Here's a scenario seen more than once throughout high school journalism classrooms in the United States. The adviser, a grizzled news hound, bounces from one computer station to another in his classroom to ‘check’ on his students’ work. The students, who show more interest in their friends’ latest Jay-Z CD than the task at hand, shake their heads in mock agreement with their teacher. The school newspaper, which is published on a monthly basis, is due at the publisher’s office in less than 48 hours, and more than two-thirds of the newspaper is not completed. By now, it is less than five minutes before the final bell rings, and the teacher loudly asks, “All right, people, who can stay after school and help finish some of the articles and page layouts.” Silence. Then, the teacher answers his own question. “Okay, I'll stay, but I expect some of you to come in and help out with the newspaper.”

Many times, a teacher can relate to this scenario. A high school newspaper is important to the student body, but when it comes to getting a student body to help, it becomes an entirely different matter. I know from experience, a student writer will spend a month’s journalism class taking three weeks to ‘prepare’ for the newspaper the week it is due. I was the one student in my journalism class who waited until the last
minute to gather my facts, interview my subjects, write my articles, layout my pages and tell the teacher it was done ‘way’ before the deadline. By then, the teacher becomes worried the school newspaper will not make it to press. This is where the high school journalism teacher becomes his journalism staff. Too many times, the teacher takes over the work and stamps his name on the final project. Literally, he is not stamping the students’ work, but he ends up doing all of the work necessary to put out the students’ school newspaper.

Granted, the high school students who sign up for a journalism class usually do not know the amount of work that goes on in such an environment. Sure, it may seem like an easy class, but the other intangibles make journalism an important learning tool in the development and growth of future writers, editors, and copy editors. And it is very easy for a teacher to grow frustrated with his students and take control of the newspaper before its scheduled deadline. It does not have to be that way. A high school newspaper is the voice of the students, and it is the teacher’s job to establish the flow chart of command on the very first day of class. Like any business, there are ‘dos and don’ts’ you want your students to follow in class, and by establishing your expectations the first day of class, you establish ‘the voice of the newspaper.’ The voice you want the student body to hear when it reads its newspaper is your students’ voice, not yours.
As a professional journalist with more than 17 years under my belt, I have gained several tricks of the trade, which I feel will make a high school journalism classroom better. Journalism, as you all ready know, is an extracurricular class. Typically, journalism is an after-school activity for most districts, especially smaller schools in rural communities. But many larger schools incorporate journalism in the core curriculum taught in its school district. I believe journalism should be a class at any level, regardless of size and student population. The class brings together many types of learning and skills not seen typically in other classes. A journalism student is learning on his own, or through teacher direction. A self-starter will thrive in such an environment. But another student may need more guidance to work on an assignment. Here is where I feel the chain of command is vital to the success of a journalism classroom.

- *Establish an editorial flow chart.* You, as teacher, become the last person to check the article for submission in your high school newspaper. In a newsroom, a writer reports to the copy editor. A copy editor reports to the managing editor. The managing editor reports to the publisher, or in this case, the teacher. If the article for submission comes to you without the mark of one of the three students, return it to the student writer. This allows you several options. One, you are giving the students more responsibility to the newspaper. Students say
they are not treated with the respect they deserve because no one trusts them. Well, here is your opportunity to give the students a chance to shine in the face of responsibility. Two, if an error slips past one of the editors, or you are unsure about something in the article, you can go back and speak with your students before it is published. It also allows you time to check to see if something written may contain indecent or inappropriate language. Third, as adviser, you are a safeguard for your students. Since you get a copy of the original work, you are able to see if there are stark differences from Point A to Point B. If something is found you do not deem appropriate writing, you can meet or conference with you student editors to discuss what is appropriate for their newspaper.

- **Create a positive work environment in your classroom for you and your students to work in.** It may sound cliché, but even a high school journalism classroom should be considered an area where mistakes are forgiven and strong writing is praised. As you know, negativity is dangerous, especially with teenagers, and any amount of negative feedback can stunt a young writer’s growth. As the ‘publisher’ of your students’ newspaper, it is your responsibility to exhibit behaviors your students will pick up on. If John Smith writes an article that shows depth and intuitiveness, conference with the entire class, not just the
editors, and share a bit of his article with his classmates. Explain why you want to share the piece with them, citing examples that stand out and make sense to your classroom full of writers. This is extremely beneficial if you also teach a beginning or introduction to journalism class. It allows you the opportunity to share strong writing styles with your students in a positive way. But on the other hand, there is occasionally a bad writing effort. Again, it benefits the class if you share an example of the writing piece with them and ask if they see, or more appropriately hear, the mistakes or errors in the writing style when you read it to them. If you have an overhead, post the article’s paragraph on it and share it with them. A visual is also more helpful for those who need to see the error, giving credibility to the review session. Please, you do not need to name names. It is not necessary for such a thing, but when you and the students have found and corrected the mistakes, discuss ways they can avoid the mistakes the next time they write an article for a class assignment.

• *Give students more responsibility in the process.* It is one thing to say it is a student-run organization. It is an entirely different beast to actually operate a student-run organization. Yes, you are the teacher to these students. Yes, you are the adviser to this extracurricular activity. But no, you are not the
staff of writers, the various editors on staff, the copy editors, or the managing editor. You are not the page designer, the features’ artist, the staff photographers, or the advertising department. Your job is grading the work the students present to you. If not one student does his job, you grade accordingly, and if I am not mistaken, that would result in many failing grades. You cannot get hooked into protecting your students. It is one thing to help a student finish an article with instruction on where to go online to find additional facts or figures. It is another for you to take the paper and rewrite it. Yes, journalism is the one class where it seems more relaxed than a calculus class. But if you work with your students and explain to them from the very first day it is ‘their’ brainchild, you will see and get stronger results. They will struggle at times, but students, who are aware of the benefits that you are teaching, will work with the other students to make the classroom a more efficient and productive environment.

Create a 5-person board of directors from different areas within the high school. As outrageous as it seems, a board of directors is essential for a high school newspaper. Personally, I feel five is a good number to work with for several reasons. One, there is no tie. If you bring a piece of writing you are not sure is appropriate for your next issue, share it with your board of
directors. Three members on the board may find it objectionable – a statement is unclear – and declare it a dead writing, an article no longer suitable for the newspaper. Two members, however, may want the author to clarify his facts for the piece before it is printed. But since the majority rule – 3-to-2 – favored eliminating the article, the article is put on the backburner.

Two, I believe the board of directors should act as a safeguard to the teacher. If the teacher finds something in an article he does not care for, he can bring it to the board of directors to discuss at a monthly meeting, a week or two before the newspaper is published. The board also serves as a damage-control unit. The board can prevent a possible false statement from getting into the newspaper and harming a person’s reputation. Personally, I favor a board that consists of a principal, an assistant principal, or an athletic director. An authority figure besides teachers protects all those involved, specifically with administration that is aware of the ‘dos and don’ts’ of high school journalism. Next, I would ask two colleagues from different fields, either math or science. As teachers, they understand what you are doing with your students, but they also bring a different opinion to a class they may not be familiar with. Finally, I would select two students to complete the 5-person board of directors. The students should come from different backgrounds and provide
solid input to the discussions. They do not have to be 4-point students who are planning to go to Michigan, or Yale, but students who are up-to-date with the current events, trends, and language in student life.

A high school journalism classroom should be a wonderful experience for everyone, from teacher to students who are involved with the course. It should be a positive environment where ideas and discussions are shared among students and teacher. For any journalism teacher or adviser, here is an opportunity to make the classroom a vital teaching tool in creating future writers, graphic designers, and computer technicians. It no longer has to be your voice when the student body reads the high school newspaper. It will be your students’ voice, speaking very loudly and very clearly if you follow these simple guidelines toward making your job a little bit easier.