

Amherst.edu/news

Editorial Guidelines

About Us

[Amherst.edu/news](https://www.amherst.edu/news) is the premier source of news about Amherst College, serving as a hub for articles, photography and videography about the campus, its people and its programs. It is produced by the editorial team in the Office of Communications. Any given piece of content may be published on several platforms:

- The College's homepage ([amherst.edu](https://www.amherst.edu))
- The email newsletter (*e-News*, sent once every two weeks to alumni, faculty and staff)
- The College's social media channels
- The quarterly *Amherst* magazine

[Social media](#) and the magazine maintain their own editorial guidelines.

Editorial Values

The value of a news site is dependent upon trust—specifically, the reader's ability to trust that the reporting is complete and accurate, and that the writing is graceful and clear. We value the production of articles that are not only honest and informative but also a pleasure to read, and we value storytelling that makes creative use of the media, tools, talent and platforms at our disposal.

Objective

Our objective is to use editorial storytelling to convey how the College executes its [mission](#) and [Strategic Plan](#). Within that objective, our stories aim to demonstrate the value of an Amherst liberal arts education (including the importance of critical thinking and the work of professors who are among the foremost authorities in their fields) and to spotlight a financial aid program that is among the most substantial in the nation and a student body that is among the most diverse.

Editorial Approach

There are countless stories to tell about Amherst College. Our editorial team has the resources to pursue only a relatively small number of them at any point in time. In weekly editorial meetings, we discuss, debate and make often-difficult judgments about which people, projects and events to cover and how to cover them.

We do this, first, by gathering as varied a collection of story ideas and relevant information as possible from across the campus. Next, we put ourselves in the mind of the reader, remembering that no one is required to read what we produce. Busy readers will quickly move along if our content fails to grab their attention and maintain their interest.

In putting the reader first, we look for stories with broad impact and/or relevance; that appeal to our audience of prospective students, current students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents and others who are interested in Amherst; that enrich our editorial mix; that substantively deepen readers' understanding of the College or the world; and that highlight one or more of the following strategic priorities:

- **Academic excellence**
- **Unparalleled diversity**
- **Generous financial aid**

We cover stories, however—not topics. Stories have a recognizable beginning, middle and end; they pull the reader along; they often produce an emotional response; and they include narrative tension and resolution. Here is an example of a topic: *Amherst students who conduct research with professors*. Here is an example of a story: *Six students traveled to Costa Rica in January with Professor Smith to study bats, ants and butterflies. This work—which came with several challenges—may someday help biologists better understand these complex creatures and their habitats.*

The Editorial Director makes the final decision on which stories we cover and how we cover them.

Beats

Our beat system helps ensure the flow of story ideas and information to our office from all areas of the College. Each member of the editorial team is assigned certain academic and/or administrative offices as beats, making that member the primary contact between Communications and those departments and divisions. Having a particular beat requires scheduling idea-gathering meetings with a department chair or director at least once per semester, and communicating by email at least twice per semester. Story ideas come from many other sources, too, including other faculty and staff members, students and alumni. Our approach to story-gathering is that all members of the Communications division are “reporters” charged with listening for good stories.

The Editorial Meeting

The purpose of the weekly Editorial Meeting, run by the Editorial Director, is to create and clarify the best possible story assignments—assignments that become stories that readers will choose to read. We do this by researching and crafting story ideas and pitching them to our colleagues; the Editorial Director has the final decision. We discuss fresh angles, newsworthiness, relevance to strategic priorities and storytelling options.

Each writer must submit at least one new pitch by 2 p.m. every Friday. A pitch must clarify a story’s news value, its optimal timing, which strategic priority it highlights and why it is an important story for Amherst to tell.

In addition to the Editorial Director, many other members of the Communications staff actively participate in the Editorial Meeting: the Assistant Editor, Assistant Photographer, Associate Directors of Communications and Marketing, Chief Communications Officer, Directors of Athletic Communications, Director of Digital Communications, Director of Media Communications, Director of Social and New Media, News Writer, Photographer/Photography Services Manager, Senior Writer and Video Producer/Production Manager.

Reporting and Writing

All writing—whether a short headline or a long feature—is expected to be tightly focused and to demonstrate both style and substance. Writers are expected to meet the following standards:

Interviewing: In-person interviews are ideal and the strong preference. Telephone interviews are often appropriate. In both cases, accurate note-taking and/or recording is paramount. Interviews by email can, in some cases, work for shorter articles (and for follow-up questions), as long as the writer is able to convey the human or personal qualities that are more easily derived from a verbal exchange.

Sources: In general, a story should have at least three people as sources. For example, a story on a professor’s research will rely heavily on an interview with the professor, but will be enriched by interviewing other sources too: the editor of a journal in which their research was published, a student who works as their research assistant, the leader of a scholarly organization who can comment on the

importance of their work, etc. Most of the time, these sources will not be quoted equally, and some might not be quoted at all.

Quotations: Quotations must be accurate accounts of what a person actually said. Anything that is not a person's own words should be offered outside of quotation marks. It is acceptable to shorten quotes, editing out extraneous words, as long as the original meaning and context are preserved. It is also acceptable to send quotes to sources as a means of fact-checking, or to read quotes back to a source over the phone, but changes should be limited to minor edits that are required for factual accuracy. Be especially careful of changes that remove the conversational tone inherent in spoken quotes.

Fact-Checking: Writers must verify all facts in a story and are the primary fact-checkers. Editors will double-check some facts, such as name spellings and class years, but only as a safety measure, not as a replacement for fact-checking by the writer. Any questions or issues should be brought to the Editorial Director prior to publication. The best practice is to check individual facts or passages with sources, rather than sending the entire story, which would invite requests to change more than just facts.

Voice: The following words characterize our ideal editorial voice: lively, engaging, creative, accessible, immediate, honest, candid, transparent, intelligent, informative, insightful, thought-provoking, friendly and vibrant.

Style: For the most part, the Communications team follows the Associated Press Stylebook. Exceptions and points of special interest are listed in our [Editorial Style Guide](#), which the Assistant Editor maintains.

Plagiarism: Writers must never plagiarize and must give proper credit to avoid even unintentionally passing off someone else's work as their own.

Length: Our website news stories and Q&As are usually **400-600 words** long, in accordance with the prevailing research about online reading habits. Q&As should include three to six questions, and no answer should be longer than 150 words. Edited video pieces are about 1–3 minutes in length. Photo slideshows include 6–24 images, depending on the project. In some cases, web stories are best told in a longer form, but that is the exception, not the rule. Writers who wish to pursue articles longer than 600 words must obtain prior approval from the Editorial Director. (See the Amherst Magazine Editorial Guidelines for magazine word counts.) Writers are the first editors of their own work: filed stories can exceed the assigned word count by no more than 100 words.

Deadlines: We post new articles multiple times each week. It is imperative that writers meet agreed-upon deadlines. If this becomes impossible in the course of reporting and writing a story, they must talk with the Editorial Director immediately, as soon as possible before the original deadline.

Deadlines vary depending on the type of story; here are some examples: The Commencement story is due to the Editorial Director at 3 p.m. on Commencement day. Breaking news is posted, generally by 4 p.m., on the same day that the news takes place. Coverage of a lecture by a visiting speaker is due at noon on the day after the event takes place (if the event takes place on a Friday, the deadline is noon on Monday). Stories that preview upcoming events are due one week in advance of the event. Other deadlines are assigned case by case.

Headlines: Writers should submit stories with at least one suggested headline and subhead. We encourage brainstorming with colleagues if helpful.

Corrections: If any fact in a story is wrong, we will correct it quickly and transparently by (1) making the appropriate edits within the text, and (2) including an asterisk at the end of the corrected sentence pointing

to a new line at the end of the piece that explains how and why the wording has been revised from the original.

Video and Photography

We tell stories with images as well as with words. Decisions on how to illustrate a story—whether with video, portraits, journalistic photography or stock photography—are made by the Director of Digital Communications in consultation with the story’s writer and the Editorial Director, based on needs, usage and resources.

Project Management

Writers, editors, photographers and videographers are responsible for familiarizing themselves with our online project-management tool and actively using it to manage deadlines, to inform others when they finish an assignment and to communicate changes and new information.

Writers should file completed stories by emailing them to either the Editorial Director or the Assistant Editor (the project management tool indicates which of these editors is assigned to which story). Edited stories will be returned to the writer for further work, if necessary. Once there is a final version, it is the writer’s job to create a hidden page within the news site, to post the story on that page and to send the link to the Director of Digital Communications, copying the Editorial Director. (The Director of Digital Communications can provide instruction on how to create and post to a hidden news page.)

Videographers and photographers should file completed assignments by sending them to the Director of Digital Communications.

Final Thought

It can be helpful to think of national news sites as our main competition, as we are vying with these sites (and with a multitude of other media) for the limited time and attention of our readers. What would make you, the reader, spend more time with an Amherst story than a *New York Times* or CNN story? This is a useful question to consider throughout the editorial process. Our news site is valuable only when an audience engages with it. We aim not only to produce first-rate content but to ensure its broad reach. Amherst is brimming with rich stories—stories to be found inside classrooms, labs and offices; on the athletic fields and courts; around tables in Valentine and chairs on the Main Quad; in every performance space; and beyond. In our daily work to seek out and convey such stories, we are most successful when we serve the reader above all else.