SO YOU WANT TO BE A JOURNALIST?
INTRODUCTION

This information pack has been compiled by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) for those considering a career in journalism. It will help you to make the right choices regarding further and higher education courses, advise you of the exams you must pass in order to work as a journalist within certain fields, and help you choose the right study method for you.

So why listen to us? The National Council for the Training of Journalists is the industry’s charity that delivers the premier training scheme for journalists in the UK. We provide a world-class education and training system that develops current and future journalists for the demands of a fast-changing multimedia industry.

Our range of journalism training products and services includes: accredited courses; qualifications and exams; awards; careers information; distance learning; short courses and continuing professional development; information and research; publications and events. We play an influential role in all areas of journalism education and training.

In the 21st century journalism has converged. In the past the different branches of journalism were clear, but today all media are publishing on the web and the skills required to work across all platforms are integrated. Traditional broadcast skills and web skills are needed by print journalists.

You can start a career in any platform, and it’s not a necessity to start on a small newspaper, niche magazine or tiny cable channel. You could quite easily begin on a large regional daily, top consumer title or at a major broadcasting corporation.

Some of the journalists have learned their trade on the job, but many will have undergone some kind of formal training.

Not everyone who has undergone formal training is brilliant at their job, and it is by no means the case that everyone who learnt on the job is a bad journalist.

But what training does is give able people a short cut. It saves them time by teaching them the basics of journalism accurately and effectively. It means they don’t need to learn by trial and error. They can get it right first time.

And the NCTJ is second-to-none in setting the standards for journalism training. Through its examinations and the courses which carry its accreditation, it equips would-be journalists to find their first job in the profession, and helps working journalists to progress to the next rung up the ladder.

An NCTJ qualification equips you with the skills you need to be an effective reporter. It gives you a solid grounding in shorthand, law and how government works. With an NCTJ qualification on your CV, a prospective employer knows you have grasped the basics.

If, after reading this leaflet, you’re still not sure, we’ll be more than happy to answer any questions you have about the NCTJ and the courses we accredit. You can call us on 01799 544014, email us at info@nctj.com or visit us at www.nctj.com.
TRAIN AS A JOURNALIST

Journalism is often seen as glamorous and exciting but, as with any occupation, success comes only after much hard work and routine activity. However, each day in journalism is different and the training you receive will give you the flexibility to cover a wide range of news stories and features across a range of platforms. Multimedia journalism draws on all the knowledge and skills you have acquired and can give you a tremendous sense of achievement. If you’ve got what it takes, journalism could be the career for you!

WHAT QUALITIES DO EDITORS LOOK FOR?

To convince an editor you’re worth appointing you will need to be able to demonstrate the following:

- an interest in current affairs at all levels
- a lively interest in people, places and events
- an ability to write in a style which is easy to understand
- good spelling, grammar and punctuation
- an appreciation of the role a local newspaper plays in the community
- a willingness to accept irregular working hours
- an ability to work under pressure to meet deadlines
- determination and persistence.

HOW DO I GET INTO JOURNALISM?

Route 1 – pre-entry (after completion of a further or higher education course)

The majority of trainees are recruited into the industry after attending full-time vocational training courses for both post A-level students and graduates. Courses accredited by the NCTJ are held at colleges, universities and commercial centres across the UK. All cover the essential skills of reporting (print and online), media law, public affairs, and shorthand to 100 wpm. They also offer a range of additional options dependent on the centre. Some of these courses are for graduates only while others require five GCSEs including English and two A-levels. This route is known as pre-entry.

Courses accredited by the NCTJ should display this logo, so look out for it when researching which course to study:

To apply for a course at further education or commercial centres, you need to download an application form from the NCTJ website – www.nctj.com. You can apply for higher education/university courses through UCAS. Application forms must be returned to the NCTJ as soon as possible or at least six weeks before the start of the course.
If invited for an interview at the centre of your choice, you may be required to take a written test, based on current affairs knowledge, to test your English skills and writing ability.

Most colleges will only grant places if the applicants have already been on a brief work experience placement at a news organisation. You should write to a number of local print, broadcast or online editors, explain why you think you would make a good reporter and ask if they will allow you to join their team for a few days. Try to pick a time other than June or July, when pressure on work experience places is at its greatest.

**Route 2 – direct entry**

Trainee reporters and photographers are occasionally recruited directly by regional or local news organisations and carry out their basic training under the terms of a training contract. There are also those who may have secured employment with a newspaper group of companies who run their own training scheme. Positions like these are, however, becoming increasingly rare.

Apply directly to the editor of a regional or local news organisation for employment as a trainee. Their names and addresses can be obtained from current editions of *Benn’s UK Media Directory* and *Willings Press Guide*. Copies are available at your local library in the reference section or via the websites [www.mediuuk.com](http://www.mediuuk.com) and [www.willingspress.com](http://www.willingspress.com)

If you have been recruited into the industry from school or university, you will be regarded as a direct entrant. Most companies will expect you to enter into a two-year training contract during which time you will receive basic training. The first six months of employment is likely to be a probationary period during which you will be able to decide whether you have got what it takes to become a successful journalist. Most companies will register you with the NCTJ and provide you with distance learning materials to study.

You may also attend a block release or day release course at college, during which time you will sit the NCTJ’s preliminary Certificate in Journalism exams. Again, this is extremely rare. Following a further period of employment, you will have the opportunity to prove you are competent as a senior reporter by achieving the NCTJ’s National Certificate Examination.

**HOW DO I GET INTO PHOTOJOURNALISM OR PRESS PHOTOGRAPHY?**

Photojournalism, as the term implies, is a journalism-based course with photography as its foundation. Tutors will help you develop natural news sense in tune with an ability to use a camera and ancillary equipment to the best advantage; there is also a comprehensive reporter module.

The press photography course contains all the above elements without the reporter’s module.

The qualities you need to be accepted on an NCTJ course and to be a photo-journalist/press photographer are energy; drive; commitment; single-mindedness; personality and an enquiring mind which can look at the obvious and see something different - or better - by way of a ‘news line’ and picture.

If you are successful in obtaining a place at Sheffield College, the only centre to offer an NCTJ-accredited photography course, you will undergo intensive practical and theoretical training to prepare you for your career.
Download an application form from the NCTJ website at www.nctj.com. Suitable applicants are required to take a written test and, if successful, will be invited to attend a selection interview.

**WHAT QUALIFICATIONS DO I NEED?**

The entry requirement for reporters is a minimum of five GCSE passes (grades A-C) or equivalent - one of these must be in English. However, in recent years it has become rare for a trainee to come into the industry at this level. Currently, most recruits are university graduates and the others have achieved at least two A-levels or equivalent.

NCTJ training courses lead to a variety of qualifications including BA degrees, postgraduate diplomas and master's degrees. All NCTJ courses cover the aspects of media law, public affairs and journalism necessary to enable a journalist to perform competently by the end of the training period. As well as demonstrating competence in these and other practical areas, trainees are expected to achieve 100 wpm shorthand.

If you have attended a full-time journalism course before obtaining employment, you will probably enter into an 18-month training contract - the first three months is likely to be a probationary period. As with direct entrants, you will still be expected to prove your competence as a senior reporter after a period of employment, and complete the NCTJ’s National Certificate Examination.

**Exemptions**

There have been occasions when individuals who have shown exceptional talent but have not achieved the minimum academic qualifications have been granted a waiver. However, this is unusual. The majority of new entrants to journalism are now graduates.

**Mature entrants**

Each year the industry receives many career enquiries from mature people. Some editors like to employ these people because of their considerable local knowledge and more settled lifestyle. Over the age of 30, training is a matter for arrangement by the editor.

**IS THERE FINANCIAL HELP AVAILABLE TO HELP ME STUDY?**

A few local educational authorities may award grants to meet part of the cost. Early enquiries should be made as grants are extremely limited.

Before applying for a full-time course, it is essential candidates establish their financial situation and determine how to cover the costs involved. Contact the centre you’re considering studying at for details of course fees, which can range from £1,000 to £7,000 depending on the course chosen.

In addition to these, there are subsistence costs, travel, exam fees and textbooks to be considered.

Career Development Loans may also be available. Contact your local careers office or job centre. For postgraduate courses at universities apply directly to the university. For degree courses, apply through UCAS.
THE JOURNALISM DIVERSITY FUND

A Journalism Diversity Fund has been set up by those in the industry who want to support the training of journalists from socially and ethnically diverse backgrounds.

This industry fund was set up with the help of the Newspaper Licensing Agency (NLA) in association with leading publishing companies including Associated Newspapers, the Guardian Media Group, News International and Pearson.

It is aimed at people without the financial means to attend NCTJ training courses. Applicants will need to demonstrate a genuine commitment to journalism and the potential to succeed.

The fund can help financially by paying course fees and living expenses, as well as providing a mentor and helping to find work experience.

Individuals who make an application to the fund should meet the following criteria. They must:

- be able to provide proof they have submitted an application to an NCTJ-accredited course, or have secured a place, for the relevant academic year;
- not have the financial means to support themselves on an NCTJ-accredited course;
- be a British citizen residing in the UK;
- be able to demonstrate genuine commitment and potential to be a successful journalist, through application and interview;
- not be in receipt of any other bursary award.

Check out the website [www.journalismdiversityfund.co.uk](http://www.journalismdiversityfund.co.uk) to find out more about the fund and to download an application form.
DIPLOMA IN JOURNALISM

Seven assessments are compulsory for those going on to take the NCTJ’s professional qualification, the National Certificate Exam.

The seven assessments are made up of six exams, which will usually be sat while on an NCTJ-accredited course or during an in-company training course, and a portfolio of work.

It is also possible to sit Diploma exams on national exam dates held twice a year, in April and November. Application forms are available from the NCTJ.

Students studying newspaper journalism must select Media Law Court Reporting as one of their specialist options. Candidates are required to achieve a grade A-C in this exam to be eligible for the NCTJ’s professional qualification, the National Certificate Examination (NCE).

For students studying magazine journalism, we recommend studying the specialist options of Business of Magazines and Production Journalism.

The following titles are recommended to cover the NCTJ’s syllabus:

- *Public Affairs for Journalists*
- *Essential Reporting: The NCTJ Guide for Trainee Journalists*
- *Teeline Gold Standard for Journalists*

All titles are available from the NCTJ’s online shop at [www.nctj.com/shop](http://www.nctj.com/shop)

CORE SKILLS

**Reporting**

Reporting is an essential skill for journalists and the NCTJ’s syllabus covers multi-platform reporting for newspapers, magazines, online, television and radio journalism. This includes a practical understanding of news, news gathering, effective interviewing, creating different types of news stories, different ways of consuming news, using interactivity, basic editing, and reporting safely. You need to master the core skill of being able to write ‘clean’ copy that is accurate and engaging.

You will take a two and a half hour exam that is a test of your news sense, ability to select and prioritise key facts and quotes, and writing skills for different platforms. Marks are awarded for content, accuracy, use of language, a good angle and introduction, story structure, and the choice and use of quotes. The ability to develop a story for the appropriate platform and to identify relevant sources and questions is also tested.

**Essential Public Affairs**

All professional journalists should have a broad understanding of how government works at a local and national level, how they link together, where news stories come from and how to develop such stories. Public affairs learning should be integrated with practical journalism and trainees must have an awareness of current news issues.
related to public affairs. There are three different programmes of study and examinations for: England and Wales; Scotland; and Northern Ireland.

You will sit a two and a half hour examination which assesses their knowledge of public affairs and its practical application to the job of a journalist. You must also submit a practical journalism assignment on a story related to public affairs which is examined in the portfolio.

**Essential Media Law**

All journalists must know the legal and regulatory boundaries of what they can and cannot report. This includes both the Press Complaints Commission and Ofcom codes of practice. The programme of study covers all the media law essentials as well as an introduction to court reporting.

Assessment is by a two and a half hour examination which assesses your knowledge of media law and its practical application in a multimedia newsroom. There are three different programmes of study and examinations for: England and Wales; Scotland; and Northern Ireland.

**Portfolio**

Journalists are now expected to work across a range of publishing and broadcast platforms to deliver news and information.

The multimedia portfolio is your opportunity to demonstrate a range of journalistic work that has been published across different platforms.

The aim of this assessment is to ensure trainee journalists can demonstrate they have all the skills required in the reporting programme of study. It complements the reporting examination and integrates all the essential core skills required for the diploma.

You can include ten stories or five features with the original copy that cover a range of real-world stories or features which may have been published on any platform.

Magazine candidates must include at least one piece that is directed at a clearly identified B2B audience, an analysis piece and an interview.

One feature published on any platform with original copy and a public affairs journalism assignment should also be submitted as part of the portfolio.

**Shorthand**

Shorthand is an extremely valuable skill for the competent journalist. The NCTJ’s gold standard is to achieve at least 100 words per minute (wpm) and to be able to identify a newsworthy quote. The exam format for higher speeds has been developed to test listening skills as well as accuracy and speed.

The syllabus enables learners to acquire the skills required for reporting accurately using Teeline, an industry-recognised system of shorthand. The exams test the ability to take down the spoken word verbatim at a range of speeds – 60, 70, 80, 90, 100, 110 and 120 wpm – and to produce an accurate transcript within an error tolerance of three per cent. In addition, you must identify and accurately transcribe a key quote at speeds of 90 to 120wpm.
SPECIALIST OPTIONS

There is also the opportunity to study the following specialist options, please check which options are offered at your preferred accredited centre

**Media Law Court Reporting**

The specialist court reporting option builds on an introduction to court reporting in the essential media law syllabus. It covers court reporting restrictions, regulatory and ethical considerations. It is an important option for those who wish to focus on hard news for any platform as courts remain an excellent source for stories.

Assessment is by a one and a half hour examination which assesses your knowledge and application of media law related to court reporting.

**Sports Journalism**

The sports journalism option takes the principles of general news reporting covered in reporting and applies them to the full range of sports reporting skills.

The programme of study includes: an introduction to sports reporting; the sports news cycle; press conferences and interviewing; sports news, sports public affairs and sports politics; sports features; and editing sports stories.

You will sit an exam that is divided into two parts: a live match report where you must produce half-time and final whistle stories; and a one hour written exam testing current sporting knowledge and sports public affairs issues.

**Videojournalism for Online**

The videojournalism option is designed to enable trainees to produce short, focused video reports for use online on news websites. Creativity is encouraged but work should be to industry standards.

The four study units cover: equipment and techniques; videojournalism and news gathering; interviewing; and regulation and compliance.

Candidates sit a two hour video-editing examination which assesses their basic editing and reporting skills and produce one video news package created entirely on their own.

**Business of Magazines**

This option is designed to give you a thorough understanding of the magazine industry and how magazines work.

The programme of study includes: the roles of B2B, general consumer and specialist consumer magazines; the importance of identifying and writing for an audience; company accounts; the roles of editorial, marketing, advertising and other departments; revenue streams; editorial strategy; and means of distribution.

You will sit a two hour examination in which candidates answer questions covering the full syllabus.
Production Journalism

This specialist sub-editing option builds on the introduction to editing in the reporting syllabus. Production journalism is becoming an even more important skill as journalists are publishing stories without the luxury of copy being checked. The culture of getting it right first time needs to be instilled into trainees.

The programme of study includes: desktop publishing, subbing different types of stories; headline writing; typography; pictures and captions; proof reading; and design.

You will sit either the news or magazine assessments. You have to submit a piece of coursework and sit a two hour on-screen sub-editing exam.

Broadcast Journalism

This specialist option is in development and will be available from September 2011. The module will cover the additional skills required to operate effectively as a broadcast journalist that are not covered in the core mandatory subjects.

Meanwhile, trainees who are interested in broadcast journalism can choose from any of the other specialist options.
CERTIFICATE IN JOURNALISM FOR PRESS PHOTOGRAPHERS AND PHOTOJOURNALISTS

The Certificate in Journalism for photographers and photojournalists is compulsory for those going on to take the NCTJ’s professional qualification, the National Certificate Examination. *(This qualification is due to be replaced with the Diploma in Journalism for Press Photographers and Photojournalists, however the course content covered will remain the same).*

The press photographers’ and photojournalists’ qualifications consist of four exams and a portfolio assessment. You will learn general photographic knowledge: practical application and technical proficiency in stills and video photography; photographic practice: basic approaches to using the stills and video camera, to assignments and to captioning in print and online; media law for photographers: general reporting relevant to photographers including contempt, copyright, confidentiality, reporting restrictions, courts and the law; and photographers’ portfolio: a record of training and experience which demonstrates skills and techniques in stills and video photography.

Press photographers also learn caption writing: how to select relevant and newsworthy facts and write clear, accurate news captions for different platforms including styles and content.

Photojournalists also learn news writing for photojournalists: how to select relevant and newsworthy facts and write composite captions to length for different platforms including interviewing skills, use of quotes and news assignments.

EXAMS FOR PRESS PHOTOGRAPHERS

- **General photographic knowledge**: examines light; cameras; lenses and accessories – still and moving images; exposure and processing; colour – image production and output; current and new technology; health and safety.

- **Photographic practice**: examines PCC code of conduct; history and traditions of the press; moral and ethical issues involved in digital imagery; professional working practices.

- **Media law for photographers**: examines general reporting relevant to photographers. Takes in contempt; copyright; confidentiality; reporting restrictions; courts and the law.

- **Caption writing**: candidates select the relevant and newsworthy facts and write clear, accurate and balanced news captions to accompany two given photographs.

- **Portfolio**: a record of training and work experience, this also provides evidence of skills for prospective employers. It includes ten photographs, covering a range of techniques and categories, plus a video report.
EXAMS FOR PHOTOJOURNALISTS

Photo-journalists sit exams in general photographic knowledge, photographic practice and law, and complete the portfolio, as above, and must also sit:

- **News writing for photojournalists**: candidates write two 50-word captions to accompany two photographs. A self-contained caption story of 150 to 170 words to accompany three linked photographs is also completed, plus a one-line caption for each picture.