources:

The First Amendment Handbook
 (Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press)
<http://www.rcfp.org/handbook/c01p01.html>

Civility and Profanity

Crosscut treats staff members, contributors, readers, and commenters with respect and does everything it can to ensure participants in the Crosscut online community do the same. Ideas and performances, whether in the arts or in a profession, are fair game for criticism, but personal or vulgar attacks are prohibited. Crosscut content is edited accordingly.

Profanity and racial slurs may be permitted in direct quotes that are essential in context or when such language is part of a proper noun. The propriety of such language is assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Plagiarism and Fabrication

Plagiarism and factual fabrication, or knowingly enabling them, are grounds for immediate dismissal or, for non-employees, termination of any contractual or other relationship.

Sources of Guidance

Crosscut's mission is to be a portal to the Internet's full spectrum of journalism and commentary and to enable a wide range of dialogue about the community. That makes it difficult to impose concrete standards for conduct and content without excluding information or perspective. As Crosscut points to and publishes news and commentary, the watchwords *transparency* and *context* might satisfy many issues that arise involving ethics or standards. But it is not possible to anticipate every contingency, and not many journalism organizations have even tried to put such standards in writing. The ones that have offer wisdom and guidance that might be applicable to Crosscut decision-making.

The Elements of Journalism

Possibly the most insightful and broad definition of journalism standards is found in *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (Crown, 2001) by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel. Their own outline of this seminal book follows.

1. **Journalism's first obligation is to the truth:** Democracy depends on citizens having reliable, accurate facts put in a meaningful context. Journalism does not pursue truth in an absolute or philosophical sense, but it can — and must — pursue it in a practical sense. This "journalistic truth" is a process that begins with the professional discipline of assembling and verifying facts. Then journalists try to convey a fair and reliable account of their meaning, valid for now, subject to further investigation. Journalists should be as transparent as possible about sources and methods so audiences can make their own assessment of the information. Even in a world of expanding voices, accuracy is the foundation upon which everything else is built — context, interpretation, comment, criticism, analysis and debate. The truth, over time, emerges from this forum. As citizens encounter an ever greater flow of data, they have more need — not less — for identifiable sources dedicated to verifying that information and putting it in context.
2. **Its first loyalty is to citizens:** While news organizations answer to many constituencies, including advertisers and shareholders, the journalists in those organizations must maintain allegiance to citizens and the larger public interest above any other if they are to provide the news

without fear or favor. This commitment to citizens first is the basis of a news organization's credibility, the implied covenant that tells the audience the coverage is not slanted for friends or advertisers. Commitment to citizens also means journalism should present a representative picture of all constituent groups in society. Ignoring certain citizens has the effect of disenfranchising them. The theory underlying the modern news industry has been the belief that credibility builds a broad and loyal audience, and that economic success follows in turn. In that regard, the business people in a news organization also must nurture — not exploit — their allegiance to the audience ahead of other considerations.

3. **Its essence is a discipline of verification:** Journalists rely on a professional discipline for verifying information. When the concept of objectivity originally evolved, it did not imply that journalists are free of bias. It called, rather, for a consistent method of testing information — a transparent approach to evidence — precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work. The method is objective, not the journalist. Seeking out multiple witnesses, disclosing as much as possible about sources, or asking various sides for comment, all signal such standards. This discipline of verification is what separates journalism from other modes of communication, such as propaganda, fiction or entertainment. But the need for professional method is not always fully recognized or refined. While journalism has developed various techniques for determining facts, for instance, it has done less to develop a system for testing the reliability of journalistic interpretation.
4. **Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover:** Independence is an underlying requirement of journalism, a cornerstone of its reliability. Independence of spirit and mind, rather than neutrality, is the principle journalists must keep in focus. While editorialists and commentators are not neutral, the source of their credibility is still their accuracy, intellectual fairness and ability to inform — not their devotion to a certain group or outcome. In our independence, however, we must avoid any tendency to stray into arrogance, elitism, isolation or nihilism.
5. **It must serve as an independent monitor of power:** Journalism has an unusual capacity to serve as watchdog over those whose power and position most affect citizens. The Founders recognized this to be a rampart against despotism when they ensured an independent press; courts have affirmed it; citizens rely on it. As journalists, we have an obligation to protect this watchdog freedom by not demeaning it in frivolous use or exploiting it for commercial gain.
6. **It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise:** The news media are the common carriers of public discussion, and this responsibility forms a basis for our special privileges. This discussion serves society best when it is informed by facts rather than prejudice and supposition. It also should strive to fairly represent the varied viewpoints and interests in society, and to place them in context rather than highlight only the conflicting fringes of debate. Accuracy and truthfulness require that as framers of the public discussion we not neglect the points of common ground where problem solving occurs.
7. **It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant:** Journalism is storytelling with a purpose. It should do more than gather an audience or catalogue the important. For its own survival, it must balance what readers know they want with what they cannot anticipate but need. In short, it must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant. The effectiveness of a piece of journalism is measured both by how much a work engages its audience and enlightens it. This means journalists must continually ask what information has most value to citizens and in what form. While journalism should reach beyond such topics as government and public safety, a journalism overwhelmed by trivia and false significance ultimately engenders a trivial society.

8. **It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional:** Keeping news in proportion and not leaving important things out are also cornerstones of truthfulness. Journalism is a form of cartography: it creates a map for citizens to navigate society. Inflating events for sensation, neglecting others, stereotyping or being disproportionately negative all make a less reliable map. The map also should include news of all our communities, not just those with attractive demographics. This is best achieved by newsrooms with a diversity of backgrounds and perspectives. The map is only an analogy; proportion and comprehensiveness are subjective, yet their elusiveness does not lessen their significance.
9. **Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience:** Every journalist must have a personal sense of ethics and responsibility — a moral compass. Each of us must be willing, if fairness and accuracy require, to voice differences with our colleagues, whether in the newsroom or the executive suite. News organizations do well to nurture this independence by encouraging individuals to speak their minds. This stimulates the intellectual diversity necessary to understand and accurately cover an increasingly diverse society. It is this diversity of minds and voices, not just numbers, that matters.

Resources:

The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect
<http://www.concernedjournalists.org/node/540>

Outline

<http://www.journalism.org/resources/principles>

Society of Professional Journalists

This venerable organization's Code of Ethics is one of the oldest, and it's been tweaked over the many years to accommodate changing technology and values. It's also conveniently concise. A synopsis:

- **Seek truth and report it:** Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.
- **Act independently:** Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.
- **Minimize harm:** Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.
- **Be accountable:** Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.

Resources:

SPJ Code of Ethics
<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

The New York Times

In the early 2000s, *The New York Times* went from being the perceived pinnacle of mainstream media to suffering through a period of turmoil and self-examination. It's a long story (see Jason Blair), but America's leading journalism outlet righted itself, and as a result its code of ethics is second to none in scope and street cred.

Ethical Journalism: A Handbook of Values and Practices for the News and Editorial Departments is a 1.1-megabyte PDF file. Supplements to this lengthy document include *Guidelines on Integrity* and *Policy Regarding Confidential News Sources*.

Resources:

Ethical Journalism

http://www.nytco.com/pdf/NYT_Ethical_Journalism_0904.pdf

Guidelines on Integrity

<http://www.nytco.com/company-properties-times-integrity.html>

Policy Regarding Confidential News Sources

<http://www.nytco.com/company-properties-times-sources.html>

Other Resources

The First Amendment Handbook

(Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press)

<http://www.rcfp.org/handbook/c01p01.html>

The Associated Press Statement of News Values and Principles

(Associated Press Managing Editors)

http://www.apme.com/news/news_values_statement.shtml

3. Working With Crosscut Editors

If you have an idea for a story, commentary, blog, photo, audio, video, or some other journalistic effort, send an e-mail to the editor at editor@crosscut.com. If the story is already written, attach it to the e-mail. Please tell us something about yourself. A resume or bio is helpful. We need to gauge your expertise and qualifications, as any reader would.

Please let us know if you have submitted the idea or article elsewhere, too. We prefer exclusivity.

We will respond to your idea one way or another.

How to File a Story

We prefer plain-text documents with modest HTML styling. Microsoft Word Document format is not helpful. The formatting that Word employs is not Web-friendly. Save your Word document as a plain-text file (.txt) and attach it to an e-mail to the editor at editor@crosscut.com.

If you don't feel comfortable inserting basic HTML "tags," don't worry about it—we'll take care of it. But the HTML formatting that is helpful to us is simple:

Paragraphs: Put `<p>` at the beginning and `</p>` at the end of every paragraph.

Bold: Put `` at the beginning and `` at the end of text you wish to make bold.

Italic: Put `<i>` at the beginning and `</i>` at the end of text to be italicized.

Dash (—): `—`

Bullet (·): `•`

Hyperlink: Put `` before the text to be "hotlinked" and `` after. Be sure to include the entire URL, including "http://". The sentence you are reading includes a few hotlinked words; imagine that `these words here` are to be highlighted as a link.

Style

With some exceptions, Crosscut follows Associated Press style as defined in *The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law*.

For matters of composition, Strunk's *The Elements of Style* is our guide. More detailed help can be found in *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English*. These works are available online at Bartleby.com.

Compensation

Whether and how much you are paid for your Crosscut contribution must be negotiated prior to publication. If you are compensated for your work, you must have a signed contract on file with us. Whether paid or not, a contributor of editorial content must fill out a personal-information form. These documents follow.

In brief, our contributor's contract gives us exclusive rights for two weeks. After that, you're free to resell your work product. We may continue to use your content indefinitely. Sometimes we trade articles with other Web sites, and this contract allows for that.

Contributor Contract

This contract is by and between Crosscut LLC ("Crosscut") and the undersigned ("you") and is effective as of the date fully executed below. This contract concerns, among other things, any text, photographs, graphics, audio, video, or other material of any nature (collectively referred to herein as the "Content") to be written or created or provided by you for publication by Crosscut.

1. You agree to prepare the Content as described by Crosscut upon assignment and to deliver it in form suitable for publication on or before the date specified upon assignment. You also agree to keep your Crosscut editor advised of the progress of the Content, to revise the Content as requested by your Crosscut editor, and to provide your cooperation and pertinent research materials, including but not limited to source names and telephone numbers and annotated and/or highlighted copies of pertinent documents, for the purpose of fact-checking and pre-publication review for accuracy and libel. Upon assignment, we will agree upon the fee to be paid if the Content is published, the fee to be paid if it is not published, and all documented expenses, approved by the Crosscut editor or publisher, to be reimbursed.
2. For 14 days after the date the Content is published on the Crosscut Web site, you grant to Crosscut exclusive worldwide publication and syndication rights to the Content, in all languages and in all mediums, including print publication. You further grant to Crosscut the rights, non-exclusively, thereafter, to include the Content in any archive or database of Crosscut, in any form or medium, and the non-exclusive worldwide right to republish the Content at any time or from time to time on the Crosscut Web site or in any anthology or similar collective or historical work published by or at the direction of Crosscut or any affiliate of Crosscut in any form or medium.
3. You represent and warrant the originality, authorship, authenticity, and your sole ownership of the Content and all rights in the Content; that the Content will not have been previously published; that you have not sold or agreed to sell any rights in the Content to anyone other than Crosscut; and that any necessary permissions will have been obtained, copies of which you will deliver upon request. You also agree that the Content, and your newsgathering in connection with the Content, will not be libelous or infringe upon any copyright, right to privacy, proprietary or any other right of any person, firm or corporation or other entity, or violate any local, state, or federal regulation. Provided that you do not breach any of the foregoing representations, warranties, or agreements, and further provided that you promptly notify Crosscut of any claim or legal proceeding relating to the Content, Crosscut agrees that it will defend you against any legal claims arising out of the publication of the Content by Crosscut with counsel selected solely by Crosscut. Crosscut further agrees to include you as an additional insured under our Media Professional Liability policy for the coverages provided therein.
4. You are an independent contractor and are not Crosscut's agent or representative and have no authority to bind or commit Crosscut to any agreements or further obligations. You are responsible for paying for your own taxes and benefits.
5. Crosscut will have the right to edit, abridge, and augment the Content, and Crosscut has no obligation to publish the Content.
6. Crosscut will have the right to use your name, biography, voice and likeness, and the Content, or any portion thereof, in connection with the publication, advertising, and promotion of the Content and Crosscut, and, during the two-week period following publication of the Content, you will be reasonably available to make promotional appearances arranged by Crosscut.
7. You agree to make a reasonable effort to give Crosscut suitable credit, such as "First published on Crosscut in 2007," upon the exercise of any of the rights retained by you in the Content.

8. This contract constitutes the entire agreement among us and replaces and supersedes all previous agreements, proposals, promises, representations, understandings, and negotiations, whether written or oral, between us respecting the subject matter of this contract. If any part of this contract shall be held invalid or unenforceable, this contract shall be construed as if it did not contain such portion, and the rights and obligations of the parties shall be construed and enforced accordingly. No waiver, modification, amendment, consent or discharge in connection with this contract shall be binding upon either party unless in writing and signed by an authorized representative of the parties. Failure or delay on the part of any party to exercise any right, remedy, power or privilege hereunder will not operate as a waiver. This contract may be executed in any number of counterparts, each of which when so executed and delivered shall be deemed an original, and such counterparts together shall constitute one instrument. This contract may be executed by facsimile transmission of signature pages, which shall be treated as originals for all purposes. This contract shall be construed and controlled by the laws of the State of Washington, and each party further consents to exclusive jurisdiction and venue in the federal courts sitting in King County, Washington, unless no federal subject matter jurisdiction exists, in which case each party consents to exclusive jurisdiction and venue in the state courts in King County, Washington. In any action or suit to enforce any right or remedy under this contract or to interpret any provisions of this contract, the prevailing party shall be entitled to recover reasonable attorneys' fees and costs, including expert witness fees.

Please sign and return a printed copy of this to confirm the foregoing understanding. This contract covers all Content provided to Crosscut prior to or after the date this contract is signed.

CONFIRMED AND AGREED:

Your Signature
Date

FOR CROSSCUT LLC:

Our Signature	Name (please print)
Date	

Editor

Your Name (please print)
Address
City, State, Postal Code, Country
Best Phone (indicate if mobile)

200703

Crosscut Contributor Information

The following information is required for us to pay you, verify your identity, or communicate with you in a timely way.

1. Print and fill out this form and the contract, sign both, and return them by snail mail to:

Chuck Taylor
 Editor
 Crosscut
 1411 Fourth Ave., Suite 1027
 Seattle, WA 98101

2. If we don't already have it on file, send a resume and/or bio and relevant references to previous work via e-mail to editor@crosscut.com.

First Name
Middle Name or Initial
Last Name
Byline, If Different
Make Check Payable to:
Mailing Address
City, State, Code
Tax ID or Social Security Number
Landline Phone
Mobile Phone
E-Mail
Personal Web Site
I hereby promise that the information I am providing Crosscut is true. Signature:
Date

200703

Internal Revenue Service Form W-9

All contributors who are to be paid must fill out and sign Internal Revenue Service form W-9, "Request for Taxpayer Identification Number and Certification." Please download that form at the link below, fill it out, sign it, and return it to Crosscut with your signed contributor's contract and information sheet.

<http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/fw9.pdf>