

Use anonymous sources with care

To use or not to use? That is the question. Because of controversies surrounding the writing of some professional journalists, including Jayson Blair (New York Times), Stephen Glass (New Republic) and Jack Kelly (USA Today), it has become even more important for writers to evaluate whether to use anonymous sources.

Resources:

- **Anonymous sources**
<http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=1596>

- **Poynter links to coverage about anonymous sources**
<http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/links-to-the-news/22025/anonymous-sources/>

- **Those persistent anonymous sources**
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/opinion/22pubed.html>

- **Unnamed sources: essential or overused?**
<http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0812/p03s01-usju.html>

- **Who's watching the watchdog?**
<http://www.ethics.org/resource/whos-watching-watchdog>

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Readers tend to be skeptical and the use of anonymous sources often makes them question whether information they are reading is accurate. Readers have grown skeptical because in the past few years at least 10 papers from The Chicago Tribune to the Sedalia (Missouri) Democrat have confirmed instances of plagiarism and fabrication.

To avoid questions about plagiarism and/or fabrication, it is best to avoid using anonymous sources. Writing gains credibility when all sources are on the record. Sometimes, though, anonymous sources are the only way to tell the story.

Some professional journalists say promises of anonymity should be given only for these reasons:

1. There is no other way to get the information. If there is no other way, then verify the information with a second source. Don't rely on one person's word. Be sure both sources are reliable.
2. The information is important enough to the reader to warrant anonymity.
3. The source's privacy and/or reputation requires protection.
4. The source needs to be protected from academic, psychological or physical harm. It's possible a student's grade might be in jeopardy if he/she goes on the record. It's also possible a teacher's job might be in jeopardy if he/she doesn't remain anonymous.
5. The source's relatives require protection.

Besides taking the above items into consideration, the writer should also ask the following before using the

information.

1. What is the purpose of the article?
2. Does the reader have the right to know?
3. How might I get someone else on the record?
4. What are the possible consequence of my actions?
5. What safeguards can I implement to allow my writing to be objective?
6. Will the story offend any readers?
7. Are all my facts accurate?
8. Have I eliminated my opinion from the story?
9. How would I feel if the story was about me, a relative or a close friend?
10. Is the story objective? Am I missing any point of view?

If the writer promises anonymity, then the writer must keep that promise. If a writer wants to use an anonymous source, the writer should discuss that with his/her editor. If the editor agrees the writer may use an anonymous source, the writer should tell the editor who the source is. Several professional papers, including The Washington Post, require this. The Post also requires its writers to explain to the readers why a source merits confidentiality.

It is also wise to have the source sign a consent form to use the information anonymously or by using a pseudonym.

To use or not to use? The best answer would be not to use. That helps the reader trust the reporting. Whatever the decision, there is no substitute for accuracy. Always tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.