

How to Find, Evaluate, and Summarize Validated Independent News Stories (VINs) PROJECT CENSORED—August 2023

Find a Candidate Story

A censored news story reports information that the public has a right and need to know, but to which the public has limited access.

Validated Independent News stories take the form of **news** reports.

Do not include press releases, academic journal articles, public relations materials, or editorial and opinion pieces.

Search **independent** news sources to find candidate stories. See the Project Censored website for recommended independent news sources:

<https://www.projectcensored.org/independent-news-links/>

ProQuest's Alt-Press Watch is also a useful database.

Evaluate Your Candidate Story's Strength

The strongest candidate stories are important, timely, fact-based, well documented, and under-reported. Once you have found a candidate story, test its significance by considering these questions:

1. Is it **important**? The more people that the story affects, the more important it is. Be careful to consider indirect impacts.
2. Is it **timely**? Only stories published since March 2023 will be considered for *State of the Free Press 2025*. Recent articles on older events will be considered if they report new, important information.
3. Is it **fact-based** and **well documented**? The story's accuracy and credibility are crucial. How many different sources does the story use? How credible is each source? Dramatic and sensational claims do not matter if the story fails to provide *adequate supporting evidence*.

If your story cites other published work (for example, a scientific study, government document, or another news story), track down that source and read it. Does your story accurately depict the original?

4. Have **corporate media under-reported** the story? Evaluate your story's coverage by using a news database (such as Nexis Newsdesk, ProQuest US Major Dailies, or EBSCO Newspaper Source Plus) to search for corporate news reports on it. Check with your instructor or your school's reference librarian to determine what news databases you can access.

Google News is not always reliable; use it as a last resort.

The clearest "censored" stories are ones that corporate media have completely ignored. However, candidate stories that received some corporate coverage should still be considered if that corporate coverage leaves the reader with an incomplete or distorted understanding of the story.

5. As you research your candidate story, **be alert for related stories** that report information contrary to your original story, were published before your original story, or include more complete information than your original story. You may need to revise your summary based on these considerations.

Summarize Your Candidate Story

Your submission should include a title, a summary of the story's key points and corporate news coverage, references, and credits for who researched and evaluated the story. All candidate stories submitted to Project Censored must use the following format.

Improperly formatted or incomplete submissions will be returned for revision.

TITLE This captures the story's most important point in 5-10 words. Make sure your title is different from the title used in the original article.

SUMMARY (300-500 words)

The first paragraph should provide a specific and factual summary of the story's most important points. Identify the source and date of the story in the first paragraph of your summary.

Your first sentence—known in journalism as a **summary lead**—should introduce who did what, where, and when.

Be specific. Use active verbs. Avoid passive constructions (for example, "Civilians were targeted") that hide agency (who did what).

For a guide to writing a strong lead, see:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/journalism_and_journalistic_writing/writing_leads.html.

The second paragraph should provide additional detail including, for example, a quote from one of the story's sources, background, or statistics.

Add detail to your summary in order of importance, so that the least important items are

at the bottom. This is what is known in journalism as **inverted pyramid structure**: The most important facts—the pyramid’s “base”—appear at the top of the story. For more on this see:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/journalism_and_journalistic_writing/the_inverted_pyramid.html

The third paragraph should address **corporate media coverage** of the story. It is essential that you do a thorough job of researching your story's coverage using a reliable news database. This is just as important as your story's summary lead.

- If there is no corporate media coverage of your story, state so directly and indicate a date as of which this was true.
- If your story has gotten some corporate news coverage, use live URLs to link to this corporate news coverage. Describe in specific terms how your independent news story provides a more complete understanding of the issue coverage provided by the corporate media.
 - See the final paragraph of [this VIN](#) for examples of using links for corporate news coverage and identifying important differences between the independent and corporate news coverage.
- If you cannot see a difference between the independent and corporate coverage, you may need to conclude that your story is not actually a "censored" story.

The best story summaries **avoid editorializing**. This is not the place to express your personal opinion. Instead, focus on presenting facts that allow readers to draw their own conclusions.

REFERENCES After the summary, give a complete reference for your article using the following format:

Author's first and last name, "Title of Article," News outlet, date.

Use a hyperlink to embed the URL for the story in the story source. For example:

Sarah Lazare and Simon Davis-Cohen, "Fossil Fuel Companies Are Enlisting Police to Crack Down on Protesters," [In These Times](#), April 16, 2019.

If your summary draws on multiple stories, provide a complete citation for each one.

Use the References section only for **current, independent** news articles. If your summary cites corporate news articles or older independent news articles, then use live links within the summary to connect to those sources.

Identify student researcher and faculty evaluator

Identify the student researcher(s) and faculty evaluator(s) by name and, in parentheses, school affiliation. For example:

STUDENT RESEARCHER: First Name Last Name (School Name)

FACULTY EVALUATOR: First Name Last Name (School Name)

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Identifying, researching, and summarizing candidate stories will sharpen your critical thinking skills (including interpretation, evaluation, and explanation) and enhance your critical media literacy.

Project Censored posts selected Validated Independent News (VINs) online at <https://www.projectcensored.org/news/validated-independent-news/>

These VINs are considered for inclusion among the top 25 stories in Project Censored's annual book.

Online and in the book, we acknowledge the students and faculty who contribute VINs by name.

FINAL SUBMISSION DEADLINE: Candidate VINs must be submitted to Project Censored by **Friday, April 5, 2024** to be considered for inclusion in *State of the Free Press 2025*.

Check with your instructor to confirm specific due dates for your news research and story summary.

Since 1976 students' research of important but under-reported news stories has been Project Censored's lifeblood. We look forward to your contributions!

Revised: August 2021 by Andy Lee Roth and Steve Macek, updated August 2023