

# The reporter's guide to **TROUBLE**

Reporters enjoy a certain amount of freedom, privilege and power. But there's a downside to reporting, too: you can get into all kinds of trouble. The chart below will help you gauge the severity of common problems that can arise from bad luck, bad judgment or bad intentions. We're not trying to make you *paranoid*; we just want to alert you to some of the dangers you need to avoid. In the pages ahead, we'll explore some of these topics in more detail.

	THE OFFENSE	EXAMPLE	HOW TO AVOID IT
 <p><b>STORIES THAT CAN GET YOU JAILED</b></p>	<b>CONTEMPT OF COURT</b> <i>Refusing to tell a judge the source of controversial material used in a story.</i>	With help from a confidential source, you write a story exposing a criminal scandal. During the trial that results, you're ordered to reveal your source. You refuse. The judge jails you for contempt.	Most states have "shield laws" that let journalists protect the confidentiality of most (but not all) sources. If those laws don't protect you, you'll have to choose: name names or do time in jail.
	<b>TRESPASSING</b> <i>Or, in some cases, it could be called Failure to Obey a Lawful Order.</i>	You're snooping around a crime scene, or stalking a celebrity's home, or covering a riot, or pestering a tight-lipped politician in his office. The cops ask you to leave. You argue. They arrest you.	It varies. If you're in a public space and you're <i>not</i> interfering with police activity, you have a right to be there. Try to reason with the police if you can — but you may still be detained anyway.
	<b>SEDITION</b> <i>Publishing material too critical of government leaders or policies.</i>	You're a reporter in a foreign country (say, China or Ethiopia) and you write a story criticizing the government. You're jailed, without trial, for "aiding the enemy" or "conspiring to incite unrest."	Thankfully, sedition is no longer a crime in the U.S. (though it <i>has</i> been, as recently as World War I). But overseas, reporters are still imprisoned for attempting to expose official wrongdoing.
 <p><b>STORIES THAT CAN GET YOU SUED</b></p>	<b>LIBEL</b> <i>Publishing a falsehood that holds someone up to public ridicule or scorn.</i>	Something in your story — a description, quote, photo, even a headline — insults, misrepresents or defames someone. If they can prove you were careless or malicious, it could cost you <i>millions</i> .	Truth is the best defense. As long as you can <i>prove</i> that what you wrote is true, you'll win — uh, probably. But there are lots of variables that make libel law messy. (See the next page.)
	<b>INVASION OF PRIVACY</b> <i>Using someone in a story in a way that violates their right to be left alone.</i>	You write a story called "Who's the Old Hermit in That Creepy House?" with quotes from neighbors and photos peeking into the windows — all of this <i>without</i> the owner's consent. He sues.	Always ask: Am I dragging this person unwillingly into the spotlight? Exposing someone's personal secrets without consent? If a story exploits or hurts ordinary folks, it may have crossed the line.
	<b>BREACH OF CONTRACT</b> <i>Publishing the name of a confidential source after promising you wouldn't.</i>	You interview a source and agree not to use his/her name in your story. But somehow — by mistake or under legal pressure — the source's identity becomes publicly known.	Avoid promising confidentiality, if you can. Some courts hold that a reporter's promise to conceal a source's name is a legally enforceable contract; others say it's a moral, not a legal, obligation.
 <p><b>STORIES THAT CAN GET YOU FIRED</b></p>	<b>PLAGIARISM</b> <i>Passing off words or ideas of others as your own, without attribution.</i>	You're researching a story (or a column, or a review). You find that someone else has already written terrific stuff on this topic, so you "borrow" entire sentences without giving credit.	There's no shame in quoting other sources, so always attribute any words you recycle. Don't forget: Once online, your story will be just as searchable as the text you plagiarized from.
	<b>FABRICATION</b> <i>Manufacturing or falsifying any facts, quotes or events for a story.</i>	Maybe you lost your notes for a story, so you try reconstructing them from memory. Or maybe — worse — you need a juicy quote, so you concoct a bogus new source with a likely-sounding name.	Everything you ever write must be provably true (see <i>libel</i> , above), no matter how inconvenient that is. Once you lose the trust of your editors, you might as well start cleaning out your desk.
	<b>LAPSES IN ETHICS</b> <i>Behavior on or off the job that could damage your publication's reputation.</i>	You're a reporter covering City Hall. Your editor discovers that you've been concealing a sexual relationship with a controversial city council member. Conflict of interest? Yes. You're fired.	As a reporter, you represent your newspaper. To readers, you <i>are</i> the newspaper. Thus, editors will hold you to a high standard of behavior <i>in</i> and <i>out</i> of the newsroom. Don't let them down.
 <p><b>STORIES THAT CAN GET YOU ANGRY PHONE CALLS</b></p>	<b>BIAS</b> <i>Taking sides in a story, or failing to present both sides of an issue fairly.</i>	You write a consumer story: "How <i>NOT</i> To Get Ripped Off by Used Car Dealers." Angry dealers claim you never contacted them — and because of your one-sided story, they yank all their ads.	Never forget, there are two sides to every story. That's obvious for topics like politics and religion, but your unconscious biases can taint and slant <i>anything</i> you write if you're not careful.
	<b>BAD TASTE</b> <i>Using words or ideas that some of your readers may find offensive.</i>	At a banquet, a sleazy local politician tells a racist, sexist joke. Your editor says, "Let's teach that jerk a lesson. Print it." Hundreds of readers are now blaming <i>you</i> for spoiling their breakfast.	Sometimes you just <i>know</i> you'll inflame readers with what you're printing. That's OK, as long as you've cleared it with The Boss. It's far worse to be blindsided by a careless or tasteless slipup.
	<b>BLUNDERS &amp; BLOOPERS</b> <i>You name it — somebody will find a reason to get upset with your story.</i>	You misquoted me, you idiot! You misspelled my wife's name, you moron! You printed the wrong address for my bake sale, you nitwit! You claimed Captain Kirk's alias on the planet Organia was . . .	Of all the problems on this page, those inevitable typos, misspellings and factual flubs may be the hardest to avoid, no matter how many editors proofread your stories. Sadly, we're only human.