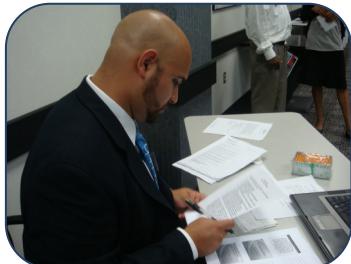


Participation Guide: Citizen Journalist



DO YOUR RESEARCH

You've taken the Citizen Journalist class and you want to know what to do next. Step off the sidelines and get into the game!

- STEP 1:** Pick Your Beat
- STEP 2:** Know Your Rights
- STEP 3:** Be a Responsible Journalist
- STEP 4:** Start Writing
- STEP 5:** Get Published
- STEP 6:** Stick With It
- STEP 7:** Get Social



INTERVIEW THE STAKEHOLDERS

Becoming a Citizen Journalist

Knowledge is Power. Citizen Journalism is making sure people know what is happening in their community and how they can take constructive action. Citizen Journalism is about creating or writing the news, and helping get the word out on issues that are important to the community.

Over the past few years, there has been a stark decline in newspaper advertising revenues, causing major budget losses and ultimately staff layoffs in New Jersey's largest daily newspapers.

Rather than relying on campaign literature or word of mouth, citizen journalists have the power to fill the information gap in a responsible non-partisan way, to prevent vital news from slipping through the cracks.

For citizens to be fully engaged and able to constructively participate in their government, they must also be an informed citizenry.



REPORT ONLINE

STEP 1: Pick Your Beat.

Write about something you're interested in and familiar with. This could be anything or anyone. Cover municipal government meetings (ie. the city council or planning board), or topics like public education, the arts, local restaurants, sports, music. The most important thing is that you care about it. Rather than covering specific events or government entities, you could interview community members, like the leaders of the local non-profits, small business owners or residents. Being able to share their stories will help bring the community together and educate people on the community's needs. If you are interested in covering government and reporting frequently, here are the best places to start:

- ✓ **Municipal Government:** The Mayor and Governing Body adopt resolutions, ordinances, collect property taxes, control public safety, and oversee development. If you want to cover municipal government make a calendar of meeting times and important deadlines (like budget introduction and elections) to help you stay on track. Find out from your municipal clerk what "form of government" your municipality is, such as "strong mayor," "township" or "borough." This will help you know who has the power in the community.
 - [TownStats.org](#). Online tool to compare how municipalities spend money
 - [DataUniverse](#). Payroll data for all public employees in New Jersey
- ✓ **The Planning Board:** The Planning Board makes sure development happens in accordance with the Master Plan and has the power to shape development in the community. Every planning board meeting must be open to the public. At the meetings, important development applications will be voted on, possibly having a major impact on traffic, open space, and municipal resources. The Planning Board also will be the entity to investigate whether or not an area is "in need of development," which is the first step towards redevelopment and possibly the use of eminent domain.
- ✓ **The School Board:** The school board controls the school district portion of a property tax bill, and controls the curriculum requirements for students. The first step is to find out if your district is a Type I (appointed) or Type II (elected) school board, make a list of important contacts including the schools superintendent, business administration, and union presidents. Regularly attend meetings to see what issues are coming up.
 - [New Jersey School Report Card](#). Offered by the New Jersey Department of Education
 - [Employee Contracts](#). Offered by the New Jersey Public Employee Relations Commission
- ✓ **Political Parties:** Also known as the "hidden power centers." Every local municipality and county have neighborhood-level elected officials for both the Republican and Democratic parties. As private organizations, there is limited access to information and the meetings aren't required to be open to the public. At a minimum, it is public information who serves on the party committees, what bylaws and constitution they have adopted, and all fundraising and expenditure reports.
 - [Election Law Enforcement Commission](#). Online database of campaign contributions and expenditures.

STEP 2: Know Your Rights

- ✓ **Open Public Records Act** (N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq.) OPRA gives citizen journalists access to the same government information available to elected officials, information that is often essential to making an intelligent proposal.
 - Access to government resolutions, ordinances, meeting minutes, contracts, budgets, and expenditures.
 - Guarantees a response in 7 days
 - Copies of public records limited to 5 cents a copy (or 7 cents for legal size paper)
 - Download the [Citizens Guide to OPRA](#) from the Government Records Council.
- ✓ **The Sunshine Law** or Open Public Meetings Act (N.J.S.A. 10: 4-6) The Sunshine Law guarantees the public's right to observe government in action and the right for citizen participation.
 - The right to speak at public meetings
 - Requirement for official government action to occur in public
 - The public must be given notice of meetings
 - Limits the ability of governing bodies to go into "executive sessions"
- ✓ **The Right to Videotape Meetings** (Tarus vs. Pine Hill) A 2007 New Jersey Supreme Court ruling upheld the public's common law right to videotape meetings. While citizens have the right to videotape meetings, the governing body is allowed to adopt rules to prevent disruptions, like limiting camera placement. Before attending a meeting to videotape, call the clerk to find out what rules, if any, there are.
- ✓ **Party Democracy Act** (P.L. 2009, c. 135) Adopted in 2009, the Party Democrat Act was designed to make the political parties fairer, transparent, and accessible. It guarantees access to a list of official members of the municipal and county committees, including both appointed and elected members. It also requires each county board of elections to post copies of the County Political Party's Constitution and Bylaws.
- ✓ **Citizen Service Act** (P.L. 2009, c. 141) This law requires municipalities to maintain a public directory of boards and commissions, including terms of office, the authorizing statute or ordinance, and vacancies to be filled. As a citizen journalist this can come in very handy to see who sits on powerful boards, and to compare who applied vs. who was appointed.

STEP 3: Be a Responsible Journalist



- ✓ **Be Accurate.** Use a note pad, tape recorder, or even video camera to take notes or record interviews. Obtain public records using OPRA to back up your story. And always re-read your article to double check numbers and important facts.
- ✓ **Be Thorough.** Interview all the community stakeholders impacted by the ordinance or development to get the full story. This includes the Mayor & Council, Business Owners, Community Non-Profits, and concerned citizens.

- ✓ **Be Fair.** It's important not to show favoritism towards one side or another. At the same time, if someone is opposed to a certain proposal ask them what is their solution to the problem. This is very important, if someone is going to discredit a proposal, make them offer up a constructive alternative.
- ✓ **Be Independent.** Leave your partisanship at the door. This will help you build a larger audience and be seen as a credible news source.
- ✓ **Be Objective.** If you want to be read as a non-partisan, trusted news source, then you need to refrain from inserting your own opinion. To do this, we recommend you always use a "No Blame Approach." This means not resorting to the blame game, but instead focusing on Constructive Solutions. And, if you want to earn reader's trust, you need to remain objective and respectful.

STEP 4: Start Writing

REMEMBER: Every story should cover the five W's:

1. **Who**
2. **What**
3. **Where**
4. **When**
5. **Why**

Before publishing an article or blog post, reread your piece to make sure each of these questions are answered.

- ✓ **Lead with your most important information.** Think big numbers and the big picture. Pick your juiciest piece of news and lead with it.
- ✓ **Your story can be a few sentences or 1,000 words.** On the internet there are no word limits, so your stories can be a brief or extensive as you like.
- ✓ **Write like you would want to read it in print.** These days it is not uncommon for traditional print publications to run an online piece, so it is important to be aware that whatever you write might show up in other places.
- ✓ **Be Timely.** It's important to report the news within a day or two, even when you don't have as much information as you'd like, especially when proposals are advancing through local government. If you are publishing online, you can always post updates. Even established media outlets like the Associated Press will continually update a story as more information is obtained.

STEP 5: Get Published

- ✓ **Look for online news sites in your area.** Do a web search for local news sites and see who covers your area. Email the editor and pitch story ideas you feel should be covered in their publication.
- ✓ **Start a blog.** Websites like Blogger (blogger.com) and WordPress (wordpress.com) make this very easy and

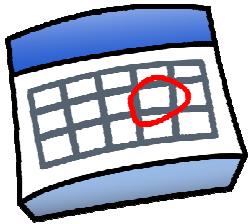
TIP: Contribute to a Community Mapping Project. As the old adage goes, "knowledge is power." It can be incredibly powerful to map out what resources are available to the community. A simple mapping project can unearth hundreds of "stories" like whether there is access to healthy food, recreational facilities, or open space.

free and allows you to have total control of the content and timing.

- ✓ **Start a website.** If you have a lot of varying content to share, like posting public records, or you want to have many people contributing to the same site, setting up a WordPress site might be the solution. WordPress would be ideal for community organizations or initiatives that want to work on a common purpose -- it could be general town news, a green initiative, or even a business directory to promote economic development.

STEP 6: Stick With It!

The hardest part about being a citizen journalist is staying with it, which makes it all the more important that you are covering something you are passionate or knowledgeable about. Remember, you don't have to be researching and writing every day to help keep your community informed. Whatever time you have to devote to reporting will be appreciated by your readers.



- ✓ **Set up reminders on your calendar.** Depending on your subject area and time, you can write monthly, weekly, or daily – whichever you choose, put reminders on your calendar so you don't forget to write.
- ✓ **Give yourself a deadline.** Professional journalists have deadlines, so why shouldn't you? Having a deadline is especially important if you are interested in writing about city council meetings or proposals to be voted on, where time is of the essence.

STEP 7: Get Social

- ✓ **Facebook.** You can promote your work on Facebook by posting links to your articles, or you can create a group to create an online forum to discuss issues.
- ✓ **Twitter.** Twitter is another great way to share your work with a broader audience. You can use hashtags using the number symbol (i.e. #NewJerseyNews) to start a conversation with other Twitter users.
- ✓ **YouTube.** You can create a video blog or "vlog," to share news via videos.