

TRAILMARK YEARBOOKS

Staff & Leadership Curriculum

Building Your Yearbook Team

A complete lesson in creating staff excitement, running team building activities, establishing a chain of command, and understanding the role of the adviser.

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SECTION 01

Creating Excitement with Your Staff

The energy your yearbook staff brings to the first week of school will largely determine the energy they carry for the next nine months. Your job as a leader — whether you are the adviser or the Editor-in-Chief — is to make your staff feel, from the very first day, that this is a room worth being in.

Why Excitement Matters

Yearbook is a class that requires voluntary effort above and beyond the minimum. Students who are excited about the product stay late, chase better photos, rewrite captions until they are right, and hold each other accountable. Students who are simply filling an elective slot do the minimum and leave. The difference between those two groups is almost entirely created in the first two weeks of the year — and it starts with how you set the room.

"If your staff is not excited about the yearbook, your school will not be excited about it either."

Show Them the Product

One of the most powerful things you can do on the first day is put last year's yearbook in every student's hands. Let them flip through it. Point out the best spreads, the strongest photos, the headlines that worked. Then point out what did not land — and frame it as an opportunity. Tell them this year's staff gets to do better. That framing makes them feel like they have inherited something worth improving, not just something worth maintaining.

If this is a new program or you are building from scratch, show them outstanding yearbooks from other schools. Let them see what is possible. Aspiration is one of the most powerful motivators for creative students.

Make the Stakes Feel Real

Students work harder when they understand that the yearbook is a permanent record — not a class project. Every photo they take, every spread they build, every word they write will be read by students and families for decades. The freshman who got the best action shot of the homecoming game will still be in that yearbook at their 30-year reunion. When staff members understand the permanence of what they are creating, the stakes of getting it right become very real.

Build Identity Early

Give your staff a sense of belonging before they have done any work. This can be as simple as custom staff shirts, lanyards, or press credentials. It can mean a staff name or motto. It can mean a wall where staff photos

go up on the first week. The point is to signal: you are part of something. There is an us here. When students feel like they belong to a group with an identity, they protect that identity — and producing a great yearbook becomes part of protecting it.

- Host a brief "state of the yearbook" on day one — what worked last year, what the vision is for this year, and what each person's role will be in making it happen.
- Create a staff social media account or shared digital space where only staff can post — it builds community and gives the team a sense of shared ownership.
- Set a public goal: a specific number of pages, a particular award you want to pursue, a distribution event you want to be proud of.
- Celebrate early wins loudly — the first great photo, the first approved spread, the first quote that makes the room laugh. Recognition in the first weeks sets the standard for the whole year.

Create a Culture of Standards

Excitement without standards becomes chaos. The best yearbook staffs have a culture where good work is expected and celebrated, and where shortcuts are not accepted. Establish that culture early — not through lectures about quality, but through the work itself. Look at photos together and ask: which one tells the story best? Look at headlines together and ask: does this make you feel anything? When students practice making judgments about quality from day one, quality becomes the culture.

SECTION 02

Team Building Activities

The best yearbook team building is not generic — it is directly connected to the skills and culture you want to build. Every activity below is designed to be fun, fast, and directly relevant to the work your staff will do all year.

Why Dedicated Team Building Matters

Yearbook staff members often come from very different social circles. The sports photographer might not know the layout designer. The copy editor might not have spoken to the arts coverage writer before. Team building activities create connections across those groups early — before the pressure of a deadline makes collaboration harder. Time spent on team building in the first week pays dividends for the next nine months.

01

The Cover Pitch

TIME: 20 min

GROUP: Teams of 3–4

MATERIALS: Paper, markers, colored pencils

Each team receives a theme word chosen randomly from a hat and has 15 minutes to sketch a front cover concept using only paper and markers. No yearbook software — just raw ideas. Each team then presents their concept to the full staff in 60 seconds. Staff votes on the most compelling concept. This activity immediately builds visual thinking, presentation confidence, collaboration, and understanding of how a theme translates to a cover design.

02

Photo Scavenger Hunt

TIME: 30–45 min

GROUP: Pairs

MATERIALS: Cameras or phones

Give each pair a list of 10 shots to capture around the school in 30 minutes. The list should include: one action shot, one portrait, one detail photo, one environmental photo, one photo that tells a story without words, and five shots of your choosing. Pairs return, images are shown to the full group, and staff votes on the single strongest image from each category. This immediately puts cameras in hands and creates a shared vocabulary around what makes a photo work.

03

Caption It

TIME: 15 min

GROUP: Individual then group

MATERIALS: Printed photos (5–6 images)

Print 5 or 6 photos from last year's yearbook without captions and give each staff member one minute to write a caption for each. Then read them aloud for each photo. This exercise reveals immediately how differently people see the same image, creates natural conversation about voice and accuracy, and is almost always the funniest 15 minutes of the year. Use it to launch a discussion about what makes a caption informative and engaging versus generic.

04

Spread Rebuild Challenge

TIME: 25 min

GROUP: Teams of 3

MATERIALS: A printed spread cut into sections

Cut a strong spread from a previous yearbook into its individual elements — photos, captions, headline, body copy, graphics — and shuffle them. Give each team the pile and ask them to reassemble the spread as close to the original as possible in 15 minutes. Teams then compare their version to the original. Discuss: what choices did different teams make? What does the original design do that yours does not? This builds layout intuition and reveals how design elements work together.

05

Yearbook Jeopardy

TIME: 20 min

GROUP: Full staff divided into teams

MATERIALS: Prepared question set

Create a Jeopardy-style game with categories like: Yearbook Vocab, Photography Basics, Caption Rules, This Year's Staff, and School History. Keep questions fun and fast. This is a great way to cover foundational knowledge — AP Style, photo terminology, deadline vocabulary — without it feeling like a lecture. Award a small prize to the winning team. The laughter and competition create the kind of informal bonding that structured activities sometimes cannot.

06

The Staff Yearbook Page

TIME: 30 min GROUP: Full staff collaboration MATERIALS: Yearbook software access or paper mockups

On the first or second day, have your staff build a yearbook spread — about themselves. This is the staff page for the book, built by the staff. Assign roles: one person writes the headline, one writes the copy, photographers take portraits and action shots of the staff at work, designers build the layout. The result goes in the book and every staff member is in it. This activity covers every skill your staff will use all year, creates a real deliverable on day one, and produces a spread that staff members are personally invested in seeing look great.

SECTION 03

Chain of Command

A yearbook staff without clear leadership is a group of people with cameras and computers. A yearbook staff with clear leadership is a publication team. Establishing roles — and making sure everyone understands what those roles mean — is one of the most important structural decisions a yearbook program makes.

Why Structure Matters

When everyone is responsible for everything, no one is responsible for anything. A clear chain of command means that decisions get made, problems get solved at the right level, and the adviser is not the only person holding the program together. The goal is to build a staff where student leaders are genuinely leading — not just holding titles.

Editor-In-Chief

SENIOR LEADERSHIP

About This Role

The Editor-in-Chief is the chief executive of the yearbook program. They set the creative direction, uphold the publication's standards, and are ultimately responsible for every page in the book. The EIC is the primary liaison between the staff and the adviser, and between the staff and the school administration.

Key Responsibilities

- Sets and communicates the yearbook theme and creative vision
- Approves all major design, photography, and copy decisions
- Manages section editors and holds them accountable to deadlines
- Leads staff meetings and sets the tone for the program culture
- Reviews all pages before submission and makes final approval calls
- Represents the yearbook staff to administration, faculty, and the school community

Photography Editor

VISUAL LEADERSHIP

About This Role

The Photography Editor is responsible for the visual storytelling of the entire book. They direct the photography coverage plan, assign photographers to events, review and select images, and maintain the photographic standards of the publication. They are the authority on what a strong yearbook photo looks like.

Key Responsibilities

- Creates and manages the event and coverage photography schedule
- Assigns photographers to specific events and follows up on coverage
- Reviews, selects, and curates photos for each section of the book
- Maintains the photo archive and ensures proper file organization
- Provides feedback and coaching to staff photographers
- Sets and enforces standards for photo quality, composition, and storytelling

Design Editor

DESIGN LEADERSHIP

About This Role

The Design Editor is the visual architect of the yearbook. They own the design system — the color palette, typography, spread templates, and graphic elements — and ensure that every page in the book feels cohesive and intentional. They are the authority on what good yearbook layout looks like.

Key Responsibilities

- Develops and maintains the yearbook design system and style guide
- Creates master spread templates that all staff members use
- Reviews all completed spreads for consistency and design quality
- Trains staff members on layout software and design principles
- Manages the folio system and ensures consistency throughout the book
- Works with the EIC to ensure the cover design reflects the theme

Copy Editor

EDITORIAL LEADERSHIP

About This Role

The Copy Editor is the guardian of language in the yearbook. They review all written content — headlines, captions, body copy, and section introductions — for accuracy, style, grammar, and voice. They ensure that the writing in the book meets the same standard as the design and photography.

Key Responsibilities

- Reviews all written content before it is placed on a spread
- Enforces AP Style and the publication's specific style guidelines
- Verifies the accuracy of all names, dates, scores, and facts
- Coaches staff members on caption writing and headline technique
- Manages the proofing process and tracks corrections
- Ensures the written voice of the book is consistent across sections

Staff Members

CORE PRODUCTION TEAM

About This Role

Staff members are the engines of the yearbook program. They are photographers, designers, writers, and reporters — responsible for producing the actual content of the book under the guidance of the section editors. The quality of their individual work determines the quality of the publication.

Key Responsibilities

- Photograph assigned events and submit work by established deadlines
- Build and complete spreads according to the design system
- Write captions, headlines, and body copy for their assigned sections
- Attend staff meetings and participate in critiques and reviews
- Communicate proactively with editors about coverage gaps or issues
- Represent the yearbook program with professionalism at all school events

Establishing the Chain in Practice

Titles only matter if the authority is real. Give your editors actual decision-making power — the Photography Editor should be able to tell a staff member that a photo is not good enough, and that decision should stand without being appealed to the adviser. The Design Editor should be able to reject a spread that does not meet the standard. When student leaders have real authority, they take real ownership.

Hold weekly editor check-ins — separate from the full staff meeting — where editors report on their section's progress, raise problems, and align on upcoming coverage. This creates a leadership team within the program and gives editors a space to lead.

SECTION 04

The Role of the Adviser

The yearbook adviser is one of the most complex roles in a school building. You are simultaneously a teacher, a creative director, a project manager, a counselor, a technical trainer, and an advocate — often all in the same class period. Understanding what your role is — and what it is not — is the key to a healthy, high-functioning program.

Lead Without Taking Over

The single most important thing an adviser can understand is this: the yearbook belongs to the students. Your students should be making the creative decisions, solving the production problems, and owning the outcomes. Your job is to create the conditions in which that is possible — not to make the decisions for them.

When an adviser takes over — making design decisions, rewriting student copy, choosing photos because the student's choice was not quite right — they create a staff that does not trust its own judgment. Students learn to wait for the adviser to fix things rather than developing the skills and confidence to fix them themselves. Resist the impulse to step in. Ask a question instead. "What do you think is not working?" is almost always more effective than "here, let me show you."

"Your job is to build a staff that does not need you — and then be there for them anyway."

The Adviser's Core Responsibilities

- Curriculum and training — Teaching the skills students need to do the work: photography, design, writing, journalism ethics, and production software. The adviser is a teacher first.
- Deadline management — Holding the calendar and ensuring the book ships on time. This is non-negotiable. The adviser must understand the production schedule and build staff accountability to it.
- Quality oversight — Reviewing the book at major checkpoints with enough time to correct problems before they go to print. The adviser is the last line of defense against factual errors, design failures, and coverage gaps.
- Budget and vendor relationship — Managing the yearbook contract, understanding pricing, coordinating with the publisher, and ensuring the program stays financially healthy.
- Legal and ethical oversight — Ensuring the publication operates within school policy, journalism ethics, and applicable law. The adviser is responsible for what goes to print.
- Staff wellbeing — Watching for students who are overwhelmed, burned out, or struggling in their role. The yearbook room can be a high-stress environment. The adviser creates the psychological safety that makes

hard work sustainable.

- Celebrating the team — Recognizing achievement publicly and often. Great advisers make their staff feel seen.

When to Step In vs. Step Back

The hardest skill in advising is knowing when to intervene and when to let students figure it out. A general framework:

Always step in when:

- A factual error, legal issue, or ethical violation is about to go to print.
- A student leader is misusing their authority in a way that harms other students.
- A deadline is in genuine danger of being missed with consequences for the program.
- A student is struggling emotionally and needs adult support.

Step back and ask questions when:

- A design decision feels wrong to you but is not technically incorrect — let the student own it.
- Two students disagree about a creative direction — let them work it out with your facilitation.
- A spread is not as strong as you would like but is within acceptable standards — give feedback, not fixes.
- A student is struggling with a skill — ask what they have tried before showing them the answer.

Supporting Student Leadership

Your editors are student leaders who may be leading peers for the first time. They will make mistakes. They will sometimes be too soft with their feedback and sometimes too harsh. They will occasionally make a decision that does not go well. Your job is to coach them through those moments — not to take the decision away from them.

Meet with your Editor-in-Chief regularly, one-on-one. Ask them what is hard. Ask them what they need from you. Make it clear that coming to you with a problem early is a sign of leadership, not weakness. The culture you build with your EIC will ripple through the entire staff.

"The best yearbook advisers are invisible in the product and visible in the room."

The Adviser and the Staff Relationship

Students who feel respected by their adviser work harder. It is that simple. Respect looks like: taking their creative ideas seriously, explaining your feedback rather than just giving directives, acknowledging when they are right and you are wrong, trusting them with real responsibility, and showing up to the events they cover.

The yearbook room should feel different from other classrooms. It should feel like a newsroom — purposeful, a little loud, full of people who are working on something that matters. The adviser sets that culture by how they

show up every single day.

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This lesson is one part of the TrailMark Adviser Resource Library, available exclusively to TrailMark partner schools. The library includes a complete photo curriculum, design curriculum, copy curriculum, color palette book, and the TrailMark Playbook.

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