

THE PURPOSE OF YEARBOOK

In the children's book *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox, a young boy searches for ways to find lost memories for an old woman who had lost her own. Through his persistent questions and vivid imagination, he inspires her to remember events from her past.

A yearbook should allow any reader to do the same when it is visited years later. But let's be honest. The most thorough inspection any yearbook is going to get happens within hours and days of the distribution of that book. Years later, specific spreads and certain people may be revisited, but few people spend their time reading every article; they are too busy with the latest best-seller or iPod download.

Clearly, the memories a yearbook captures must be as relevant in May or August when the book comes out as in 20 or 30 years. So many events occur during a school year that scenes from Homecoming seem like a distant memory in May, especially after prom.

With that in mind, what is the real purpose of the yearbook? With blogs and Facebook and easily shared digital photos, why do people still care about the yearbook? Is it the perfect place, as the daughter of a friend claims, to write heartfelt sentiments about friendship? Is it the proper forum to address controversial issues? And is it an accurate reflection of the people who not only immersed themselves into sports and clubs, but also of those who chose more diverse interests?

The straightforward answer is that the yearbook is a publication that reflects the events and lives of people involved with a school during that given year. Historically, yearbooks were little more than picture books, often including literary works and art. With the explosion of desktop publishing in the last few decades, yearbooks have become even more journalistic, reflecting not only the design and photographic capabilities now available, but including coverage that showcases everything from reporting of events to first-person profiles.

In these ways, the yearbook still fulfills some standard roles: it is a memory book, a history book, a record book, and/or a reference book. Some also believe that it is a public relations tool for that particular school. While a yearbook should be all of the above, I would like to add three adjectives to the list of things a yearbook should be: honest, thorough and accurate.

These descriptors may, at first glance, seem contradictory. For example, some believe that you cannot provide honest coverage and still serve as a "public relations" tool. But the beauty of the yearbook is that the students can choose to cover the topics in student life that reflect their student body without feeling an obligation to cover every aspect of their lives. While not every area must be covered, one that should be included is any world-changing event. I looked at scores of books after 9/11 to see how staffs chose to record and localize this life-altering event. What shocked me most was that some staffs chose to not cover it at all. The yearbook, when used as a reference and history book, should allow future generations to do more than check out weird hairstyles and outdated clothing.

H O N E S T

If the baseball team lost every game that year and the coach quit mid-season, that must be covered. Honestly. That does not mean that those two facts need to be the lead or even the focus of the copy. Instead, the staff may choose to focus on the resiliency of the athletes, the work ethic of those who came to two-a-day practices, the bonding activities that kept the team together, whatever made those student athletes show up each day despite the record or the absent coach. That is honest coverage.

I also believe that yearbooks can be honest about controversial topics such as teen pregnancy, drug or alcohol abuse and non-conventional families and still be a public-relations tool. This is where great reporting, sound journalistic standards and individual stories come into play. Rather than merely state that 67 percent of all students are drinking at least once a month, an article might feature a student who is recovering from an accident involving a drunk driver. That statistic can then become part of a first-person profile that celebrates the recovery of that injured student. The reporting is still honest, the topic is still covered, and a student's story is told in a way that can have far-reaching effects on others.

T H O R O U G H

When I took over the Overland yearbook program in the middle of a school year, most of the book had already gone to press. I discovered that, because students had been producing the book in the absence of an adviser, the book had some serious flaws: no academic section (The kids thought that section was boring.), no band pictures (They didn't care for the instructor.) and no cheerleaders (I think jealousy played a role there!). That never happened again. While not every event can be covered, the major ones must be, as must all active clubs and all academic areas. If possible, every student in the school should be pictured at least once.

Coverage includes more than a photograph and a caption. Coverage includes interviewing, reporting and writing. Good coverage includes attending the events or club meetings or games. Great coverage is what allows a book to truly serve as a memory book.

A C C U R A T E

There is simply no excuse for getting the facts wrong. For the yearbook to be a historical and reference book, the staff must make sure names are spelled correctly, that people are identified in the photos, that the win-loss record for each sports team is listed and that quotes are real and not fabricated.

While these guidelines fit the purpose of the yearbook, I want to add one more thought: the purpose of ("the" intentionally deleted) yearbook.

When I think of the purpose of the yearbook, it is clear that the book itself is an important, permanent document for that year. However, when I think of the "purpose of yearbook," it is perfectly clear that the process of publishing that book offers an opportunity for students to learn so much—not only about journalism, but about life.

At a spring JEA/NSPA national convention held in San Francisco, one adviser confided that she felt guilty having students take yearbook class because they had so many other obligations competing for their time. I disagreed, respectfully but passionately. I believe that being on the yearbook staff offers students far more rewards than any other commitment they might make in high school.

Yearbook students learn to write for an audience. They learn great picture taking skills. They learn to play well with others. They learn to close a sale. They learn to celebrate each others' achievements. They learn to meet deadlines. They learn to make friends. They learn to be honest and thorough and accurate.

Just as Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge taught a friend to remember, we will do well to remember just why it is we choose to be involved with yearbooks. There is so much we can all learn from each other.

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