



The Early Career Guide To Newsroom Success

Produced by [Rachel Lobdell](#) in partnership with the [Reynolds Journalism Institute](#)

Welcome to the working world

You've been hired by a newsroom—congratulations! This is no small feat. Media is a competitive industry, and your hiring manager saw promise and opportunity by adding you to their team.

There's so much that jobs in journalism encompass: story ideation, platform and format expertise, the ability to learn a lot about any subject matter, and source relationship development, to name a few. But your ability to succeed—or at least a large part of your success—will depend on the way you organize your work, communicate with your colleagues, solve problems, and understand how your work ladders up to the greater mission of the organization. How you work is just as important as the work you produce, and those who employ professional workplace skills are better aligned with management, have stronger relationships, and will likely be considered for better assignments or have their ideas greenlit more often.

These are important skills to work toward. This guide is here to help you show up as your best self and have the best chance at success—and start off on the right foot with your colleagues and managers.

Table of contents

Organize your day

- [Prioritization](#)
- [Time management](#)
- [Meeting deadlines](#)

Communicate with confidence

- [Be resourceful](#)
- [Professional communication](#)
- [Communicating with your manager](#)

Be part of the company's future

- [Relationship building](#)
- [Proposing projects](#)
- [Receiving feedback](#)

[About this project](#)

Organize your day

The specifics of how you organize your work will depend on your exact role, but no matter the job there are a few key skills to develop:

- **Prioritization:** You only have so much time in a day, week, or month, and you need to work on the right assignments at the right time.
- **Time management:** You need to develop a system to work efficiently and ensure your colleagues are able to do their parts in a timely manner.
- **Meeting deadlines:** You need to consistently turn in a high-quality product on time.

Prioritization

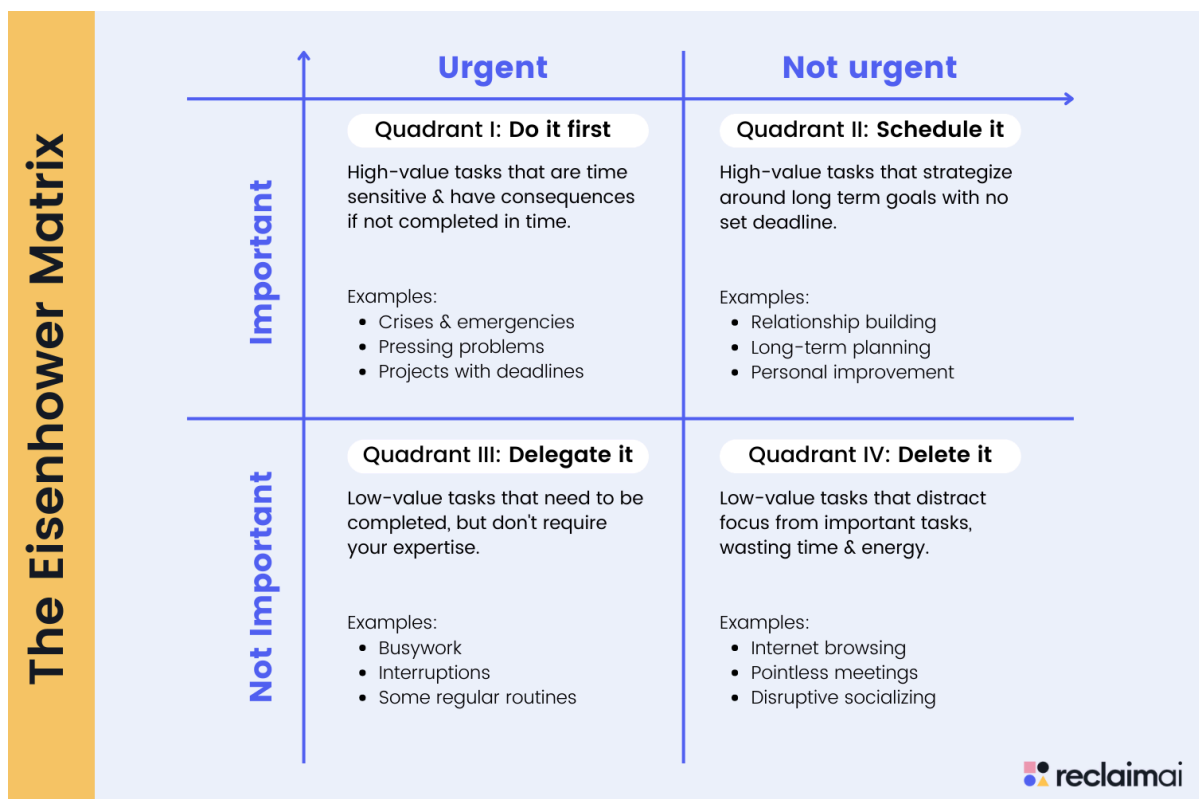
The first step in getting organized is having a complete picture of everything that must get done. You can do this on paper or digitally, whatever works best for you. Some popular list platforms are [ToDoist](#), [Trello](#), [Things](#), [Google Tasks](#), [Microsoft To Do](#), and [Apple To Do List](#). Getting it out of your head and into a list helps to calm feelings of overwhelm and clears space to be your best self.

A question you should ask yourself every day: What's the best use of my time today? It might be overwhelming to look at your to-do list or think about the five stories that were assigned in this morning's meeting. Having a system to quickly determine the best use of your time will help you stay focused and get it all done.

This is also important because newsrooms can be unpredictable. Breaking news requires flexibility and the ability to switch gears quickly.

Urgent vs. important

The [Eisenhower Matrix](#), developed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, is a popular and effective tool to organize your work. It can be helpful to organize your assignments into the matrix to better understand the order you should work in.



Graphic by ReclaimAI

[A note on the graphic above: As early career workers, you may be the ones who work is delegated to in Quadrant III.]

Let's say you were planning to spend the day writing a non-timely story, often called evergreen. As soon as you arrived at the office, some breaking news happened, and it needed to be done right away.

This *urgent* work pushed itself to the top of your to do list—even if it won't be the most meaningful work you do this quarter. Later on in the week, you were nearing the deadline for your annual performance review. This *important* work means you may have to delay some less meaty tasks.

This can also be applied to tasks within an assignment. Many people find it helpful to break work into smaller pieces. It can be satisfying to have more things to cross off, and it is easier to complete small tasks when you only have a few minutes in between interviews or other work.

An example: If you need to reach out to a source to request a photo for a story publishing today and you need to read through a lawsuit for a story later this week, it would be beneficial to ask the source for a photo first so they can work on it while you do other work.

These examples might seem obvious. There are many factors that influence something being urgent or important. Perhaps your boss' boss' boss really wants to see a story before it goes live, and it needs to be done urgently to ensure there is time. Maybe the team is planning extra social media posts, and they need the language before tomorrow. Or it may be that the project is part of a sponsorship package, and the deal has a hard deadline.

Every newsroom operates differently, but it is almost a guarantee that at some point, you'll get an assignment that you are not crazy about. At the end of the day, you are being paid to do a job, and that often means having to prioritize assignments your manager considers more important than you do. This will influence how you organize your work, even if you'd rather be doing something else.

Being agile, recognizing the urgent work, and being able to adapt quickly to new assignments is paramount to your success. Just remember to carve out time for the important but not urgent work, such as making progress on a big project that isn't due for several weeks. You probably can't get it done in the final few days before the deadline, so be strategic in how you plan your time.

Time management

There is no one right way to get your work done. There are [varying energy levels throughout the day](#), tasks that come easier to you than others, and differing lengths of time you can work uninterrupted. As you gain more experience, you will figure out what works best for you.

Here are a few frameworks to try:

- **Pomodoro technique**: Break work into 25-minute intervals, called pomodoros, followed by a 5-minute break. After four pomodoros, take a longer break of 15-30 minutes.
- **Time blocking**: Block certain hours of your day to execute specific tasks, like transcribing an interview in a one-hour block in between meetings. If time blocking works for you, check out [Kelly Nolan's free 5-day program](#) that supercharges this method.
- **Eat the frog**: Identify the tasks that feel the heaviest, and get those done first. This can be something that doesn't come easily to you or that you just really don't want to do, but once it's done, your day is off to a smoother start.
- **Agile results**: Pinpoint the 1-3 outcomes you want out of each day and week and then break these into actionable tasks.



Graphic by NapkinAI

These techniques can also provide clarity on how long tasks take. If you think something will take 20 minutes, but it actually takes an hour, it will impact how much you can accomplish in one day. And vice versa: As you become more efficient, you can accomplish more. It's important to have an accurate idea of how much time tasks require so you can more accurately plan your time and make your deadlines. You'll get better at this over time as you learn on the job.

It is likely that you will end up with a combination of the above frameworks and other strategies that work for you. It is also likely that the way you approach work will change over time, especially if you are moving into a new role or becoming a parent or caregiver. Make time every so often to reflect on what is working for you and what could be improved, and don't be afraid to take the initiative to ask your manager for their perspective as well. Don't wait for someone to provide feedback.

Further resources:

- Harvard Business Review: [Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time](#)
- University of Georgia: [10 Strategies for Better Time Management](#)
- ToDoist: [The Top 9 Productivity Myths That Just Aren't True](#)

- [“Winning the Week: How To Plan A Successful Week, Every Week”](#) by Demir Bentley and Carey Bentley
- [“The Procrastinator's Guide to Getting Things Done”](#) by Monica Ramirez Basco

Meeting deadline

Most work in a newsroom is very time sensitive. Audiences need breaking news quickly. Newspapers have to go to the printing press. Television and radio stations have to go live on time. The pace of social media is relentlessly immediate. Being in a newsroom that publishes daily news is one of the best training grounds for getting work done on time.

A few tips for hitting your deadlines:

- **Allocate the appropriate time for things:** Properly estimate the time needed to complete a task.
- **Avoid procrastination:** We all procrastinate from time to time. In fact, [75% of college students](#) say they are habitual procrastinators. You might think you thrive under pressure, but it's a recipe for disaster if you hit any bumps. If you're having a hard time getting started, breaking a task into smaller pieces can make it less intimidating. Create a project roadmap, starting with your deadline, and back out all the work that needs to be done so you know when to start.
- **Ask for help when you get stuck:** If you don't understand the requirements or don't have the tools needed to complete your work, reach out to your manager or colleagues.
- **Stay focused on the core deliverable:** Understand the scope of work and hone in on the most important outcome. Avoid rabbit holes on parts that aren't important.
- **Leave time for finishing touches:** Every story or project benefits from some fine-tuning and polishing at the end of the process. If you aim to finish a little ahead of the actual deadline it gives you time to put that final finesse on your work.

Hitting a deadline is more than turning something in on time. You need to turn in a high quality product on time. Your work should be proofread to ensure you are using your newsroom's style, spell checked, and fact checked. If you are a text reporter, others in the newsroom will likely add to your report through editing, adding art and graphics, and tweaking SEO fields. If you are rushing to finish and turn in a subpar story, it will take longer to edit, and the flow between teams becomes jammed.

Things don't always go according to plan, and you will be in a scenario at some point where you can't make a deadline for one reason or another. Don't chance it—be sure to communicate as early as possible that you may need more time. This allows your editor or collaborators to better plan their time and possibly tweak the assignment to lighten your load. Clear communication around priorities is important. You can ask your manager something along the lines of: “I can have this done by 3 p.m. if I push the city council story to tomorrow. Is that preferred?”

Managing staff in a time-sensitive environment comes down to trust. Can your manager trust you to do a great job in the time allotted? If so, you are going to be considered more for the assignments that matter. Consistent performance is what makes you a reliable team member.

Further resources:

- UVA Today: [How Can I Stop Procrastinating? Here is the Advice We All Need](#)
- Forbes: [How To Overcome Procrastination And Meet Your Deadlines](#)

Communicate with confidence

Your relationship with your manager, peers, and other colleagues throughout the newsroom is paramount to your success as an early career employee. The most powerful thing you can do is communicate clearly about what you are going to do, and then do it well, on time, and on budget. No matter how simple it seems, being reliable is far too rare of a skill. And being reliable starts with communication.

Be resourceful

Managers of early career workers said their biggest frustration was when staffers were not resourceful. This might look like being asked questions (or asked for documents or links) where the employee should already have access to the answer or being asked a question that Google could answer, too.

Being resourceful means overcoming difficulties or solving problems by using everything available to you—tools, documents, searching Slack channels. Resourceful staffers find effective and efficient ways to get work done.

The first step is to create a system that allows you to be resourceful. Make a folder in your email or on your computer that contains your onboarding documents. Save bookmarks for websites you'll need to find over and over. Take good notes whenever someone explains how to do something. Build a system that makes it easy for you to find your newsroom's style guide or formatting requirements.

You were hired because you're smart, and you have the ability to solve problems. Try to find the solution before asking for help. This will help build your creative problem solving muscle, which will definitely be used throughout your career.

If you can't find the answer, reach out to your manager. They are there to support you. It can be helpful to mention where you looked, so they know that you tried to solve it on your own.

Further resources:

- Yale: [Resourcefulness in the Workplace](#)
- Master Class: [Alexis Ohanian on How to Be Resourceful](#)

Professional communication

You already know that the way you communicate varies based on who you are talking to, the medium you are communicating through, and the environment. The way you speak to your friends over text is different than how you tell your parents about your day during dinner. There are norms for communicating at work, as well. Perhaps more importantly, your ability to speak professionally within your workplace gives your leaders confidence that you can speak professionally outside of work, such as with sources or at industry events. Conveying maturity and professionalism is vital for better assignments, speaking opportunities, and promotions.

A few tips for communicating professionally:

- **Know the medium and audience.** It may be okay to text your colleagues using slang or shorthand like “lol,” but that’s not appropriate for most work emails. When in doubt, lean more conservatively. Use complete, clear sentences that show you’ve organized your thoughts, and you have a clear point, and proofread your written communication before sending.
- **Choose the right medium and timing.** Journalism is not a 9-to-5 job, and there is plenty of communication that happens at night or over weekends. If it’s outside work hours and not urgent, an email is likely preferred over text or a Slack message. You should only text your boss at 10 p.m. if there’s an emergency or something they need to know urgently. This is a great topic to discuss with your manager during onboarding. How do they prefer to communicate?

- **Stay respectful and polite.** Avoid sarcastic or aggressive language. Before hitting send, read over everything for tone and reword anything that could be misinterpreted.
- **Be judicious when raising issues.** If a work situation is really bothering you, ask yourself if complaining about it to your manager is the right move. No one is going to love their job 24/7, and everyone is asked to take on assignments they are less than thrilled about. Is this part of the job? Would you be better served by venting to a group chat of friends? This isn't to say that you should never speak up, but it is important to pick your battles and speak up—using professional communication—on the issues that really matter to you and can make a difference for the company.
- **Communicate when you are unavailable.** For example, if you have a doctor's appointment and will be away from your desk for a few hours, make sure that your manager and anyone else who might be waiting on you knows, along with utilizing the technology tools that your newsroom uses such as blocking your calendar or setting a Slack status.
- **Keep it professional.** Some digital spaces, such as Slack, can feel very casual. Be sure to not say anything in a digital space that you wouldn't want repeated later on via transcript. If your company were to be involved in a lawsuit, digital messages can be part of the evidence.

Further resources:

- [“Crucial Conversations”](#) by Joseph Grenny
- Charter: [Four Maxims for Better Conversations](#)
- Fast Company: [Yes, your Slacks and text messages are fair game in a lawsuit](#)

Communicating with your manager

There are few things more important than building a strong and communicative relationship with your manager.

Most employees have 1:1 meetings with their manager, either regularly scheduled or occasionally. It's important to use this time wisely so you leave feeling empowered about what the right next moves are and how you can consistently grow as a journalist. If your manager doesn't set up a regular touchbase, you may have to initiate these.

A few tips for utilizing your communication with your manager:

- **Be prepared with notes.** This can be as simple as keeping a note on your phone or a Google doc with bullet points to jog your memory. You'll want to quickly highlight what you accomplished in the last week or two. [Side note: Keep a [success sheet](#)! Write down work you are proud of, especially with data, if you can. This can be super useful in communication with

your manager, during performance review season, and when you are interviewing for other jobs.] We often spend the most amount of time communicating with our managers around issues that we need help with, but it's important to ensure they have knowledge about the things you've completed and what has gone well. Then dive into what you need their perspective on, starting with the most urgent item first. Communicate frequently about your daily and weekly priorities and deadlines to ensure everyone is on the same page.

- **Proactively communicate your progress on the projects on your plate.** If you are running behind schedule on something, it's better to highlight that early rather than missing the deadline with no warning. It may be helpful for your manager to review all of your assignments and help you prioritize. An important note: It is impossible for you to do everything. Editors really want to help you with prioritization. Don't hesitate to let them in.
- **Ask for feedback.** This can be especially useful around the areas where you are most interested in growing. Don't wait for your annual review. An example: "I'm struggling to find diverse sources. How can I improve?"
- **Clarify how they want to communicate.** As you are building your relationship with your manager, and this is especially crucial if you move to a new team or get a new manager, be sure to ask how they like to communicate, how often they want updates, what level of detail they want insight into, and how they prefer you ask for help. This will help you learn over time when you can make decisions on your own vs. asking your manager to make the call. Being on the same page about decision making will greatly reduce the number of hiccups you encounter. (And, as with any relationship, take the temperature of the situation. Avoid asking a non-urgent question if your manager is in the middle of a stressful project.)
- **Show progress.** If you've received feedback, follow up by showcasing how you've incorporated others' perspectives or grown in a particular area. Even if you haven't perfected a skill, it's good for your manager to know it's top of mind for you and you are trying.

1-on-1 Meeting



Agenda 📅 :

- ☐ How was your trip to France? 🇫🇷 🍷
- ☐ Share feedback on website designs
- ☐ Which upcoming projects are you most excited to work on?
- ☐ What's the biggest challenge you've faced in the last month?
- Start, stop, continue:
- ☐ Start: Experimenting with new design tools
- ☐ Stop: Underestimating your UI intuitions
- ☐ Continue: Mentoring Laura

Action items 🏃 :

- ☐ Round of website designs using feedback

From last meetings:

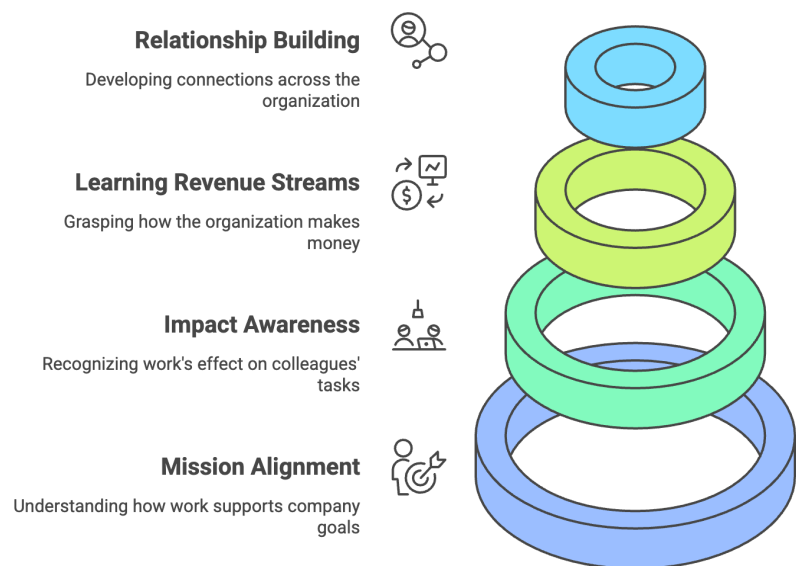
- **Share your aspirations.** After you've built your rapport with your manager, make sure they know about where you want to go in your career, what kind of skills you want to develop, and what kind of projects you want to add to your portfolio. Ask them about opportunities within the company to try new things or work with other teams. They won't be able to create your dream job on the spot, but they can try to carve out space and time for you to work on something you are passionate about.

As you work to build your relationship with your manager and communicate with colleagues, sources, and industry friends, you'll find your authentic yet professional voice.

Be a part of the company's future

While the newsroom is the heart of a media company, it is not the only department. The structure of the organization varies on many factors, size being one of the main ones. Your media company may include people who work in operations, fundraising, human resources, technology, product management, marketing, partnerships, communications, public relations, investor relations, sales, branded content, event programming, legal, finance, data science, and sales. Within your newsroom, you likely have various teams or team members that work in different spheres: writing, video, photo, podcasts, editing, planning, and social media, for example.

Understanding how your work ladders up the greater mission and how your work impacts the work of your colleagues is critical to your success. Become a sponge: Take time to learn about your organization's revenue streams and the processes that turn ideas into reality. Build relationships with colleagues across the newsroom, the company, and the industry. Understanding the landscape informs your thinking, sharpens your insights, and gets you seen as someone who deserves to advance within the organization.



Graphic by NapkinAI

A few ways to improve your relationship building:

- Reflect on the areas you want to learn more about or skills you want to develop, and use that to guide how you spend your time with colleagues.
- Set up coffee meetings with colleagues in a different role. Ask open-ended questions about their work, what they like doing the most, and where they could use more support. Some newsrooms have buddy or mentorship programs that you can sign up for.
- Attend company-wide meetings and webinars, like quarterly all-hands calls. Take note of the language executives are using and what projects they are focused on right now.
- Volunteer for initiatives that would expose you to different kinds of projects or people.
- Send a quick email congratulating a colleague on a job well done and include a personalized sentence about something specific you admire.

A key thing to remember as you communicate beyond the newsroom: News moves quickly, and journalists move at the speed of news. Other departments often move slower. Be patient, and know that your definition of soon (“I’ll let you know soon!”) could be different from theirs.

Industry colleagues, such as people you meet through a journalism organization or conference, can provide a neutral point of view and expose you to new ideas or ways of working. Not only can they improve your day-to-day tasks and storytelling, but they can provide a bridge to a future job or career, as well. Create a system to keep track of the people you meet, such as a spreadsheet or using the [Pollen extension](#) for LinkedIn, so you know who you’ve met, how you know them, and any relevant information that will help you follow up with them in a personalized and meaningful way. [Journalism.WTF](#) is a fantastic resource to find community groups, conferences, and other tools.

Further resources:

- Harvard Business Review: [How to Build Real Relationships at Work](#)
- Forbes: [How To Build More Connected Work Relationships And Collaborate Better](#)
- New Things: [How you can pivot to thoughtfulness at work](#)
- The Muse: [Simple Ways to Keep Your Network from Growing Cold](#)
- [How to use LinkedIn](#)

Proposing projects

As you start to understand how the puzzle pieces of the office fit together, you’ll have a more complete picture about how your work, skills, and experience contribute. You’ll also have more information to guide how you choose future work or how you pitch new projects.

Let's say you see an opportunity to launch a new kind of product. Maybe it's a project that spans beats or makes use of a new kind of technology or platform. You'll want to start by sharing your idea with your direct manager. You may be asked to put together a presentation or document that outlines what it would take to make this happen and what the expected outcomes are. This is where you can utilize the information you gathered through your relationship building efforts to align your personal goals with the company's priorities to create mutually beneficial outcomes.

If your project identifies an issue that you'd be solving, be sure to approach it tactfully. The issue may stem from someone else's work or a past decision. Newsrooms are constantly evolving, and many decisions that were right at the time now have to be reconsidered. Others may have noticed the issue, but it wasn't a priority to solve before. Being a part of the evolution is exciting, and you can frame your solution as building on the work of the past projects to accomplish the goal (e.g., growing audience, driving subscriptions, providing up-to-date government resources, etc.).

If you are asked to put together a slide deck or presentation, it is a chance to showcase that you have the professional planning and communication skills it takes to execute beyond your role. Organizing your materials and presentation is more important than how beautiful the slides are.

Some things to consider when building a presentation:

- Start by defining your key takeaways, and then build a structure that moves your audience through it. You're a storyteller, so dip into those skills. What do they need to know to understand the issue and your proposed solution?
- Align your recommendation with at least one of the company's goals. Why is it in the company's interest to greenlight this?
- Use data to sharpen how you present your idea. If you want to make a case to publish more stories about the city council, what metrics support this?
- Know who you are presenting to and what level of detail they are interested in.
- There's no need to reinvent the wheel. Use an online platform like [beautiful.ai](#) or [Slides Carnival](#) to get a jump start on your deck. Aim to create a clean and easy-to-read presentation. Use bullet points and visuals wherever possible, along with consistent fonts and colors. You want your audience to think about the content of your presentation and not about how crazy your color scheme is.
- Every workplace and manager has their own norms, but a good rule of thumb is to keep your presentation to 10 slides or less.

- When you present, don't just read your slides word for word. Add context and colorful storytelling where relevant.
- Plan to PDF your slides and share it with your audience so they can review it after the presentation and share it with any necessary stakeholders.

As you build your project proposal, you'll want to lean into your time management and organization skills. Your managers (and their managers) will want to see a thoughtful—and accurate—project timeline that shows how long each step will take and when they can expect to see results. Even if the project doesn't require an investment in technology or supplies, they'll be thinking about the amount of staff time they are committing to the project.

Further resources:

- Asana: [How to create a project timeline in 7 simple steps](#)
- Harvard Business Review: [What the Best Presenters Do Differently](#)

Receiving feedback

No one is expecting you to know everything. It can be helpful to talk to collaborators or colleagues from other departments ahead of time to get their perspective on your proposal: "I'm pulling together a pitch to do X. Mind taking a look at it to see what I may not have considered?" It's not helpful to be surrounded by people who tell you that your work is perfect. Other points of view will make your case even stronger and will often fast track its approval, along with preparing you for questions that may come up later during the presentation.

When you present your idea, even if the pitch is just a quick email with bullet points, you will receive feedback. Questions and critiques can be hard to hear, especially when you've put time and energy into your proposal. Feedback is an opportunity to make your work better; it is not an indictment of you as a person.

A few tips for receiving feedback:

- Stay calm and focused. Try not to react emotionally or take it personally. Take a few breaths, and give yourself some time to process before responding. It can be helpful to write down the feedback, so you can continue to process and incorporate it after the conversation.
- If you're receiving the feedback in a real-time conversation, be sure to hear the person out completely. Don't interrupt. Consider where this feedback is coming from: Have they done

something similar in the past they've learned from? Are they aware of budget constraints you might not know about?

- If you have any questions about the feedback, ask clarifying questions, especially for examples.
- Thank them for taking the time to give you feedback and ask if they'd be willing to review an updated proposal that incorporates their notes.

It's important to make receiving feedback a practice. In college, professors are paid to give feedback and to help you grow. But newsroom managers are pulled in a lot of directions. The lack of readily available and/or regular feedback can be one of the hardest transition points for those entering the workforce. You don't have to wait for your annual review to ask your manager to share where you can improve. You can also ask colleagues or industry peers to review a project and ask for their thoughts. Feedback will start to feel less pointy over time. This will become more natural as you improve your collaboration and relationship building skills, too.

You will undoubtedly pitch many things and be told "no" many times throughout your career. Newsrooms—and all organizations, for that matter—are complicated beasts that have a lot of nuance and many factors that drive decisions. Even if you are right in identifying an issue and proposing a great solution, it might not be the best time for execution or there are many opportunities for improvement and leadership wants to focus on other priorities. It is simply impossible to do everything all at once. Learning how to focus on what you can control now, and what might be possible in the future, will help you have a long career.

Further resources:

- [“Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well”](#) by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen
- Fast Company: [This is how our brain reacts to negative feedback \(and how you can train it to reframe\)](#)

About this project

This guide was informed by a survey of newsroom managers, interviews with journalists and editors, and research from leading workplace institutions. The survey collected insights from 58 editors across the United States working in digital, newspaper, magazine, television, and radio newsrooms who

oversee and/or work with early career journalists. The editors detailed the workplace skills that early career journalists most need to improve on and receive training on.

If you have feedback on this project, especially on other potentially helpful areas for advice not covered by this guide, please email Rachel Lobdell at rachel.b.lobdell@gmail.com.