

Nebraska State Bar Foundation & Nebraska Broadcasters Association

Judge Lyle Strom High School Mock Trial Student News Reporter Contest *A Guide to Reporting on the Courts* *Student Guide*

Mock Trial Student News Reporter Contest

The Nebraska State Bar Foundation, the Nebraska Broadcasters Association, and the Judicial Branch partnered to create this competition to give high school students interested in careers in journalism or communications a chance to see what it is like to report on a court trial. This competition gives participants practical experience in courtroom reporting. This document is designed to guide students participating in the competition.

The Trial

During the trial, your job will be to sit, listen, observe and take notes. No audio or digital recordings are permitted; however, you may use electronic devices such as tablets, iPads, smart phones and laptops to take notes. You also should bring notebooks and multiple writing instruments. Take good, detailed notes. No interviews are allowed. Bring your own laptop or other electronic device to use to write your story.

Background Work

Student writers are encouraged to read the mock trial charging documents, the witness statements and review the exhibits before the trial. Information is available on the NSBF website under the Civics Education page.

Writing the Story

When writing your story, you must consider several factors:

Accuracy

All names and titles must be spelled correctly, and all facts must be correct.

Objectivity

Reporters don't take sides; they tell the story. Articles should not take sides or contain the opinion of the author. The article should be unbiased.

Concise, but Complete

Stories should be relatively short, 500 to 600 words in length. Still, stories should contain important or newsworthy information. As a reporter, you must decide what information is important to tell the story. Use clean transitions and logical connections with succinct, clear paragraphs. Each paragraph should address one point.

Legal Understanding

Since you are covering a court case, you must know legal terms and how to use them correctly. A list of legal terminology is provided on the website. To prepare, talk to your schoolmates who are participating in the competition to learn more about the case. To read the case, refer to the Nebraska State Bar Foundation website at <https://www.nebarfnd.org/law-related-education/mock-trial>

When writing your story, though, remember the average reader does not always have a complete understanding of legal terms, so don't get too technical. To help with your understanding, refer to Basic Legal Definitions for Mock Trials at <https://www.nebarfnd.org/news/student-news-reporter-contest>. The link to the list of legal definitions is at the bottom of the page.

Use descriptions of the courtroom and events of the trial.

Story Structure

The first paragraph of your story is called the "lead." The lead paragraph is usually one or two sentences, each about 20 words in length. The purpose of the lead is to summarize the most important part of the story and grab readers' attention. Your lead should have news value.

From there, the story should go from telling the most important information in the beginning to the least important information at the end (inverted pyramid).

Grammar and Spelling

Take care with punctuation, spelling and grammar. After writing your story, review the article again and proofread your work. Use spellcheck on your computer, but remember the tool is not infallible. Ensure you are using AP style.

Quotations

Two standard ways are available to quote someone. A direct quote is reporting what the person said word for word. This is set off from the rest of the story by quotation marks. The other way is to paraphrase. This is summarizing what a person said, using your own words and attributing the information to the source, but not using the person's exact words. Identify sources and accurately attribute them. Try to use quotes that cover a broad range of the topic.

Headlines

A headline should tell the story. Every headline needs a present tense verb. Headlines, like the rest of the article, should be fair and unbiased. You are asked to write a short, compelling headline for your story, which is included in the word count.

Deadlines

Meeting deadlines is one of the most important responsibilities of being a reporter. This competition reflects that.

Each student will be given two hours to write and edit your story for the State Mock Trial Championship. Late submissions will not be accepted.