

Free Press 101: Early Years

WHAT DO “ON THE RECORD” AND “OFF THE RECORD” ACTUALLY MEAN?

Understanding and respecting the distinctions between “on the record,” “off the record,” and “on background” is critical to journalism as a profession and to maintaining journalistic integrity. These conventions form the ethical framework that governs how information is gathered, attributed, and shared with the public.

“**On the record**” ensures transparency and accountability by allowing information to be directly attributed to a named source. “**Off the record**” protects the confidentiality of sources, encouraging whistleblowers and insiders to speak truthfully without fear of exposure. “**On background**” strikes a balance, enabling journalists to inform the public while safeguarding a source’s identity.

Together, these practices are foundational to the credibility and veracity of traditional news media, reinforcing public trust and the journalist’s role as a responsible steward of information in a democratic society.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- Read through this webpage, [“What do “on the record” and “off the record” actually mean?” in Free Press 101.](#)
- Retrieve a print copy of the Free Press to use in the learning experiences.

GOALS OF THESE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

- Learners will actively produce and demonstrate understanding of using information from sources, including:
 - Respect and trust
 - When to share information, and when not to share

DEFINITIONS

- On the Record:** Someone gives information to the newspaper, and gives permission for the newspaper to publish their name.
- On Background:** Someone gives information to the newspaper that will be published, but without their name.
- Off the Record:** Someone gives information to the newspaper that they do not want attributed to them in any way.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE 1: WHAT REPORTERS CAN SHARE

1. • Explain the concept of each of the below terms, using the definitions on the previous page and/or the content from **"What do "on the record" and "off the record" actually mean?"** in **Free Press 101**.

1.	On the record: someone gives information to the newspaper, and gives permission for the newspaper to publish their name. Example: Mr. Smith, the school principal, said the new computers will arrive next week.
2.	Off the record: Someone gives information to the newspaper that they don't want anyone to know came from them. Example: The Free Press has learned that Shamrock School will be getting new computers next week.
3.	On background: Someone gives information to the newspaper that will be published, but without their name. Example: A staff member at the school said the new computers will arrive next week.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE 2: TRUST AND ETHICS

2. • Using the same three categories above, ask learners to generate ideas about WHY certain people would like their information to be on the record, off the record, or on background. If prompting is needed, provide some of the examples below
1. To protect themselves or someone else (off the record).
 2. To make sure they are recognized for their work (on the record).
 3. They want you to know about something that affects a large group, but they don't want to be singled out (on background).
- If desired, this is a useful frame for discussions and further learning about when it's appropriate to keep secrets, when it's appropriate to tell an adult about something that is happening in their lives, or when they should share information even if someone else wants them to keep it secret because it's the right thing to do. If in doubt about whether something should be "off the record" in their life, learners should be encouraged to ask a trusted adult. The **Canadian Centre for Child Protection** has **free resources** to help develop learning opportunities that help keep kids safe.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE 3: REAL WORLD APPLICATION

3. • View "**News for young children**" by clicking the link or clicking "News for young children" from the **education subject search page**. Choose a story you feel your learners would enjoy hearing about and/or that has ties to curricular outcomes.
- Read some of the article quotes to the learners and have them debate whether the quote is on the record or on background.
- When learners meet with sources to discuss creating their own news stories, such as in "**How do reporters and newsrooms get their stories**", they should be encouraged to use their new knowledge to sensitively credit their sources of information.

Questions for reflection:

- Why is it important for journalists and sources to agree on these terms?
- How these rules might apply to and impact their social media, texting, or sharing of information online or in person?
- What could/has gone wrong if these boundaries are not respected?