



**THE MERCURY**

# **STAFF HANDBOOK**

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# DISCLAIMER

The staff handbook of *The Mercury* is designed for informational purposes and is intended to provide student participants and employees with the most up-to-date policies and procedures governing the student newspaper and the Student Media Department.

Student editors and Student Media professional staff retain the right to modify or discontinue the use of any policy or programs described herein barring an otherwise express agreement.

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*For internal use only*



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# ABOUT US

*The Mercury* is the student newspaper of the University of Texas at Dallas and is one of four officially recognized groups in the university's Student Media Department within the Division of Student Affairs.

## MISSION STATEMENT

*As the student news publication of UT Dallas, The Mercury strives to inform, educate and entertain the university community with unique content focused on student interest, while fostering integrity and innovation among its student staff and providing them with the opportunity to learn journalistic ethics, best practices, and to develop verbal and written communication skills.*

The newspaper is printed every other Monday during the fall and spring semesters and on the first Monday of the month during the summer, historically for a total of eight fall editions, eight spring editions and three summer editions. We print 5,000 broadsheet copies and distribute them to more than 30 locations across campus. We also post our content online at [utdmercury.com](http://utdmercury.com). We share our content through social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Our office is located in the Student Media suite in the Student Union, S.U. 1.601, on the UT Dallas campus. The mailing address is:

UT Dallas – The Mercury  
800 W. Campbell Road  
S.U. 24  
Richardson, TX 75080

For general information about *The Mercury*, contact the editor-in-chief at (972) 883-2294 or [editor@utdmercury.com](mailto:editor@utdmercury.com). The newspaper adviser and director of student media, Chad Thomas, can be reached at (972) 883-2290 or [chadthomas@utdallas.edu](mailto:chadthomas@utdallas.edu). The office fax number is (972) 883-6626.



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# ADVERTISING

*The Mercury* accepts print and online advertising in all of its regular and special editions, as outlined in the advertising rate card that can be found online at [utdmercury.com/advertising](http://utdmercury.com/advertising). All ad specifications, prices, discounts and publication dates are listed in the rate card.

Unless otherwise specified, payment for all print display ads is due upon receipt of an invoice. Prepayment is required for classified and online ads, as well as any ads pertaining to an election or political candidate. The latter policy is to ensure candidates are able to pay for the advertisements using campaign funds prior to the close of an election.

Advertising inquiries can be directed to [ads@utdmercury.com](mailto:ads@utdmercury.com). For questions about billing, contact the Student Media Interim Director, Jonathan Stewart at [jonathan.stewart@utdallas.edu](mailto:jonathan.stewart@utdallas.edu).

Advertising restrictions and refusal policies are outlined in the Student Media bylaws in Section 4.1: Advertising & Public Service Announcement and Underwriting Policies.

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# CONDUCT

All staff members are expected to conduct themselves professionally at all times when in the Student Media suite. Staff should treat one another with dignity and respect. Demeaning or threatening behavior will not be tolerated, nor will any form of sexual harassment. Improper or unethical activity should immediately be reported to the Editor-in-Chief or a Student Media professional staff member. Improper conduct can result in termination and can be reported to the Dean of Students or UT Dallas Police for further review.

Staff members are also expected to exhibit professional conduct outside of *The Mercury's* office when representing the newspaper. Occasions include conducting interviews, photographing an event or

## CONDUCT (cont.)

person, interacting with university officials or posting on *The Mercury's* official social media accounts or on personal outlets. Improper conduct in these instances can also result in termination and can be reported to the Director of Student Media or the Dean of Students for further review.

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## CONTENT REVIEW

*The Mercury* does not allow persons who are not on the newspaper's current student staff to review content prior to publication ("prior review"). Prior restraint also is prohibited, according to Student Media bylaws outlined in Section 2.8, as no university official may delay publication or distribution because of the nature of the newspaper's content.

*The Mercury* does not permit the review or approval of quotes. It is the expectation that newspaper staff members will conduct all interviews in person barring extenuating circumstances. Email interviews are strongly discouraged.

Staff members may, however, send excerpts of an article to a source in some rare cases. If an article contains dense and complex information that is beyond the expertise or comprehension of the writer and editor, staff members may ask the source to review the information and verify its accuracy. Each use of this practice is at the discretion of the staff member and the Editor-in-Chief.

The Editor-in-Chief maintains final authority over the material published in the newspaper. No university official, including the newspaper adviser, may censor content.

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# CORRECTIONS

According to the Student Media bylaws outlined in Section 4.3 (e), when an erroneous statement is published, a correction should be published in the first issue possible after the inaccuracy is discovered. The prominence of the correction should be reasonably commensurate with the importance of the original article.

In most cases, the error should not be restated within the correction in order to avoid confusion. In the example that a source's name was misspelled John Smyth, the error should not be restated verbatim. Instead, it should be corrected as such:

“ *In the (DATE OF PUBLICATION) edition of The Mercury, in the article titled (“TITLE OF ARTICLE”), John Smith’s name was misspelled.* ”

In all other cases, *The Mercury* adheres to a correction policy modeled on that of *The New York Times*, which states in part:

For clarity, the first sentence of a correction should characterize the error without repeating the faulty information.

For example:

“ *The article misstated the 1998 profit of the Karitsa Company’s heavy equipment group.* ”

At the end, after supplying the facts, the correction may usefully remind readers of the specific error. Unlike the *Times*, we provide the correct information but do not restate the error verbatim in order to avoid confusion. See the next page.

## CORRECTIONS (cont.)

For example:

“ *It was \$480 million, not \$480 billion.* ”

Corrections to errors published online should be made as soon as possible after the inaccuracy is discovered. The incorrect information should be removed or corrected, and at the beginning of the article a correction statement should be placed outlining the error. For example:

“ *A previous version of this article incorrectly identified the title of John Smith. He is the vice president of the Glee Club, not the president.* ”

Within the body of the article, the corrected information should appear as such:

“ *John Smith, vice president of the Glee Club, said the organization has grown to 40 members this year.* ”

No additional corrections should be made within the body of the article online.

# REMOVAL OF ONLINE CONTENT

Content will not be removed from or changed on any of *The Mercury's* online platforms except in cases when new facts come to light that warrant the removal or correction of what would be then considered false information. Removal of content will require the approval of the Editor-in-Chief in consultation with the Director of Student Media. Requests to remove or alter factual information will not be honored.

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## DISCIPLINE

*The Mercury* employs a three-strikes approach regarding policy and procedural violations. The initial violation results in a meeting between the Editor-in-Chief and the staff member/contributor in question in order to review the violation, outline the correct behavior/procedure and discuss an action plan.

The second violation results in a second meeting with the adviser, the Editor-in-Chief and the staff member/contributor in question to identify why the student continues to violate the organization's policies and procedures. Again, those parties outline the correct behavior/procedure and discuss an action plan.

The third violation results in a review by the editorial board. The student may be dismissed from his or her staff position or prohibited from participating as a contributor by a majority vote of the editorial board. The adviser relays the editorial board's decision to the student.

The three-strikes policy may be overruled and the staff member/contributor may be dismissed immediately in the event a violation posed or caused harm to a fellow staff member/contributor or to *The Mercury* as a news organization.

Common reasons for issuing strikes include, but are not limited to, repeated failures to submit drafts on time, habitually reporting erroneous or misleading information, or behaving inappropriately while in *The Mercury's* office or while on official assignment. The Editor-in-Chief and Managing Editor hold final authority over what constitutes a strike.

# DISCIPLINE (cont.)

The Student Media Operating Board is responsible for reviewing policy and procedural violations committed by the editor-in-chief, managing editor and advertising manager, as outlined in the Student Media Bylaws, Section 2.9.

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## EQUIPMENT

Student employees and contributors are free to use any equipment and office supplies for newspaper and Student Media-related projects. Printers and office supplies are not to be used for personal use or for class assignments. Personal data and schoolwork should not be saved to any computer in the media office.

Requests for equipment—such as cameras, lenses and digital voice recorders—must be properly documented in NewsHub, *The Mercury*'s web-based personnel and asset management system. Reservations for equipment must be approved by a member of the management team on NewsHub before equipment can be checked out. Failure to properly document equipment use in NewsHub or the use of equipment without prior authorization constitute grounds for a strike or dismissal.

Only members of the management team will have access to *The Mercury*'s equipment room (SU 1.601DA).

Students who have obtained the university's cart certification can reserve and use the departmental golf cart, which must be signed out by a Student Media professional staff member.

Damaging or failing to return equipment may result in a hold on the student's account until the property is returned or the department is compensated for the lost or damaged item(s).

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# ETHICS

*The Mercury* follows the ethical practices outlined in the Associated Collegiate Press Model Code of Ethics for College Journalists. These guidelines are partially codified into ethics agreement that all staff members are required to sign before commencing their work with *The Mercury*.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No staff member should hold a position on or off campus that creates a conflict of interest. For example, a staff writer who covers Student Government cannot also hold a Senate seat. A section editor who selects and edits stories about specific campus organizations cannot also be an active ranking/voting member of an organization that he or she covers for the newspaper.

All staff members should disclose to the Editor-in-Chief any positions that might pose a conflict of interest.

According to Student Media Bylaws outlined in Section 2.4 (e), the Editor-in-Chief and Managing Editor may not hold any other student employee appointment on campus.

## GIFTS & BENEFITS

No staff member should accept gifts, payments or any fringe benefit as a result of coverage or as an incentive to provide coverage to a person or group. Free or discounted tickets should be accepted only when a staff member is attending an event with the expressed journalistic intent to report or review the event (such as a sports match, concert or film).

All other gifts, payments or benefits should be rejected or returned to the sender.

## PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism is considered the word-for-word duplication of another person's work. All of *The Mercury's* content (written, photographed, designed or illustrated) must be original. Use of copyrighted material without proper approval or citation is illegal and prohibited. Any references to previously published articles or reports must attribute the information to the source of origin.

*The Mercury* does not tolerate plagiarism of any kind. Staff members who are found to have plagiarized other work without proper approval or citation will be dismissed immediately.

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## ETIQUETTE

Students should practice professional etiquette when conducting business on behalf of *The Mercury*. Staff members are expected to use professional and courtesy titles when communicating with faculty and administrators, and emails should be formatted professionally.

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## INTERVIEWS

Newspaper staff members are required to bring a digital voice recorder, notepad and writing utensil to all in-person interviews in an effort to ensure the accuracy and integrity of quoted material. Staff must ask sources for permission to record their conversations. If a source does not wish for the conversation to be recorded, staff should take notes as needed. Editors may ask staff members to produce audio recordings in case quote accuracy must be verified. As such, staff members should keep all records and recording of interviews for at least six months after the publication of the article.

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## INTERVIEWS (cont.)

Staff members are strongly encouraged to schedule interviews with sources early in the production cycle to allow time for the interview to be transcribed and properly reviewed. In-person, telephone and email follow-ups, at the discretion of the Editor-in-Chief, are encouraged as needed to clarify information.

Staff should dress appropriately for all interviews, wearing business casual attire for special events and VIP interviews.

## EMAIL INTERVIEWS

Email interviews are strongly discouraged. These should be used only under extenuating circumstances and should never be viewed as an acceptable alternative to in-person or telephone interviews. Approval must be obtained from the Editor-in-Chief before proceeding with an email interview.

## QUESTION REVIEW

Some sources will request or demand to receive questions prior to an in-person or phone interview. *The Mercury* does not agree to this practice and should look to alternative sources when given an ultimatum to provide all questions in advance. It is *The Mercury's* practice, however, to notify sources in advance of the topic and focus of an article so that the source may gather information that is essential to the article and speak knowledgeably about the subject matter in question.

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# LEADERSHIP

## EDITORIAL BOARD

The editorial board consists of the Editor-in-Chief, Managing Editor, News Editor, Life & Arts Editor and Opinion Editor.

Editorial board opinion pieces should be viewed as the newspaper's institutional stance on an issue of significant interest or concern to the university community or the student audience.

A majority vote is required for the editorial board to compose an opinion piece, which is to be published in an upcoming edition. The names and titles of all editorial board members in support of the opinion should appear at the end of the piece.

## MANAGEMENT

The management team consists of all editorial board members and the Graphics Editor, Web Editor, Photo Editor, Sports Editor, Copy Editor and Outreach Editor. The management team meets biweekly to consult with the newspaper adviser and discuss organizational and content matters.

## DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The job descriptions shown on the next page are copied from the Student Media Bylaws. Amendments to these descriptions cannot be made without prior consent from the Student Media Operating Board, as these positions are filled by individuals appointed by the Board.

## EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The newspaper editor shall be responsible for the expression of opinion in the editorial pages and for consulting with the media adviser on matters of an editorial nature.

(b) The newspaper editor shall determine the items for news coverage.

(c) The newspaper editor shall be the official student representative of *The Mercury* on matters that concern the public relations of the paper.

(d) The newspaper editor shall preside over *The Mercury's* Editorial Board for the purpose of formulating and expressing the paper's position on issues affecting the university community. The student newspaper Editorial Board shall consist of five members – the newspaper editor, the managing editor, and three section editors selected by the newspaper editor.

(e) The general duties of the editor include:

(1) selection and supervision of the news and editorial staff with assistance of the media adviser;

(2) formulating a yearly edition of a staff manual in conjunction with the media adviser;

(3) editing of letters to the editor according to Section 4.3;

(4) selection of photographs and editing of news materials for publication;

(5) establishing and maintaining production schedules in conjunction with adviser;

(6) planning and conducting regular staff meetings and training sessions;

(7) providing layout guidelines to layout editors and approving print-ready pages to send to printer;

(8) contributing articles as necessary;

(9) seeking evaluations of reporters from persons interviewed;

(10) assuming responsibility for newsroom furnishings, equipment, and supplies;

(11) consulting regularly with the media adviser regarding all phases of the newspaper operation.

## MANAGING EDITOR

The managing editor shall fill the duties of the editor outlined in Section 3.4 (e) in the editor's absence. In the event the editor resigns, the managing editor will fill the role of interim editor until the operating board can select a replacement.

(b) The managing editor will serve on *The Mercury* Editorial Board.

(c) The general duties of the managing editor include:

- (1) preparation of print-ready pages according to layout developed in conjunction with the newspaper editor;
- (2) coordination of all art/graphics, including photos, and share responsibility for photo assignments with the newspaper editor;
- (3) determine appearance of newspaper in consultation with the editor;
- (4) maintain production schedule set by the editor and adviser;
- (5) assist with layout/design on advertisements;
- (6) assist with copy editing and/or other editorial functions;
- (7) monitor use of computers with the editor and adviser;
- (8) attend staff and/or production meetings; and
- (9) consult regularly with the editor and adviser.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the editor are the forum through which readers respond specifically to content published in *The Mercury* or on its website. Op-eds are general commentary pieces authored by members of the UT Dallas community unaffiliated with *The Mercury*.

Letters to the editor either should be emailed (preferably as a Word document) to the Editor-in-Chief at [editor@utdmercury.com](mailto:editor@utdmercury.com). Although electronic copies are much preferred, a hard copy can be submitted to the reception desk of the Student Media office in S.U. 1.601 or mailed to:

UT Dallas — The Mercury  
800 W. Campbell Road  
S.U. 24  
Richardson, TX 75080

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR (cont.)

No author may have more than one letter printed in a single edition of *The Mercury*. It is strongly recommended that all letters relate to the news and feature content or topics appearing in the newspaper. *The Mercury* may edit letters for spelling, grammar and style, to make them free from libel or to fit the aforementioned word limit while preserving the intent of the author. *The Mercury* may reject letters that:

- Are directed at inciting or producing imminent lawless action and are likely to incite or produce such action
- Contain material that is libelous or obscene
- Appear to be misleading, deceptive or that grossly exaggerate
- Contain material that is of questionable accuracy and adjustments to the material are not possible
- Appear to be attacks of a personal nature or to be discriminatory on the basis of race, sex, disability, religion, national origin, age, sexual orientation or veteran status
- Violate good journalistic practice

According to Student Media Bylaws outlined in Section 4.3 (d), letters to the editor must be 500 words or less. The author (in the case of a student) should include his or her full name, field of study and academic year. Faculty, staff and administrators should include their full name and title on submitted letters.

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## LIBEL

The Mercury should not publish any libelous statements or articles in print or online. Libel is the publishing of false and damaging statements that, historically, must meet several legal criteria:

- Defamation—the message is harmful to a person’s reputation
- Identification—the message pertains to a named source or one that is identifiable based on the details presented in the message
- Communication—the message is disseminated to an audience via print or web platforms
- Fault—knowingly printing false information or failing to properly fact check
- Damages—the message causes direct or indirect losses and harm to the identified party

While there are numerous defenses against libel, the best defense is to report the truth.

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## OP-EDS

*The Mercury* publishes op-ed submissions in an effort to reflect a wide variety of campus perspectives. Topics or the opinion reflected in the op-ed should be relevant to a college audience. *The Mercury* reserves the right to reject any submission. Writers are strongly encouraged to support their opinions with information from official, reputable sources.

Op-eds should be sent (preferably as a Word document) to the Editor-in-Chief. Op-eds must be between 400 to 600 words. Authors (in the case of students) should include their full name and a headshot to accompany the article when it prints. They must also include their major and classification. Only one author per op-ed will be accepted.

*The Mercury* reserves the right to edit op-eds for accuracy, clarity, spelling, grammar, style, length or to make them free from libel.

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# PROFANITY & VULGARITY

*The Mercury* follows the Associated Press' guide to profane word usage. Inclusion of profanity and vulgarity is discouraged if it is used exclusively for humor or shock value and lacks any journalistic reasoning for its use. Profane or vulgar language may be acceptable in quotations when used by official sources (university faculty, staff or students in positions of authority or elected office) if the language shows particular relevance in the context of the article or agate copy. Section editors and the Editor-in-Chief should be consulted in all cases of usage. Profane or vulgar language should not be used in opinion pieces.

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# SOCIAL MEDIA

*The Mercury* posts on its social media pages to drive traffic to its website, [utdmercury.com](http://utdmercury.com), to engage with its audiences and to create a sense of community. Staff members assigned to operate these pages must exhibit professional behavior in the way posts are structured and worded and in the way pictures and videos are shared. Social media assets are managed by the Outreach Editor. Any individual representing *The Mercury* must also be cautious of posts on their personal social media accounts, as their behavior is reflective of the newspaper as an organization. Failure to adhere to these guidelines will result in the removal of any posts in question and in suitable disciplinary action as outlined in the "Discipline" section of this handbook. Improper conduct in these instances can also result in termination and can be reported to the Dean of Students office or UT Dallas police for further review.

# WORDING POSTS & CAPTIONS

Posts should avoid the use of juvenile language and should never include obscene language. *The Mercury* may post opinions if they relate to commentary pieces/reviews online. The Editor-in-Chief should approve posts that display opinions before such posts are submitted online. *The Mercury* should never include opinion statements in posts related to news.

## RESPONDING TO COMMENTS

*The Mercury* will neither comment on nor take action against comments on its posts, with two exceptions:

- *The Mercury* may comment on its posts to answer a question such as “When do you print?” or “How can I write for *The Mercury*?” The Editor-in-Chief should answer such questions and, when possible, link to where the answer can be found on *The Mercury*’s website.
- *The Mercury* may delete comments if they contain obscene or threatening language.

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## SOURCING

As a general rule, all articles should include three to five unique sources to help provide more balanced and thorough coverage. In all cases of reporting on contentious or polarizing topics, balanced reporting is mandatory. However, simple stenography and “he said/she said” reporting should be avoided. Simply reporting what people said without verification of claims or assertions or without further analysis is absolutely discouraged.

## ANONYMOUS SOURCES

All information in *The Mercury*’s print and online editions must be properly sourced and attributed. Anonymous sourcing is highly discouraged and is allowed only with the consent of the Editor-in-Chief. It should be reserved for:

- Cases when the information is of great value to the public
- When there is no other possible source to provide the information, and
- When the source would be at risk of physical, financial or psychological harm if not granted anonymity.

## ANONYMOUS SOURCES (cont.)

In the event a source requests anonymity, the source's name and the information he or she possesses should be gathered first before proceeding with an interview. Both the writer and the Editor-in-Chief should know the identity of the source. Once anonymity is granted, it should not be revoked.

Writers should obtain permission from the Editor-in-Chief before agreeing to off-the-record and background interviews.

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## NOTICE

Changes to this policies and procedures outlined in this document will be communicated to staff members.

For further questions or clarification, please contact the Editor-in-Chief or the Managing Editor.

### **Fatimah Azeem**

Editor-in-Chief

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Managing Editor

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