

NQJ THE BIG NEWS STORY EXAM

THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATION IN JOURNALISM

The overall aim

The big news story exam tests many skills needed by a senior journalist. It is a test of news sense, ability to select the right facts, story-writing skills, the ability to present a story using different forms of media and adeptness with digital and social media.

Candidates must demonstrate a strong use of English. Candidates will be asked to demonstrate newsroom management skills and their knowledge and use of data and audience analytics. Stories must be written to a deadline and to specified word count.

Assessment

Assessment for the big news story is an online examination which is taken on Cirrus – the NCTJ’s secure online exams portal. The exam is set and marked by NCTJ examiners.

The total time allowed for the exam is two hours and 30 minutes.

Candidates tackle an unfolding (‘breaking’) story in which more information becomes available as time elapses. Candidates must assess the value of the information, its accuracy, its relevance and produce one short story at an early stage (140-160 words) in the exam with a final, longer story, coming as the last question (450-470 words). Other questions during the exam will focus on social media, analytics and decision-making in the newsroom as the story unfolds.

Timed sections

There are four timed sections in the exam. At the end of each time limit candidates are unable to go back to amend the answer(s) for that section, but candidates can still see their answer and continue to have access to all the information provided.

Candidates can also copy and paste from all section information and answers given.

Section 1: 10 minutes **(11 marks)**

Question 1 (6 marks)

Sets the scene for the story and kicks off with asking for three things you would do next in no more than 50 words

Question 2 (5 marks)

In light of the story, a question about using social media platforms

Section 2: 35 minutes **(37 marks)**

Question 3 (25 marks)

Write a breaking news story for the website -140 to 160 words

Question 4 (5 marks)

Write a relevant social media post as a news alert

Question 5 (5 marks)

Write another social media post for a different platform

Question 6 (2 marks)
Multiple choice question relating to the Editor's Code of Practice

Section 3: 30 minutes (52 marks)

Question 7 (12 marks)
Question relating to internal management of the situation i.e. health and safety or internal communications

Question 8 (25 marks)
How you might use additional reporters to cover the breaking story including a rationale for your decisions in no more than 200 words

Question 9 (15 marks)
This question will focus on the use of analytics/data.

Section 4: 75 minutes (100 marks)

Question 10 (100 marks)
Write a 450-470-word story for publication on your website in 75 minutes time. Some additional information will also be shared with you at given times during the 75 minutes.

MARKING GUIDE

Marks available

Up to 200 marks are available for the exam.

Pass mark

The candidate will need to achieve a minimum 120 marks (60 per cent) to pass this exam.

Pass = 60-64 % Merit = 65-69 % Distinction = 70+ %

Presentation

Examinations are taken in the Cirrus online exams portal.

Word/character counts

Word and character counts are verified automatically in the online exams system.

Compounds which need to be hyphenated should be counted as one word (e.g. 21-year-old).

General marking criteria

1. In no more than **50 words** outline three things you would do next.
Bullet-point answers are acceptable. (6 marks)
 - 6 marks: Excellent decisions based on excellent news judgements
 - 4-5 marks: Good decisions based on strong news judgements
 - 1-3 marks: Weak decisions with poor news values
 - 0 marks: Poor decisions and news values; or has not completed the task correctly

2. In the light of the story which appears to be possibly developing, what #hashtag(s) would you use with any Twitter posts? (5 marks)
- 4-5 marks: Excellent #hashtags based on excellent news judgements
 - 3 marks: Good #hashtags based on strong news judgements
 - 1-2 marks: Weak #hashtags with poor news values
 - 0 marks: Poor #hashtags and news values; or has not completed the task correctly
3. Write a breaking news story for your organisation's website, between 140 and 160 words. (25 marks)

A gross inaccuracy, likely to lead to a demand for a correction and/or apology, will mean a *maximum* of only 12 marks can be awarded for Q3.

Word count

Any story of fewer than 120 words or exceeding 180 words is automatically disqualified. Penalty marks for writing over or under 140-160 words are deducted as follows:

1 mark (1-3 words over or under)	5 marks (13-15)
2 marks (4-6)	6 marks (16-18)
3 marks (7-9)	7 marks (19-20)
4 marks (10-12)	

Content and accuracy (15 marks available) – marks are awarded in the following bandings:

- 14-15 marks: The work is 100 per cent accurate. All the key facts have been included in a story with no ambiguities. The story displays rigour, excellent insight and high-quality analysis. High levels of judgement with strong decision-making and initiative are demonstrated in the selection of content
- 9-13 marks: The work is accurate. Any inaccuracies will be minor and not alter the meaning of the story. Most of the key facts have been included in a story with no ambiguities. There is good insight and analysis, coupled with good decision-making and initiative in the selection of content
- 3-8 marks: There are some inaccuracies. Some or many of the key facts have been omitted, making the story incomplete and/or ambiguous. The organisation of the story content will generally be limited with a lack of insight or analysis. There is little evidence of reasoned decision-making and initiative in the selection of content
- 0-2 marks: Most of the key facts have been omitted. The story is inaccurate and would warrant a correction and/or a referral to the regulator (or the commencement of legal action). Little or no initiative or evidence of decision-making in the selection of content

Intro, story structure, readability and use of language (10 marks available) – marks awarded in the following bandings:

- 8-10 marks: The story-telling is excellent. It engages the audience from the start with a compelling introduction and is structured in a way that is easily

read (viewed) and understood, while still commanding authority. The use of language is excellent with no errors

- 6-7 marks: The story-telling is good. It engages the audience from the start with a good introduction and is structured in a way that is generally easy to read (view) and understand, with some degree of authority. The use of language is good with no significant errors
- 3-5 marks: The story-telling is weak. The introduction would be unlikely to engage the audience from the start and the structure makes it difficult to read (view) and understand. The story commands little or no authority. The use of language is weak, with some significant errors
- 0-2 marks: A poor story that fails to engage the reader (viewer) at the start and one that has little or no readability (viewability). Significant language errors

4. Write a breaking news alert for **Twitter**. The answer box must only contain your Tweet.

(5 marks)

- 4-5 marks: The social media will reach the target audience. The message plays to the strengths of the social media channel
- 3 marks: The social media is likely to reach the target audience. The message makes good use of the social media channel
- 1-2 marks: The social media is weak and untargeted. Little or no use is made of the strengths of the social media channel
- 0 marks: Inappropriate or inaccurate use of social media

This question may sometimes ask for a social media post alerting people to the story on a website. It is essential in these circumstances to include a link if this is the purpose [we suggest candidates use the words: see link]. The link is included as part of the 280 characters in a Tweet. If no link is provided, no more than 1 mark will be awarded.

This question may sometimes require the use of Instagram. Instagram has a strong and growing following; especially popular with young people. It uses hashtags. The downside is that you cannot put in clickable links. However, a commenting facility helps gain more information.

5. Write a **Facebook** post of no more than 30 words seeking more information from your audience about this unfolding story. The answer box must only contain your Facebook post.

(5 marks)

- 4-5 marks: The social media will reach the target audience. The message plays to the strengths of the social media channel
- 3 marks: Social media is likely to reach the target audience. The message makes good use of the social media channel
- 1-2 marks: Social media is weak and untargeted. Little or no use is made of the strengths of the social media channel
- 0 marks: Inappropriate or inaccurate use of social media

If the question refers to Twitter, any Tweet of more than 280 characters should be marked 0.

Look for appropriate #hashtags and tags; in Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

Will the social media post gain more information to develop the story?

This question may sometimes ask for a social media post alerting people to the story on a website.

This question may sometimes require the use of Instagram. Instagram has a strong and growing following; especially popular with young people. It uses hashtags. The downside is that you cannot put in clickable links. However, a commenting facility helps gain more information.

6. Which of these clauses of the Editors' Code should be uppermost in your mind as you report on this unfolding major news story?

- a) Clause #
- b) Clause #

(2 marks)

This is a multiple-choice question where candidates must choose one answer. Question/answers will change for different exams.

7. In no more than **200 words** outline some of the key decisions regarding the health and safety issues you might consider when reporting on this story.

Bullet-point answers are acceptable.

(12 marks)

- 10-12 marks: Excellent decisions based on appropriate health and safety issues and the likely dangers of reporting on the story
- 7-9 marks: Good decisions based on appropriate health and safety issues and the likely dangers of reporting on the story
- 1-6 marks: Weak decisions based on health and safety issues and dangers of reporting on the story
- 0 marks: Poor decisions made on unlikely health and safety issues and dangers of reporting on the story

OR

In no more than **200 words** outline, at this point in the story, your internal communications strategy. Detail recipients of information and why they have been chosen?

- 10-12 marks: Excellent decisions based on identifying key people/departments that will need to know and giving sound reasons for choices
- 7-9 marks: Good decisions based on appropriate people who need to know, with sound reasons

- 1-6 marks: Weak decisions based on communications
- 0 marks: Poor decisions on communications or no answer

8. You have two reporters to help you cover this unfolding story. You will be expected to remain in the office.

What will your instructions be to them to ensure your news organisation gets as full a coverage of this developing event as possible?

Your answer should consider all aspects including, but not exclusively, deployment of staff, equipment, the people they would speak to and the questions you will seek answers to. There must be a rationale for the decisions you take, including your role in managing the coverage and preparing material for use.

(25 marks)

- 21-25 marks: Excellent decisions and rationale demonstrating excellent management skills
- 15-20 marks: Good decisions and rationale demonstrating good management skills
- 9-14 marks: Decisions may lead to gaps in coverage with incomplete rationale and limited management skills
- 4-8 marks: Weak decisions and rationale demonstrating poor management skills
- 0-3 marks: Poor or no decisions with no rationale or evidence of management skills

9. This question will focus on the use of analytics and/or data. (15 marks)

- 13-15 marks: Shows excellent understanding of analytics/data, demonstrating the knowledge and techniques of how this information can be used by a newsroom
- 9-12 marks: Shows good understanding of analytics/data but demonstrates more limited knowledge and techniques of how this information can be used by a newsroom
- 4-8 marks: Poor understanding of analytics/data demonstrating little knowledge and techniques of how this information can be used by a newsroom
- 0-3 marks: Little or no understanding of the use of analytics/data

10. You have now been tasked with writing a story of 450-470 words to be published on your website in 75 minutes.

(100 marks)

A gross inaccuracy likely to lead to a demand for a correction and/or an apology will mean a *maximum* of only 59 marks can be awarded for Q10.

Word count

Any story of fewer than 430 words or exceeding 490 words is automatically disqualified. Penalty marks for writing over or under 450-470 words are deducted as follows:

- 2 marks (1-3 words over or under)
- 4 marks (4-7 words)
- 6 marks (8-11 words)
- 8 marks (12-15 words)
- 10 marks (16-20 words)

Content and accuracy (40 marks available) – marks are awarded in the following bandings:

- 36-40 marks: The work is 100 per cent accurate. All the key facts have been included in a story with no ambiguities. The story displays rigour, excellent insight and high-quality analysis. High levels of judgement with strong decision-making and initiative are demonstrated in the selection of content
- 24-35 marks: The work is accurate. Any inaccuracies will be minor and not alter the meaning of the story. Most of the key facts have been included in the story with no ambiguities. There is good insight and analysis, coupled with good decision-making and initiative in the selection of content
- 16-23 marks: The work is mostly accurate, but there are some inaccuracies which may alter the meaning of the story. Some key facts have been included. There is limited insight and analysis and limited evidence of good decision-making and initiative in the selection of content
- 6-15 marks: There are a number of inaccuracies. Many of the key facts have been omitted, making the story incomplete and/or ambiguous. The organisation of story content is generally poor with a lack of insight or analysis. There is little evidence of reasoned decision-making and initiative in the selection of content
- 0-5 marks: Most of the key facts have been omitted. The story is inaccurate and would warrant a correction and/or a referral to the regulator (or the commencement of legal action). Little or no initiative or evidence of decision-making in the selection of content.

Intro, story structure, readability and use of language (40 marks available) – marks awarded in the following bandings:

- 36-40 marks: The story-telling is excellent. It engages the audience from the start with a compelling introduction and is structured in a way that is easily read (viewed) and understood, while still commanding authority. The use of language is excellent with no errors

- 24-35 marks: The story-telling is good. It engages the audience from the start with a good introduction and is structured in a way that is generally easy to read (view) and understand, with some degree of authority. The use of language is good with no significant errors
- 16-23 marks: The story-telling is average. It mainly engages the audience with a fair introduction that may be readable (viewable) in parts, but not throughout. The use of language is mainly satisfactory, but may contain errors.
- 6-15 marks: The story-telling is weak. The introduction would be unlikely to engage the audience from the start and the structure makes it difficult to read (view) and understand. The story commands little or no authority. The use of language is weak, with some significant errors
- 0-5 marks: A poor story that fails to engage the reader (viewer) at the start and one that has little or no readability (viewability). Significant language errors

Quotes (20 marks available) – marks awarded in the following bandings:

There should be a strong mix of reported and direct quotes. A high degree of accuracy should be attained although minor variations that do not alter the meaning of the quote are allowed so as to fit in with the flow of the story.

- 18-20 marks: Quotes (voices) have been well-chosen and used effectively. They are accurate and have been attributed correctly. The quotes (voices) are vigorous and lively, adding colour and emotion
- 11-17 marks: The choice of quotes is generally good and effective. They are accurate and have been attributed correctly. The quotes (voices) are generally vigorous and lively, adding colour and emotion
- 4-10 marks: The quotes used are not the most appropriate and have not been chosen or used effectively. There may be some inaccuracies. The quotes (voices) are often flat, of a narrative type, adding little colour and emotion
- 0-3 marks: There are no quotes or the quotes used have major inaccuracies that alter the meaning.

Grade descriptors

Distinction 70+

All the essential facts have been included in an accessible, well-structured story with no inaccuracies. The candidate has chosen a compelling angle and produced a tightly written intro that carries real impact. Story construction is logical and aids understanding. The best quotes have been selected, used accurately and attributed correctly. Final copy demonstrates a high-level of journalistic skills and can be published with little or no correction.

Merit 65-69

The key facts, plus the majority of the other worthwhile facts, have been included with no inaccuracies. The candidate has chosen a strong angle and the intro is well written. Story construction is logical and aids understanding. Good quotes have been selected, used accurately and attributed correctly. Final copy demonstrates a good level of journalistic skills and can be published with few, if any, changes.

Pass 60-64

Most of the key facts, plus most of the other worthwhile facts, have been included. Any inaccuracies will be minor and not change the thrust of the story. The candidate has chosen a good angle and the intro is satisfactorily written. The story has a sensible flow and can be easily understood. Acceptable quotes have been selected, used accurately and attributed correctly. Final copy demonstrates a satisfactory level of journalistic skills and can be published without major changes.

NQJ grading

An overall grade of Pass, Merit or Distinction will be awarded for the NQJ. Candidates must achieve a minimum of 60 marks in each of the three assessments to gain a Pass. Final marks in each section will be expressed as a percentage. The final percentages in each section will be aggregated and divided by three to establish an overall percentage. Any half mark will be rounded up.

The grading scale used to signify performance differentiation within the qualification is Pass, Merit or Distinction which will be awarded as an overall grade. Grades are awarded for the Level 6 National Qualification in Journalism based on the following overall percentage marks achieved:

70+	per cent	-	Distinction
65-69	per cent	-	Merit
60-64	per cent	-	Pass

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