



By [Jim Sweeney](#)

Having been a reporter, reporters' manager and copy editor/copy desk chief at several publications, I thought I'd throw in my two cents about the Jayson Blair situation.

I've worked with a number of reporters in all those jobs whose accuracy was very questionable. Perhaps none were deliberately falsifying stories, but many played fast and loose with the facts.

All reporters make errors. I made errors when I was a reporter. But a massive accumulation of errors is cause for concern, and should be communicated higher up in the chain of command.

Many of the stories on Jayson Blair quoted reporters who had worked with him who had problems with his accuracy. I talked last week to a reporter who had worked with him who said she wasn't surprised at all about this.

Reporters know what's going on, even if they're reluctant/afraid to take their concerns to management (would you go after one of the managing editor's favorites?).

I think a major tipoff to a problem reporter is that other reporters don't want to work with them. Because they don't do the heavy lifting but take all the credit, or steal sources and ideas, or screw up their work so badly that the other reporters have to re-report it or are afraid/ashamed to have their bylines on the story.

Based on my experiences and what I've read about some of the better-known incidents (Blair, Glass, etc.), here are some other things that might indicate you have a problem reporter:

- repeated problems with basic errors (governor's name wrong, dates wrong, etc.)
- sources are "unavailable" when information needs to be verified
- excessive reliance on anonymous sources
- reporter gets angry or complains to upper management when asked to verify details
- reporter is excessively jealous of other reporters' successes/kudos/awards

- reporter insists that copy desk isn't entitled to know source of information, that it's been cleared with upper management
- reporter always blames others (copy desk, editor, researchers, sources) for errors
- reporter is always working on "big stories" that never seem to get finished
- reporter is often out of the office working on vague stuff and even his boss isn't sure where he is
- reporter ignores requests to clarify details in stories
- "sources" are clips from other publications
- reporter is not skeptical enough about information from sources
- excessive and rapid job hopping even for a reporter
- transferred repeatedly to new beats/departments within a publication/company
- big "exclusives" don't get followed up by competition (because there's no real story there) and reporter doesn't bother to follow up, either
- big "exclusives" are stories that everybody knows or aren't important
- erratic story output--generates few stories or a huge pile compared to other reporters in a given time period, or alternates between the two
- constantly brags about how long and how hard he works
- inexperienced reporter with seemingly unusual access to confidential sources
- stories that bypass the normal editing process
- stories often handed in at the last minute or late to avoid careful scrutiny