What are the differences between law and ethics?

Law says what we should do; ethics says we could do, helping us explore the options. Then, and only then, we decide what we would do. The goal in asking ethical questions before stories are published is to carefully consider the implications and consequences of the journalist's choices.

Ethics can be helpful in reporting sensitive or controversial issues. A staff working its way through a list of questions to make reasonable, ethical decisions can provoke many valuable comments, discussions and considerations helping in many situations.

Common ethical problems student media face:

1. **Conflict of interest:** Examples include interviewing friends; only interviewing one grade or those with a specific point of view; "getting even" with those who might have wronged you; doing anything that might compromise objectivity in the reporting of the truth.
2. **Plagiarism:** Claiming others' work as one's own, essentially stealing from them. Students must credit other people's materials and ideas, including those published in newspapers, magazines and books. This includes "borrowing" or downloading visuals from the Internet to use without permission with stories.
3. **Anonymous sources:** Although many reporters use anonymous sources, there are rules about when to use them. A reporter has to determine the information's value and whether is it possible to get it any other way. She also has to determine whether she needs to protect the source from harm from being an identified source. A comment about the cafeteria's food should not be permitted to remain anonymous, for example, but a revelation about suffering child abuse may be.
4. **Offending or distasteful content:** Although it is impossible to run any story without offending, insulting or displeasing someone, student journalists must strive to keep the press open and accessible to a wide range of views without stooping to gratuitous offense. While some use of "dirty" language might be necessary, journalists have to decide if there is another way to present the information or if the presentation will be so offensive it will preclude readers from getting the information.
5. **Invasion of privacy:** While this is often a legal issue, it is also an ethical one. Student - and professional - reporters must consider the consequences of publishing the outstanding news value photo or naming someone in an article.
6. **Bias:** Human beings cannot be purely objective. The mere selection of one story over another raises the issue of value judgments. Those who create content must attempt to be as fair and impartial as is possible. Every issue has more than one side, and all sides should be represented as much as possible. Student journalists trying to be objective should not avoid exploration, experimentation and variety in the press.
7. **Commitment to accuracy:** Little undermines integrity and, therefore, effectiveness of the media more than carelessness (or deceit) leading to inaccuracy in the press. Not publishing information is almost always better than publishing inaccurate information. The rush to be first, prized today and available to anyone now with the Internet, is no justification for not checking out data, information and sources.

*By John Bowen for the Principal's Guide to Scholastic Journalism. Published by the Quill and Scroll Society*