[****](https://www.uvm.edu/ccn)

**CCN Election Assignment Templates**

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.

[**Assignment 1: Profiling first-time and/or young voter attitudes on campus**](#_we7ir8t8c4bm)

* WHEN: Within the first two weeks of the fall semester
* WHY: Young voters are expected to be pivotal in this election. This assignment is worthy of being published in local papers.
* HOW: Students can first submit their report for a grade as a simple, 200 to 400-word vignette, depending on how many people they interview for the assignment. Afterward, you and your students can collaborate on a group project where all their findings are compiled into one feature published in a real newspaper.
* Bonus: Students can work together to create a “scorecard” of issues that students on campus appear to care the most about.

[**Assignment 2: Profiling voter attitudes in underserved communities off-campus**](#_2pn41q30qrnj)

* WHEN: Within the first two weeks of the fall semester
* WHY: Voters in underserved communities close to campus may not currently be part of your professional newsrooms’ local news coverage.
* HOW: Students can first submit their report for a grade as a simple, 200 to 400-word vignette, depending on how many people they interview for the assignment. Afterward, you and your students can collaborate on a group project where all their findings are compiled into one feature published in a real newspaper.
* Bonus: Students can work together to create a “scorecard” of issues that these voters appear to care the most about.

[**Assignment 3: How do I cast my vote? A how-to guide for first-time voters in the 2024 election**](#_ye9kmq9k0qzq)

* WHEN: Within the first two weeks of the fall semester
* WHY: Every year, colleges welcome a new batch of students who don’t know how to cast their vote. This project helps provide crucial information to younger voters on campus and helps student reporters dip their feet into election coverage. These stories would be distributed via student media and social media to reach young voters.
* HOW: This is likely best as a collaborative project. Use this as a chance to introduce students to multimedia reporting and working as a “newsroom.” Some students can be assigned to interview election workers or officials; voter advocacy groups such as the American Democracy Project, which have a presence on campuses across the U.S. to help students get registered to vote; as well as first-time voters to show how educated they currently are on where and how to vote versus their attitude toward the stakes of the election. If you have students who are interested in video, photojournalism, social media or graphics for news, this is a great opportunity to get them to hone their skills. (This is especially important for students who aren’t sure whether to register in their precinct at home or on campus.) This group project can include a written explainer, graphics, a Q&A, etc.

[**Assignment 4: Student-made voter guide project**](#_1aaayb28at9l)

* WHEN: 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 would provide a template for them to report on the race, requiring one phone or in-person interview with the candidate. 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.

[**Assignment 5: Pitch a feature story on the 2024 election to your “editor”**](#_gf7wd0tjz5vs)

* WHEN: October to December
* WHY: Firstly, it’s a great opportunity for students to go in-depth on important elections in their community. Secondly, in some cases, they might be the only reporter in the whole state covering these races. What a great opportunity for the students and a gift to local readers!
* HOW: After fact-finding for the voter guide, students can and should use this time to write more in-depth stories informed by their initial reporting on the candidates or races in their voter guide profiles. They can start with a “pitch,” which can be its own assignment, followed by a feature story that needs to meet certain criteria, e.g. at least three different sources interviewed and a minimum of 700 words, based on findings from previous reporting this semester on the election. These stories would start before the election and continue after the election. (Note: We plan to share any election-related news produced by cohort-participating programs on a dedicated CCN webpage.)

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### **Assignment: Profiling first-time, young voter attitudes on campus**

Requirements:

* You must conduct ***at least one*** man-on-the-street interview with another student on campus about their election plans, and write a short news story based on that.
* The story must include:
	+ Interviewee’s full name, their year (e.g. freshman), and their major
	+ A brief summary of their voter attitudes and at least one quote
* Note: You *cannot* interview someone you already know.
* Word length: Minimum 200 words
* Deadline: XXX

QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK:

* *Do you plan to vote in this election? Why or why not?*
* *Do you know where or how to vote?*
* *What are the three most important issues to you in this election?*
* *Who do you plan to vote for?*
* *Which races are you paying attention to? Are you paying attention to local races or just the presidential race?*

**Tips for faculty:**

* One way to make sure students do these man-on-the-street interviews properly is by using class time to walk around campus and find an interviewee; this may help prevent them from being tempted to just interview a friend or someone in their dorm.

### **Assignment: Profiling voter attitudes in underserved communities off-campus**

Requirements:

* For this assignment, you must conduct ***at least one*** man-on-the-street interview with another student on campus about their election plans, and write a short news story based on that.
* Note: You cannot interview a student you already know!
* The story must include:
	+ Interviewee’s full name, the year they are in college (e.g. freshman), and major
	+ At least one piece of data from an official source related to voting or issues important to young voters this election season.
* Word length: Minimum 400 words
* Deadline: XXX

Questions you can ask:

* *Do you plan to vote in this election? Why or why not?*
* *Do you know where or how to vote?*
* *What are the three most important issues to you in this election?*
* *Who do you plan to vote for?*
* *Which races are you paying attention to? Are you paying attention to local races or just the presidential race?*

Later this semester, everyone in the class will compile their story into a larger collaboration story with all our findings.

**Tips for faculty:**

* One way to make sure students do these man-on-the-street interviews properly is by using class time to take a trip to a nearby neighborhood.

### **Assignment: How do I cast my vote? A how-to guide for first-time voters in the 2024 election**

The goal of this on-campus coverage is for student reporters to provide timely and useful information to fellow students or local underserved communities to increase voter participation, as many first-time voters or residents may not know how or where to vote.

**Example:**

| **Assignment** | **Name** |
| --- | --- |
| Multimedia graphics |  |
| Interview with an election official |  |
| Interview with voter advocacy group |  |
| Summary of voting and registration deadlines |  |
| Summary of how to find your precinct |  |
| Summary of how to vote absentee |  |

**Tips for faculty:**

* If you have a relatively small class, e.g. a few to a dozen students, you can assign each student to work on a different part of a collaborative story. For example, you can assign one student to interview a voter advocacy organization, and another to interview an elections official on where to find your precinct, etc. You can also have some other students do photography, video or graphics to create a multimedia explainer.
* You can also create a spreadsheet and have students sign their names on the aspects of the story they want to cover.

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### **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.

### **Assignment: Pitch an election feature story to your “editor”**

Requirements:

* After interviewing voters or candidates ahead of the 2024 election, you must make **at least two story pitches** to your professor, i.e. your news “editor,” for follow-up feature stories based on your initial findings.
* The pitch must be short and newsworthy. Once their pitch is green-lighted, write a feature story – minimum 800 words – based on that pitch containing the following:
	+ Interviews with at least three new sources
	+ A relevant data point from an official source related to their topic
	+ At least one multimedia element, e.g. photos, video or data visualization
* Once the story is submitted and edited, it will then be submitted to a real, partnering news publication.
* Deadline: XXX

**Tips for faculty:**

* Instead of your students pitching stories, you can communicate with participating newsrooms because they may have other ideas on how students can supplement their coverage.