

Free Press 101: Middle and Senior 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.
- Highlighters and sticky notes of various colours may be useful.

GOALS OF THESE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

- Learners will actively produce and demonstrate understanding of using information from sources, including:
 - Truthfulness and accuracy
 - Ethical content and respect
 - Synthetic media
 - Objectivity and unbiased reporting
 - Context and fact-checking
 - Professionalism and responsibility

DEFINITIONS

- On the Record:** The information and associated data provided can be quoted and attributed to the source by name.
- On Background:** The information and associated data can be used, but the source cannot be named directly. Instead, the journalist might refer to them in general terms (e.g., “a senior official” or “a person familiar with the matter”).
- Off the Record:** The information and associated data cannot be attributed to any individual, instead the information shared by the source may form the basis for further investigation or a search for someone willing to speak on the record about the issue.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE 1: WHAT REPORTERS CAN SHARE

1.
 - On the whiteboard or three pieces of chart paper, write the three categories of quotes:
 1. On the record
 2. Off the record
 3. Background
 - Explain the concept of each of the 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**.

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 their job while still bringing media attention to an issue (off the record).
 2. They represent an organization or event (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).

LEARNING EXPERIENCE 3: REAL WORLD APPLICATION

3.
 - Divide your copy of the Free Press it into sections to distribute among individuals or small groups.
 - Working alone or in pairs, ask learners to find two examples each of "on the record" and "on background" sources in their section of the paper. They may identify these by using different coloured highlighters or by underlining and annotating their copy. They should also write a logical reason that the particular source may have wanted to appear on the record or on background. This can be done in the margins or on a sticky note.
 - Learners should identify two news stories where there could have reasonably been off-the-record sources. Because the sources are off the record, they won't be quoted or referred to in the paper. This may be difficult for students to conceptualize. An example is below:

Headline: City delays sewer repair to 2026 (May 29, 2025)

Summary: The aging sewers of Winnipeg need repair but the work keeps getting delayed. There are several sources that appear on the record, including city councillors and a spokesperson for the water and waste department.

Off the record: It is plausible that someone from inside city hall sent this news tip in advance to the Free Press. In that case, that person would have specified that they want to be kept off the record, but wanted the issue to be noted in the media. Thus, the learners would identify the city worker as the person who may be "off the record" for the reason of "protecting their employment".

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?
- What could/has gone wrong if these boundaries are not respected?