Lookout Student Journalism Toolkit: Writing a Profile

Unsung Heroes: Find someone in Lane County whose story deserves to be told, interview them, and write a compelling profile that highlights all the good they do for your community.

This toolkit walks you through the reporting process in three steps: **read examples, interview, write.**

Submissions close **February 26, 2027**. Winners are published on Lookout by March 31, 2027.

Step 1: Read like a reporter

Before you interview anyone, read profiles by Lane County students who won last year's challenge. All are free to read on Lookout Eugene-Springfield, and you can see every winner on the 2026 winners page.

Read this	Written by	Who it's about
Christopher Noel conducts a community of young musicians (top 3)	Arlo Rallen, Churchill High School	A Eugene conductor and his impact on young musicians at Eugene Springfield Youth Orchestras
Fern Ridge School District's Amy Hand bridges the gap between need, support (top 3)	Brett Van Damme, Elmira High School	A family resource support coordinator
Longtime Veneta volunteer Dennis Maricle puts community first (top 3)	Easy Armstrong, Elmira High School	A longtime Veneta volunteer
More Than a Game: Alan Jeffers devotes himself to Territorial Sports Program (finalist)	Caydence Farrar, Elmira High School	A leader of a local youth sports program
From signs to assemblies, this unsung hero deserves attention (finalist)	Jaxson Potts, Pleasant Hill High School	A school community member

As you read, ask yourself:

- What's in the first sentence that made me want to keep going?
- Which details could only come from talking to the person?
- How many quotes does the writer use, and where?
- What's the one thing I'll remember about this person tomorrow?

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Step 2: Plan your interview questions

Write your questions before the interview. You can choose your favorites from the list below or add your own. These questions work for almost anyone, whether your subject is a coach, teacher, family member, instructor, or volunteer.

Growing up

1. What did you want to be when you were a kid?
2. Who did you live with growing up, and how did they shape you?
3. Who was a teacher or mentor who made a difference?
4. What first got you interested in this work? How old were you?

Learning the craft

5. Where did you go to school or train after high school?
6. Who or what taught you the most about doing this well?
7. What was your first job in this field? What brought you to Lane County?

Day-to-Day

8. Walk me through a normal day.
9. What's the most rewarding part? What does a hard day look like?
10. Tell me about a time something didn't go as planned.
11. What's a moment from your work you'll never forget?
12. What do people misunderstand about your work?
13. Why do you keep doing this?

Beyond the work

14. What do you do for fun?
15. If you could talk with anyone, living or dead, who would it be and why?
16. What would you like to be remembered for?
17. What advice would you give someone my age? What do you wish you'd known?

Follow-up questions are where the good stuff is. When an answer surprises you, don't move on. Ask:

- "Can you tell me more about that?"
- "What did that look like?" or "What did that feel like?"
- "Can you give me an example?"
- "Why?"

Questions to handle with care: Ask about family and personal life gently, and let your subject decide how much to share. Avoid yes-or-no questions; they get one-word answers.

Talk to a second person. Interview someone who knows your subject and can speak to their impact, like a coworker, student, neighbor, or someone they've helped. One good quote from them shows readers why your subject matters. Try asking:

- How do you know them?
- What difference have they made for you or others?
- What do they do that most people don't see?
- Can you tell me a story that shows who they are?

Interview Tips

Preparation

Ask permission to interview your subject for a story that may be published on Lookout. Tell them your deadline.

- Look them up first (their organization's website, past news stories) so you don't spend time on basics.
- Ask if you can record. Use your phone's voice memo app and take notes too, in case the recording fails.
- Plan for 30–45 minutes. Meeting where they work (a rehearsal, a kitchen, a gym) gives you details to describe.

During

- Start with easy questions. Save personal ones for later, once you've built trust.
- Listen more than you talk. Silence is okay; people often fill it with their best stories.
- Write down what you see and hear: the room, what they're wearing, how they move. That's your "show, don't tell" material.
- Double-check spelling of names, ages, dates, and places before you leave.
- End with: "Is there anything I didn't ask that you want people to know?"

After

- Listen back the same day and mark your favorite quotes while it's fresh.
- If you're unsure about a fact, ask them instead of guessing.

Step 3: Write your profile

1. **Find your one big idea.** Write one sentence: what should readers remember about this person? Example: *"She turned a childhood of borrowed violins into a life of making sure no kid in Eugene goes without music."* Keep this sentence in front of you the whole time.
2. **Make an outline.** Sort your notes into three piles: beginning (the hook), middle (their story), end (why it matters).
3. **Write a hook.** Your first sentence is like introducing a friend to someone new. Start with a moment, a surprising fact, or a scene, not "This is a story about..." Look at how last year's winners above open their stories.

4. **Tell their story (the middle).** Cover where they came from and how they got here: childhood, turning points, training, the job today. Telling it in time order is usually easiest.
5. **Explain why they matter.** Who do they help? What has changed because of them? What do other people say about them?
6. **Pick the interesting parts.** You're writing a story, not a résumé. Leave out details that don't support your big idea, even true ones.
7. **Show, don't tell.** Instead of "He is very dedicated," write "He's in the rehearsal hall by 6 a.m., an hour before anyone else."
8. **Use quotes carefully.** Choose two to four of your subject's best lines, ones that sound like them. Keep each to about a sentence, and use no more than one per paragraph. Put everything else in your own words.
9. **End strong.** Bring readers back to your big idea. A great final quote or an image of the person at work often does it.
10. **Proofread out loud.** Read it aloud in a quiet spot. Wherever you stumble, rewrite. Then check every name, date, and fact one more time.

More free resources

Resource	Best for	What it is
PBS NewsHour Classroom: What's your "Brief But Spectacular" take?	Grades 6–12	Watch short video profiles, talk about how they open and close, then practice interviewing a classmate.
Media Helping Media: Preparing for and carrying out an interview	Teachers	Free, Creative Commons lesson plan: write three focused questions, practice interviewing a family member, reflect.
SchoolJournalism.org: Reporting & Interviewing	High school, advanced	Self-paced lesson on choosing sources, writing questions, and on/off-the-record ethics.

Questions or need help? Contact Olivia Desgrange, Lookout's Community & Student Engagement Manager, at olivia@lookoutlocal.com.