



CCN Election Assignment Templates

Assignment 4: Student-made voter guide project

The Center for Community News' Election & Democracy Program has created a series of sample templates for faculty to give to students for the Fall 2024 semester. Faculty are welcome to use any and all of these and amend them as they see fit for their classes.

For any questions, comments or suggestions, email Elections & Democracy Program Manager Sarah Gamard at scbgamard@gmail.com.

When to assign this project: September and October

Why: Not everyone has time to read in-depth political coverage of their candidates. Voter guides are a great way for laypeople to catch up on their choices as they head to the polls and a fruitful gateway assignment for students to learn the nuts and bolts of election reporting. Findings should be made available to local newsrooms that cannot cover the candidate or race on their own.

How: College journalism programs can contact their local partnering news stations and ask if there are any local elections that students can help cover. This would likely be hyper-local elections, e.g. races for sheriff, local judges, county or town council. Students can do bread-and-butter reporting on one candidate or one race, or more if there is time.

- CCN [has created a questionnaire template](#) for faculty and students to send en masse to candidates, as well as an assignment template (next page) requiring one phone or in-person interview with the candidate. Faculty are welcome to use one or both of these templates. The resulting facts then inform a modest voter guide for each race.
- The voter guide would contain the candidate's name; political party; two or three key issues they're running on; and two to three sentences summarizing their biography and any other important information the reader would need. This would teach the student to parse through political jargon and report election news in plain-speak; a mainstay skill for any budding reporter.
- To prevent duplicative work with your local newsrooms and provide something new, programs are encouraged to ask partnering newsrooms which races – or what about the election – they would like students to help cover.
- [See the case study on our homepage](#) on a class at the University of Maryland, whose students successfully profiled more than 150 school board candidates via a Google Form questionnaire and follow-up reporting, including investigations into court records.

Assignment: Student-made voter guide project

Requirements:

- For every candidate or race the student is assigned to, the student must facilitate **at least one phone or in-person interview with each assigned candidate.**
- The student is required to get the following information from the candidate to inform the voter guide:
 - CANDIDATE NAME, PARTY
 - 2-3 BIGGEST ISSUES CANDIDATE IS RUNNING ON
 - A BRIEF SUMMARY – 2-3 SENTENCES MAX – OF THE CANDIDATE’S BACKGROUND
- Deadline: **XXX**

Instructions and tips:

- Keep your final report short, i.e. limit it only to a few points and sentences. This will require you to parse through any political jargon and long-winded answers to provide digestible, meaningful, and useful material to voters.
- You must contact candidates via phone call at least once a week if they do not answer their initial request for an interview within the first week.
- Take advantage of the interview to ask lots of questions, and keep your notes/audio recording; that way, after the voter guide is published, your interview can inform bigger stories later in the semester.
- Below are some basic questions you can ask. However, students should research the candidate ahead of the interview so they can ask specific questions about the candidate and the office they are running (or trying to be re-elected) for.

Questions you can ask the candidate:

- *Why are you running for this office?*
- *What are the three most important issues to you in this race?*
- *What do you see as the main responsibilities of this office you are running for?*
- *Why should voters choose you over your opponent(s)?*
- *What do you want voters to know about you?*
- *Before we finish, is there anything we didn't discuss that you'd like to talk about?*

Tips for faculty:

- Faculty who have worked on student-made voter guides recommend assigning one candidate to each student, and any who want extra credit can be assigned a second candidate.
- Faculty also recommend keeping track of which student is assigned to which candidate – and their progress – with a shared spreadsheet, such as a Google Sheet, where all students can put in their findings in real-time.