Over the past 14 months, the Prison Journalism Project has published a wide range of writing from personal essays, memoir, diary entries, letters and op-eds to poems, songs and spoken word. For a short time in the beginning, we even published short stories. All of them matter in different ways, but you may have noticed that we are putting increasing emphasis on journalism.

You may ask, “Why journalism?” By choosing what to write and who to write about, journalists decide what and who is important. By controlling information, they are setting the agenda and influencing public perception.

Until now, most reporting about the incarceration system has been done by outside journalists, who have limited access often controlled by prison administrators. They write stories without input from those who have lived experiences inside a system that is by definition and design, walled off from the public at large. As a result, the mainstream public only has a partial understanding of the criminal justice system.

We think that needs to change. We think that people inside should help shape how society thinks about the incarceration system. We also think that there should be more news about good and bad happenings behind bars. We want to help you develop and publish stories that will engage an audience that might never have been touched by incarceration and may even have a negative perception of people inside.

Good journalism tells a story — and we know you have many great stories — but it’s storytelling with a higher purpose than just to entertain. When done right, journalists can connect the dots to bring a new viewpoint to light, bring transparency where there is darkness and educate citizens on the nuances of an issue. Put yourself in your reader’s shoes. Nobody likes being lectured at or being told how to think, but most people enjoy a good story and they like to learn something new along the way.

But journalists have a responsibility too. Part of the definition of a journalist is to be able to use the tools of journalism to examine all sides of a story with an open mind, treat each side fairly and write factually using information that they have verified. That is why good journalists are trusted by their readers.

The training that we are developing, the publishing that we do, and the collaborative opportunities we provide with mainstream media organizations are all aimed at helping to establish prison journalism as a legitimate and important part of the broader journalism industry.

If you are a poet or artist or you prefer to stick with essays, don’t worry. We will continue to accept them, and we hope to work with you to identify ways that we can add journalistic elements.

Our ultimate goal is to establish a national network of correspondents inside prison and build out a newsroom outside that will be dedicated to supporting their work. We also see an opportunity to redefine
what journalism is and how to do it. We are excited to work with you to figure out what a narrative poem could look like or how a poem could be journalistic. Or how to do journalism through art.

But to make that happen, we — and you — have to make sure that we are operating with impenetrable journalistic standards. To do that, you need to know what those standards and responsibilities are and have the ability to incorporate them in your reporting and writing. This issue of The P.I.T. is our first crack at setting a strong foundation for journalism behind the walls, but you’ll be hearing more from us on this.

WHY NOW? A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF JOURNALISM

The landscape of information distribution is always shifting. The development of written language, the invention of the printing press, the rise of film, radio and television, and most recently, the internet explosion, have all changed the way people have received information.

The means of communication are always in flux from person-to-person communication and drum beats across long distances to books, pamphlets, newspapers to radio, television, web blogs and online publications.

You probably already know how the internet changed the game. One of the most profound effects involved want ads, which newspapers relied on for a large portion of their incomes. Online ads proved convenient, easy and cheap for consumers, but the loss of that market crippled traditional newspapers in large and small markets across the U.S. Without that source of revenue, many papers found it impossible to support a staff of reporters, editors and photographers. Some limp along, many are gone, and the forest of news that was once so rich in the U.S. has thinned and, in some communities, disappeared completely.

But the internet also offered something new. Through web blogs, social media networks like Facebook, email and other channels, it has empowered the individual to speak to the world in ways more accessible and direct than ever before. While some employ that power for nefarious purposes, others are using it to fill the need for local news and information in their communities.

This is where you come in as a writer, reporter and future journalist for Prison Journalism Project.

The time is right in part because the media is starting to understand how the traditional way of practicing journalism has resulted in an elitist and exclusive industry that gives too much narrative control to people in power, leaving a lot of communities out of the picture. There is more interest than ever in opening up the industry and re-envisioning new ways of doing journalism.

In their study of the challenges and responsibilities facing journalism, "The Elements of News," Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel stress that news gathering is no longer the sole province of professionals working for institutional news outlets. The term journalist, they write, now "describes anyone who might find him or herself producing news and who aspires to do it ethically and responsibly."

For anyone pursuing journalism, from the highly paid professional to the amateur blogger, the authors lay out 10 essential principles:
1. Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
5. It must serve as a monitor of power.
6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
8. It must present the news in a way that is comprehensive and proportional.
9. Its practitioners have an obligation to exercise their personal conscience.
10. Citizens have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news as well — even more so as they become producers and editors themselves.

Our mission at PJP is to build a core of incarcerated writers who are dedicated to those principles and strive to learn the practices and techniques that are required. Reporting from behind the walls of prison is difficult and demanding, but that’s what makes it so valuable. The public at large need to know your stories, and they need a credible voice to tell it to them straight.

We know that we are not always timely in our responses, but the entire team is working hard to create training material, publish your stories, provide feedback and raise funds, so we can support you.

Thank you for taking up the challenge, as hard as it is, and for studying the skills and practices essential to being one of an emerging breed: the prison reporter.

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TIPS FROM THE AP AND PJP STYLEBOOKS

In any news organization, big or small, you have a diverse community of writers and editors with a wide variety of skills in the mechanics of language and prose writing. But a newspaper, magazine or any editorial publication must present a coherent and consistent voice to its readers. So how do you control these divergent contributors? With an in-house style guide.

Virtually every publication, print or virtual, has its style guide, whether it is generated in-house or published by another media organization. The Prison Journalism Project utilizes one of the most esteemed stylebooks in journalism: The Associated Press Stylebook, with some in-house deviations. Founded in 1846, The Associated Press is a non-profit news agency that operates as a cooperative of U.S. newspapers and broadcasters. Its stylebook reflects its vast experience and reach as one of the most influential news outlets in the United States and the world.

In this new section of The P.I.T., we will address common grammar or style rules to help you improve your writing. This issue’s tip is on capitalization in job titles. Here’s the rule:

**titles, jobs:** Confine capitalization to formal titles when they immediately precede one or more names: President Abraham Lincoln. **When a title comes after the person’s name or when it stands alone or is**
offset from a name by commas, IT SHOULD BE LOWERCASE: John Smith, the public information officer at the Department of Corrections. Occupational descriptions are not capitalized even when positioned directly before an individual’s name: writer Shonda Rhimes. First references to clergymen and women should include a capitalized title before their name (Rabbi, Imam, Rev.). Include an explanation of the job associated with the title when it’s not obvious.

Academic majors and degrees, by the way, are also never capitalized (e.g. history department) unless it’s a proper noun (e.g. English department).

Marvin Myers’s Sept. 16 essay, “Our Life Line: Postal Service is Vital for Litigation,” is presented as a memoir but contains a lot of precise, factual information about the way things work. He uses his personal experience to raise an issue that affects everyone who is incarcerated, and in doing so, he is shedding light on how a part of the system works. It is precisely the sort of information prison reporters can make available to the world.

Myers writes that prisoners denied access to email and mobile texts must rely on the U.S. Postal Service to communicate with the court system as they litigate their cases. The slow service provided by the post office endangers the process because courts demand strict adherence to time requirements when filing documents.

The argument is clearly presented in readable prose that is tight and well organized, keeping the story succinct and on message.

So what would the editor think when this story crosses his desk for pre-publication review?

For all its good points, the editor would also want the piece to drill into more background, such as the reasons for the slow postal service. Has it always been slow, or is this a recent development? He suspects it is tied to the erosion of U.S. postal efficiency widely reported on over the past several years, and he would ask for more reporting on the history of this erosion and what the government has said in the published record about the issue.

This would be the piece’s nut graf — the one or two sentences that clearly explains why the story is important now or puts the story into a broader context that the outside reader could connect with. This is typically some kind of background context and is the vital core of any news story or reported essay. As a prison reporter, you won’t always have access to published sources that could help you formulate that, but it’s worthwhile for you to try and formulate some kind of nutgraf. Knowing your intention lets PJP editors and interns do a little additional reporting on the internet to help you polish your thought.

To broaden the story further, the editor might also ask that the reporter do some interviews with prisoners affected by this issue, telling their stories of how the snail mail disrupted their legal cases. Anecdotes and quotes would enhance the story’s veracity.
This is a good example of how a personal memoir can be transformed into a compelling and legitimate news piece. It works fine as it is, but a little additional reporting would take this from just Marvin Myers' problem to being a problem for other prisoners fighting for their legal rights. That's something the world should know about.

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**STORY EXAMPLE**

*Our Life Line: Postal Service is Vital for Litigation by Marvin Myers* (Sept. 16, 2021)

On the streets, the U.S. Postal Service is something that most people take for granted — and might even deem archaic — but in prison, it's a lifeline for many people. Outside, most people have moved on to email and mobile texts. For a prisoner, the mail system is all he has to communicate with family, friends, and most importantly, for our future, the courts.

To litigate a case here in Ohio, this is what you go through to even get a chance to fight:

By the time you get your mail from the court, it will have taken 10 days, which means you have that much less time to make the filing deadline. You send an e-kite, an internal request to the library asking for time in the law library, hoping to God you get one of the five computers they have for 2,300 inmates. Since you’re on your own, you must understand the rules of the court. Then you must conduct research, form your response into a brief, get it printed, get the paperwork notarized, get the cash slip signed, have money deducted from your account, and send the package to the cashier. Then it gets delivered to the mailroom to be sent out.

We have little to no help in research and education on legal services. We have some access to LexisNexis, a legal research site, but no one is trained on how to use the system. “Look and learn” is the motto.

Most inmates try to use the priority mail envelopes because it is one flat rate. It should take one to two days to get to its destination, but priority mail is now taking five to seven days.

Going through the postal system is a long and tedious process, but the courts don't care about the reason if they receive your brief late. They will dismiss the whole case, no matter how much you try to explain that the delay was outside your control. Many inmates fight their cases pro se, or without an attorney, against the state, which has at least 30 attorneys on the payroll looking to pounce and eat you alive in court.

The courts are the only hope of finding true justice for many people. How are we able to fight when we have to rely on a communication method that most of the world has moved beyond?

*Marvin Myers is a writer from Columbus, Ohio, who is incarcerated at the Belmont Correctional Facility in Clairsville, Ohio.*