

JOSHUA M. TAWNEY • CYNTHIA J. TAWNEY • FIELD GUIDE

[How to Start a Small-Town Publication]

A guide for people who believe their place matters.

PURPOSE • PEOPLE • PLACE • PRACTICE



HEALTHY ELK
the ELK'S STUDENTS
the ELK'S COOKBOOK
the ELK REFLECTS
the ELK'S JOURNAL
the HUMANITIES CORNER
the ELK'S GARDEN

AROUND THE ELK
READERS SUBMISSION

Trail
Mix



Source Sans Pro

QWERTYUIOP
ASDFGHJKL

qwertyuiop
asdfghjkl
zxcvbnm

While the Elk River Trail at Duck has
appeared in the
of the nation's spotlight this
past year, we should be
aware of the many beautiful
scenic views from the trail,
and the many ways to reach
the trailhead.

Local car rental agencies and
rental companies are available.

Source Serif Pro

QWERTYUIOP
ASDFGHJKL

qwertyuiop
asdfghjkl

While the Elk River Trail at Duck has
appeared in the nation's spotlight of
past years, we should be aware of the
many beautiful scenic views from the
trail, and the many ways to reach the
trailhead.

[A publication is not an object. It is a **system.**]

By the end of this book you will have named the purpose, cadence, reader, identity, mission, people, recurring segments, relationships and operating conditions of a publication rooted in one place.

Not read about them. *Named* them — in your handwriting, on these pages. This is a workbook. Write in it, in pen, badly, in the margins. The blanks are the whole point of the object; a clean copy of this book has failed at its job.

Nine sections. Ten things to fill in. Everything you write carries forward to page 038, where you assemble it into the first issue that does not exist yet.

THIS COPY BELONGS TO

STARTED

FIRST ISSUE OUT

THE ONLY DEADLINE IN THIS BOOK

READ · ANSWER · RETURN · BEGIN



FIG. 01 • THE ORIGIN

Cyndi Tawney, Editor-in-Chief — Charleston, WV public library. The rolling stone of this idea was gathering no moss, so she acted.

One fact for the record, before anything else.

Elk River Living exists because of my mother.

In 2016 the water took her hometown. What followed was two years of rebuilding — the slow, unphotogenic kind that happens after the news crews leave. Somewhere in it she stopped thinking of the magazine as something she might do one day.

In 2018 I had just come off a deep dive in brand strategy with Prophet in Manhattan and was regrouping at my parents' place in Elkview, not at my best, when she came to me with the thing she'd carried since her journalism degree at WVU — she had always wanted to start a magazine. I asked if she understood everything that entails. Typical of my mother: “Let’s do it.” We did.

Everything in this book is what we learned by doing it. Eight years, a hundred-odd contributors, a valley that now expects a magazine. None of it was obvious at the start. All of it is written down here.

For the editor working from a kitchen table. For the photographer who keeps showing up because someone should. For the writer keeping notes no one has asked to read yet.

A town deserves to see itself clearly.

A publication begins as an act of attention — not as a logo, a website or a business plan.

This book is for every small town. Not just West Virginia, not just river towns, not just magazine-style publications. Whether you are building a newsletter in rural Montana, a quarterly broadsheet in a small Midwest county, or a digital digest for a mountain community in Vermont — the principles hold. Elk River Living is the case study. **Your town is the subject.**

Local publications are one of the most direct and durable expressions of civic identity a community can produce. Not a Facebook group, not a podcast, not a news aggregator — but an object, in a hand, that says: *we made this, about us, for us.*

The barriers aren't technical. They never were. The barriers are conceptual: people don't know where to start, they underestimate what it costs in time, and they over-engineer the design before they've written a single sentence of copy. This book is arranged against all three.

[The best local publication
is the one that **actually**
gets made.]

Everything here is oriented toward getting you to a first issue — modest, honest, and worth reading. Scale comes later. Scale is a problem you should be lucky enough to have.

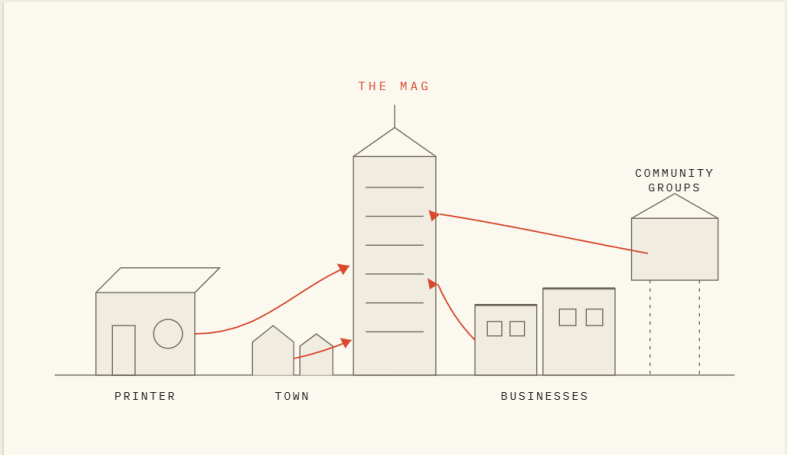


FIG. 02 · THE SYSTEM, WHOLE

Printer, businesses, community groups and the town itself — every arrow points through the publication, and the publication points back.

A publication is not a product the town consumes. It is the thing standing in the middle, carrying value in every direction at once. That is why it survives when a website does not.

The route.

I	Start honest	THREE QUESTIONS	006
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IV	The team	MAKE-OR-BREAK	018
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VII	Community & commerce	THE LOOP	031
VIII	What sustainability looks like	BORING ON PURPOSE	035
CODA	Begin before you're ready	YOURS	037

EIGHT PARTS AND A CODA. EACH ONE ENDS WHERE THE NEXT ONE STARTS.

[Start honest.]

Before you open a design application, before you register a domain, before you ask anyone to write something — answer three questions honestly. They don't need fancy answers. They need true ones.

01 • WHAT IS THIS ACTUALLY FOR?

Not what you'll tell people — what you actually believe. To document a place you love? To build community connection? To support local businesses? To give a platform to voices that aren't being heard? The answer doesn't need to be noble; it needs to be honest. Publications that don't know why they exist tend to fail quietly after two issues.

02 • WHAT CAN YOU SUSTAIN?

Monthly is ambitious. Quarterly is sustainable. Annual is a book. Match the format to your actual available time — not your best-case-scenario time. A publication that ships consistently on a modest schedule earns far more trust than one that burns bright and disappears. *Consistency is the editorial virtue that matters most.*

03 • WHO IS YOUR READER?

Specificity is a gift, not a limitation. A publication for everyone is a publication for no one. “People who live along the Elk River” is a more useful answer than “people in central West Virginia.” The tighter your reader definition, the more precisely you can choose stories, tone and format.

ANSWER THEM OPPOSITE

PAGE 007

These three are load-bearing. Every decision in the next thirty pages — color, type, segments, budget, who gets the final say — is downstream of them.

Answer them badly and quickly rather than well and never. You can revise a wrong answer. You cannot revise a blank.

Three true answers.

Write them here, in this book, in pen.

With these three answered you have the foundation for every editorial and design decision that follows — and the first three lines of your issue N°1, on page 038.

PURPOSE

What is this actually for?

CARRIES TO PAGE 038

CADENCE

What can you sustain?

CARRIES TO PAGE 038

READER

Who is this really for?

CARRIES TO PAGE 038 AND TO THE MISSION, 015

[The identity package.]

Consistency is easier to maintain when there is less to keep track of.

Local publications are often tempted to solve identity with complexity — a dozen fonts, an elaborate logo system, elaborate templates. Resist this. The most important visual characteristic your publication can have is consistency, and consistency is easiest to maintain when there is less to keep track of.

The bare-bones package is **two colors, two fonts and a name**. Five decisions. That is the entire identity, and it is enough to carry ten issues.

Opposite is one town’s answer to all five — not to copy, but so you can see what the finished thing looks like before you start guessing at your own.

Then what you choose here is a *sketch*. Part III is where it gets tested, and where you find out whether you keep it. Sketch anyway — you will decide faster with something on the page than with nothing.

THE FIVE DECISIONS

01	A primary color	010
02	An accent color	010
03	A text font	011
04	A display font	011
05	The name	012
+	Write it down	013

Five colors, two typefaces, built on community character.

Elk River Living developed its identity around the landscape and culture of the Elk River corridor in West Virginia — five colors that reference the river itself, the region’s forests, and the warmth of the communities that line its banks, and two typefaces to carry every word of it.

The system anchors on a deep Bridgewater green as primary, with a brick red as the accent that runs through every segment header bar. The supporting neutrals — a warm tan, an ivory, a pale blue — keep the pages open and inviting without requiring elaborate layout decisions.

Source Serif Pro carries the editorial copy and main headlines; *Source Sans Pro* handles secondary and supplemental text. The consistency of these choices across every issue, every year, is what makes the publication immediately recognizable — and it is why nobody at ERL has argued about a font since 2019.

#3E4E59

#F25652

#D9BB93

#F1F0E2

#C2E7F2

Bridgewater

Brick red ·

Warm tan

Ivory

Pale blue

green · primary

accent

Source Serif Pro

QWERTYUIOP qwertyuiop
ASDFGHJKL asdfghjkl
ZXCVBNM zxcvbnm
1234567890 # @ & \$ © ® ™ ? ! ½

Source Sans Pro

QWERTYUIOP qwertyuiop
ASDFGHJKL asdfghjkl
ZXCVBNM zxcvbnm

While the Elk River Trail at Duck has garnered much of the media spotlight this past year, we would be remiss if we didn't highlight Nottingham's Store that sits on the bank of the Elk River at the Duck Rails-to-Trails Trailhead.

DROP CAP USED IN FIRST PARAGRAPH FOR FEATURE ARTICLES ONLY

While the Elk River Trail at Duck has garnered much of the media spotlight this past year, we would be remiss if we didn't highlight Nottingham's Store that sits on the bank of the Elk River at the Duck Rails-to-Trails Trailhead. 

END OF ARTICLE SIGNIFIER GRAPHIC

THE SPECIMEN SHEET ERL HAS WORKED FROM SINCE ISSUE ONE — TWO FAMILIES, ONE DROP CAP, ONE END-OF-ARTICLE MARK. NOTHING ELSE.

Two colors.

01 · A PRIMARY COLOR

This is your publication’s personality, visible at a distance. It should be distinctive — not generic navy or stock red — but grounded in your community’s character: the landscape, the local architecture, the seasonal traditions. It will headline your name and anchor everything else.

02 · AN ACCENT COLOR

The pointing color: pull quotes, segment bars, link states, the call to act. It should contrast with your primary and hold up at small sizes. You do not need a third color in year one — add depth only after the two-color discipline has proven it can hold an issue together.

A note on method: don’t open a color picker. Go outside. The two colors are already in the place — in the water, the brick, the hills in November, the paint on the feed store. *Name them after where you found them.* A color with a story attached is a color the whole team will defend.

PAINT CHIPS · FILL THESE IN BY HAND

PRIMARY · NAME IT AFTER YOUR PLACE

ACCENT · THE POINTING COLOR

HEX / INK

HEX / INK

THE ONES YOU TRIED AND REJECTED

KEEP THEM. YEAR THREE HAS A USE FOR ONE OF THESE.

Two fonts.

03 · A TEXT FONT

Readable at small sizes, comfortable in long passages — this is where your words actually live, the other 95% of every page. A well-drawn serif with a complete family carries body copy and captions without once calling attention to itself. Choose reliable over trendy: the face you can still stand to read by issue nine is the right one.

04 · A DISPLAY FONT – YOUR NAME’S VOICE

For being seen: the masthead, headlines, the cover. It should harmonise with your text font, not compete with it – legible large, clean small, distinctive enough to be yours.

Test before you commit. Set one real paragraph — not lorem, a paragraph you actually intend to print — at the size you will actually print it. Then photocopy it. If it survives a photocopy at 9 point it will survive your printer.

TEXT FONT · WRITE THE NAME, THEN SET A REAL PARAGRAPH IN IT

NINE ON THIRTEEN • THE SIZE IT WILL REALLY BE

DISPLAY FONT • SET YOUR PUBLICATION'S NAME IN IT

LARGE. SAY IT OUT LOUD WHILE YOU LOOK AT IT.

The name may be enough.

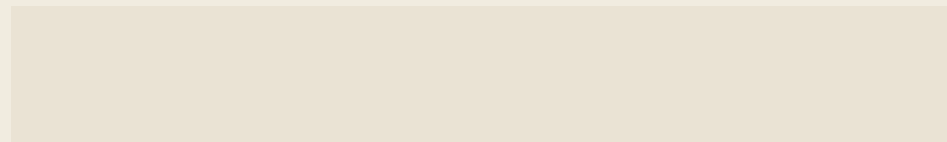
05 · THE WORDMARK — AND THE LOW-HANGING FRUIT

Your publication's name, set with care in your display font, *is* your logo. For a local publication the name itself — well-spaced, properly weighted, reproduced consistently — is the identity. Don't spend six weeks on a logo before you have a single piece of content.

The actual low-hanging fruit: your community already has visual symbols that carry meaning — a river, a landmark, a local animal, a plant. These are earned marks. Use them only if you can render them cleanly and they connect genuinely to your content.

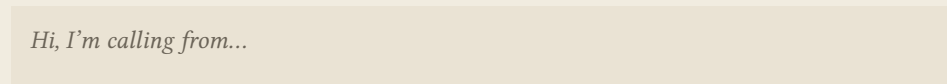
And the name itself: say it on the phone. “Hi, I’m calling from _____.” If you wince, it’s the wrong name. If the person on the other end already knows what it is, it’s the right one.

YOUR PUBLICATION'S NAME

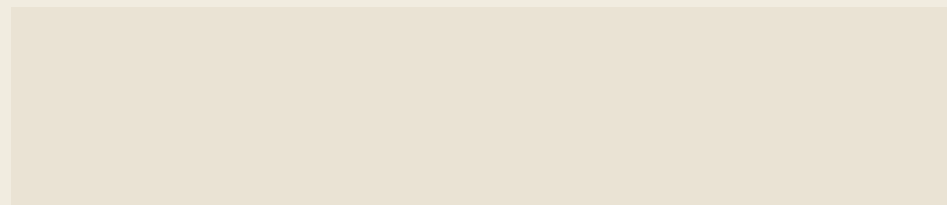


CARRIES TO PAGE 038 · THIS IS YOUR MASTHEAD

SAY IT ON THE PHONE · WHAT YOU ACTUALLY SAID



AN EARNED MARK, IF YOU HAVE ONE



OPTIONAL. A RIVER, A RIDGE, AN ANIMAL, A PLANT. DRAW IT BADLY HERE FIRST.

Write it down. Even briefly.

+ · DOCUMENT IT

A one-page style reference — the colors, the font names and sizes, a sample header and body paragraph — is worth making before your first issue. You will reference it when you are tired, when someone else is helping, and when you are building issue seven and cannot remember which green you chose.

This is that page. Fill it in and the identity stops living in your head, where it drifts, and starts living on paper, where it doesn't.

+ · PUT YOUR PLACE ON THE COVER

Optional, and the cheapest good idea in this book: give a location — town, state or ZIP — and let the cover carry the place itself. Public satellite imagery, printed in your primary color, is free and it is unmistakably yours.

STYLE REFERENCE · ONE PAGE, KEPT WHERE THE TEAM CAN FIND IT

PRIMARY COLOR

ACCENT COLOR

TEXT FONT + SIZE

DISPLAY FONT + SIZE

BODY LEADING

MARGINS

WHERE THIS LIVES

YOUR PLACE

TOWN, STATE

ZIP

[Now earn it.]

Everything you just chose was a sketch. The mission decides whether you keep it.

Two colors, two fonts, a name — provisional, all of it, and that is exactly right. Identity comes first in practice because it is the part people can picture, and picturing it is what gets a publication started. But a sketch is not a decision. This is where it becomes one.

A mission statement does three things: it tells contributors what you're making, it tells readers what to expect, and it tells you — six months from now, when you're tired — whether a potential story belongs in the publication.

The requirement: **one or two sentences**. Specific enough that someone could read it and know what kind of story does *not* belong in your publication. If you can't say no to anything, you haven't written a mission statement — you've written a press release.

RE: SPECIFICITY

To. The. Point. A mission statement should be uncomfortable in its specificity.

If yours could be pasted onto another town's magazine without anyone noticing, it is not finished.

Build it in four parts, then cut it to two sentences.

The purpose of

THE PUBLICATION

is to

WHAT IT DOES

for

YOUR READER, FROM PAGE 007

so that

WHY IT MATTERS

Then cut everything that isn't load-bearing. What remains is your mission.

MISSION STATEMENT

We exist to...

CARRIES TO PAGE 038

WHAT BELONGS

WHAT DOES NOT

IF THIS BOX IS EMPTY, GO BACK AND START AGAIN.

READ IT OUT LOUD · WHAT DID YOU CUT?

WHATEVER YOU CUT AND DID NOT MISS WAS NEVER THE MISSION.

A mission that can say no.

Celebrate the people, places and businesses of the region — a mirror to reflect its character and culture.

Notice what this does. It names the subject (people, places, businesses). It names the tone (celebrate). And it gives the publication a purpose beyond mere documentation — instil pride of place. Every story in every issue can be tested against it.

TESTED AGAINST THE STATEMENT

A story about a local restaurant	YES
A profile of the woman who runs the feed store	YES
Eight years of high-school football scores	YES
A national political opinion piece	NO
A regional chain’s press release	NO
Anything written to flatter an advertiser	NO

SIX MONTHS IN, THIS TABLE IS THE ONLY EDITORIAL MEETING YOU WILL NEED.

Test every choice.

Four questions. Use them on the color, the name, the cover, the segment you are not sure about, and the story you want to run but probably shouldn't.

Copy these four onto the inside of your template file. They are the whole of Parts I through III compressed into something you can run in fifteen seconds while a contributor waits on the phone.

PURPOSE	Does the choice help the publication do its work?
PLACE	Could this belong somewhere else, unchanged?
READER	Will the intended reader recognize themselves in it?
REPEATABILITY	Can the team maintain it by issue nine?

THREE YESES AND A NO IS A NO.

[Specific people.]

A local publication can be made by one person. It can also be made by a tight team of three or four. What it cannot survive is a committee.

01 · AN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF — OR EQUIVALENT

Someone has to make final decisions about what goes in and what gets cut. This is not a democratic process. The editor's taste and judgment is what gives the publication a voice. Without a single decider you get committee writing — pleasant to everyone, interesting to no one. This person should also be the one who knows the community deeply. Outsiders can contribute; they rarely make good editors for local publications.

02 · ONE DESIGNER, HOWEVER MODEST

You don't need a professional. You need someone who has set up your template correctly, understands the style reference on page 013, and can execute it consistently under deadline. If you can do both jobs yourself, do them. Splitting them between two people who communicate well is also fine. Having four opinions on every layout decision is not.

The team is the part of this book most likely to be decided by who happens to be standing in your kitchen. That is fine. Just write down what they agreed to before anyone is annoyed about it.

Engaged, not polished.

03 · CONTRIBUTORS — NOT STAFF

Build a network of community contributors who submit to recurring segments. A local gardener for the garden segment. A physical therapist for the health column. A local history enthusiast for the historical retrospective. These contributors don’t need to be writers — they need to be engaged community members who have something worth saying. Your editor’s job is to help their voice come through on the page.

At ERL that local gardener is Laura Boggess Shafer, who farms with her family near Clendenin. She writes The Elk’s Garden every month — gardening, canning, preserving — and every month her boys compete to see who made it into the print or web version of ERL. With Laura they have become unofficial “mascots” of The Elk’s Garden. *That is the whole argument for contributors, in one family.*

04 · TOO MANY COOKS

The most common failure mode for community publications isn’t lack of interest — it’s governance collapse. When everyone is an equal stakeholder in every decision, nothing ships. Be honest early about who holds decision-making authority. This can be communicated warmly: “**I make the final call, and I will always listen**” is a perfectly acceptable editorial structure. Enshrine it before the first conflict, not during.

INITIAL RESPONSIBILITY MAP

EDITORIAL DECISION — THE FINAL CALL

Owner · or an unresolved gap

DESIGN + PRODUCTION

Owner · or an unresolved gap

CONTRIBUTOR CONTACT

Owner · or an unresolved gap

PRINT + DISTRIBUTION

Owner · or an unresolved gap

MONEY IN, MONEY OUT

Owner · or an unresolved gap

A GAP WRITTEN DOWN IS A JOB. A GAP LEFT BLANK IS AN ARGUMENT IN MARCH.



CYNDI TAWNEY
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



JOSH TAWNEY
CREATIVE DIRECTOR



KEN TAWNEY
OPERATIONS



KATHERYNE POPP
LAYOUT & DESIGN



LAURA BOGGESS
SHAFER
THE ELK'S GARDEN



JILL MULLINS
PHOTOGRAPHER

A family of three, one Katheryne, and a valley of contributors.

Eight years of Elk River Living, made by these people. Four are the standing team, one writes The Elk's Garden every month, and six are photographers who live in the valley and shoot it because they love it.

This is what “a tight team and a network” actually looks like — not an org chart. A group of neighbors with assignments.

Nobody here quit their job to do this. That is the point.



AUBRIE ABBOTT
PHOTOGRAPHER



SCOTT ABBOTT
PHOTOGRAPHER



CRAIG ALLISON
PHOTOGRAPHER



JANET SIX
PHOTOGRAPHER



TIM CUNNINGHAM
PHOTOGRAPHER

Your masthead.

Names, not roles. Write the ones you actually have.

Three blanks filled in is a publication. Ten is a luxury. One is still a publication — write your own name on the first line and keep going. Print the masthead in issue one, even if it is short. People who see their name in a magazine tell other people, and that is how the second column fills up.

THE PEOPLE YOU HAVE

NAME

ROLE · WHAT THEY ACTUALLY DO

PEOPLE YOU SHOULD ASK, AND HAVEN'T YET

ASK ONE OF THEM THIS WEEK.

[Recurring segments.]

If you take one thing from this book, take this.

Find the two or three things your community already knows itself by — the recipes, the river, the school, the trail — and give each one a masthead and a deadline. That is a segment, and the segments are what make issue nine as achievable as issue one.

You are not inventing an identity here. You are recognizing one. The touchstones are already in the place; a segment is simply a touchstone with a name, a slot in the layout and someone responsible for it.

Everything before this page was preparation. Everything after it is maintenance.

A NOTE ON SCOPE

The examples in this part are ERL's, because they are the ones I can prove. A coastal fishing community, a plains agricultural town, a mountain trail corridor — each has its own version of a cookbook, a history column, a youth beat. *The segment names change. The structure doesn't.*

The feature is the heart. The segments are the engine.

The hardest part of publishing consistently isn't the big feature story. It's filling the rest of the pages, issue after issue, without burning out your core team or recycling the same material.

Recurring segments solve this. They are a predictable architecture that tells readers what to expect, tells contributors exactly what they're being asked for, and gives editors a reliable template to fill each cycle.

Each segment should have a name, a consistent place in the layout, a defined scope and a reliable contributor pool. Once established, segments essentially produce themselves — you're curating and editing, not originating from scratch each time.

Start with fewer than you think you need. Three to five is a reasonable first-issue target. Each should meet two tests: **you know who will contribute to it**, and **you can imagine it running for ten issues** without exhausting the subject.

RE: METABOLISM

Segments are the publication's metabolism. The feature story is the heart. The segments keep everything breathing between beats.

Six archetypes follow. They are not a menu to copy — they are the six jobs a small publication has to cover. Find your town's version of each, and you have an engine.

ARCHETYPE 01 • THE COMMUNITY CHRONICLE

Events, milestones, local news briefs. Births, openings, achievements, closings. This segment writes itself if you have a few community correspondents who know what’s happening. Its value is as a reference — people save issues specifically to look up what happened when.

ARCHETYPE 02 • THE HISTORICAL RETROSPECTIVE

Every community has more history than it remembers. This segment requires a contributor who loves research and has access to archives, photographs or oral tradition. Even a single well-researched piece about a local building, a family or an event creates a reason for long-time residents to subscribe and new residents to understand where they’ve moved.

These two are the cheapest segments to start and the hardest to stop. Once a town knows there is a page where its news is recorded, it starts sending you the news.

AROUND THE ELK



MOLLY MOOCHER TIME!

Jodie Pettry Toel, Damien Hall, and Timmy Toel enjoyed some quality time foraging for molly moochers, a true Appalachian morsel. Other common names for this morsel are sponge mushroom and waffle mushrooms. These delicacies of the woods appear in early spring and are a delicious dish. Jodie said, "I took them for at least 24 hours in salt water and rinse them really well. Then I roll them in flour, add my favorite seasoning, and fry them in a little butter or some people prefer oil."

MAY 2026

Around the Elk — the local beat. Morels in April, the brewery’s live-music calendar, who opened and who closed. Every issue gets a time-stamp.

the ELK REFLECTS

COUNTRY ROADS, WV FLASHBACK

This photo was taken near Crude and was shared by Richard Gaskins.



In 1921, Elk River Road was only as wide as a horse. Then Brown & Floyd Contractors got the job of widening it to its present width. G. J. Floyd, now retired, says it was the first widening ever of the road by contractors and that his firm improved 11 miles of the dirt road, using wooden bar-drawn horse-drawn engines and steam shovels. The project was taken along about Crude, he reports. Brown & Floyd was in business in 1921 and still does some paving.

APR 2024

The Elk River Community Museum shared a great photo from 1921. According to the article, the Elk River Road was only as wide as a buggy but then Brown & Floyd Contractors were tasked with the job of widening the road to its present width. G. J. Floyd said it was the first road widening ever done in a road in Clendenin! The article states that 11 miles of dirt road were improved, using wooden horse-drawn dump-bed wagons and steam shovels.

The Elk Reflects — picks one moment in the region’s history and revisits it. Appalachian roots keep it fed issue after issue.

YOUR VERSIONS:

ARCHETYPE 03 • THE PRACTICAL SEGMENT

Gardening, cooking, health, outdoor recreation — content people read because it is useful to them today. These segments draw in contributors who have specific expertise and readers who might not otherwise pick up a community magazine. They are the pragmatic foundation of a mixed-content publication.

ARCHETYPE 04 • THE YOUTH & EDUCATION BEAT

Acknowledging students — academic awards, athletic achievements, creative work — guarantees that parents and teachers pay attention. This segment also positions the publication as an institutional asset to local schools, opening doors for in-school distribution and educational partnerships.

A practical segment is the one people cut out and stick to the refrigerator. A youth segment is the one a grandmother buys four copies of. Neither is a small thing.

ERL • EVIDENCE • USEFUL + YOUNG

the ELK'S GARDEN
SUMMER SQUASH & CUCUMBERS

By Laura Boggess Shafer. Laura and her family manage a family farm in the Shenandoah Valley, keeping a tradition of raising and trading local, seasonal produce. Along the way, she's growing, canning, preserving, and more with 6th graders.

COUSINS IN THE GARDEN
Summer squash and cucumbers have a lot in common because they belong to the same botanical family, Cucurbitaceae. Both plants grow on trailing or vining stems, produce bright yellow flowers, and develop from pollinated flowers into delicious vegetables. They also have soft, edible seeds contained within a hollow seed cavity.

One thing they cannot do without is pollinators. Bees play a critical role in transferring pollen from flower to flower. Without bees, there would be no cucumbers or squash to harvest. Protecting bees and other pollinators helps ensure a productive garden season.

GROWING SUMMER SQUASH IN WEST VIRGINIA
Raising squash in West Virginia is highly rewarding. Our warm summers and favorable growing conditions allow these plants to thrive.

Wait until all danger of frost has passed and soil temperatures reach 60-70°F before planting. Choose a location with full sun, rich well-drained soil, and water consistently at the base of the plant. Use foliage can increase the likelihood of powdery mildew.

Squash grows best in soil with a pH between 6.0 and 6.7. West Virginia gardeners can take advantage of free soil testing through the WVU Soil Testing Laboratory.

Many gardeners recommend planting squash in "hills" or mounded rows, to improve drainage and help warm the soil. Some plant seeds directly into hills, while others, like my husband Frank, plant in rows and fill the soil around the plants later. For a continuous harvest throughout the season, consider planting one crop in May or June and a second crop in July or August.

HARVEST EARLY AND OFTEN
Summer squash is best harvested when it is 6 to 10 inches long and still has a tender skin. Frequent picking encourages plants to continue producing. Allow any squash to grow too large on the vine can drain the plant's energy and reduce overall production. Check your plants daily during peak season because they grow remarkably fast!

PHOTO: JANE DODD

The Elk's Garden • *practical* — *written every month by Laura Boggess Shafer, who farms with her family near Clendenin. Gardening, canning, preserving. One contributor, one plot, twelve months of it.*

the ELK'S STUDENTS

SOFTBALL
Team AA Region 2 Champions again! Seventh straight WV State Softball Tournament appearance for the Lady Hokies where they proudly captured third place!

BASEBALL
AA Region 2 Section 2 Champions after a clean sweep against Lewis County and AA Region 2 Champ! Headed to the States!

TRACK & FIELD
Congrats to the Hokies for a great performance at the State Track and Field Meet in Charleston. John Jones placed 3th in long jump with a distance of 18-0.75 feet and Abigail Smith placed 1st in high jump with a height of 4'10". Jenna Brown placed 2nd in the 100, 160, and 300. She also set new school records in all 3 events. The 4 x 200 team of Anna King, Abigail Smith, Carter McCarroll and Emma Correll set a new school record with a time of 1:14.32. The school's 400 meter record has stood since 1987. The Lady Hokies Track Team finished 1st overall in AA. Haver's State qualifiers included: Jay White, Champion, 200m dash; Jay White, runner-up, 100m dash; and John Jones 1st place in 200m dash, long jump, and 4 x 200 m relay. The girls have captured the regional runner-up title. Their state qualifiers were Jenna Brown, champion, 100m; and Emma Correll, Abigail Smith, runner-up 400 relay and 4 x 800 relay runner-up and Emma Correll, 1st place, 400m dash, 4 x 200 relay and 4 x 400 relay, 1st place.

FOOTBALL
Congrats to Alex Hartman and Zachary Greer who were selected to represent EHS in the 2024 North-South Football Classic. The event will be held on June 15, 2024, 12 Noon, at South Charleston High School.

PHOTO: JANE DODD

The Elk's Students • *youth & education* — *ERL's editor-in-chief works directly with students on writing and journalism.*

the ELK'S COOKBOOK

The Elk's Cookbook • *practical* — *a resident's recipe every month, the segment readers ask to keep.*

YOUR VERSIONS:

ARCHETYPE 05 • THE COMMUNITY SUBMISSION – DO NOT SKIP

A standing invitation for readers to appear in their own magazine — photographs, letters, recollections, any format the town produces. This is crucial for reasons that compound: it puts a town member’s name and personality into print, they tell their friends, family and co-workers, and those people go to the site — or subscribe. The submission segment is how readership becomes membership.

ARCHETYPE 06 • THE INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Every town has organizations that already produce information on a schedule — a library’s calendar, a trail foundation’s updates, a historical society’s programs. They have something worth publishing and no reliable way to reach the people who would act on it. A standing page trades your audience for their content, and because it runs on their operating rhythm rather than anyone’s goodwill in a given month, it is the segment least likely to run dry.

These pages are structured data, not prose — dates, times, ages, hours. Design the template once and the recurring work becomes placement instead of writing.

Be honest about how these start. Someone at your table probably already sits on that board — small publications are made by people who are at every meeting anyway. If it is not you, it is someone you know.

AND THEN • EXPECT THEM TO EVOLVE

We didn’t expect The Elk’s Journal to become a popular place for local authors to submit excerpts of their most recent work — it earned that role, and we let it keep it.

And expect readers to adopt favorites. People began writing to ask for the recipe page as a PDF so they could save them — so we added a download link to the site. The month’s recipe eventually got its own cost estimator, a little widget that totals what the dish costs to make. None of that was in the plan. All of it came from readers loving a segment enough to ask it for more.



Reader Submission — a standing invitation turns readership into membership. Readers love submitting photographs of the area most of all.

At the Library — the Kanawha County Public Library’s Clendenin and Elkview calendars, every month. Trail Mix runs the same way with the Elk River Trail Foundation.

The Elk’s Cookbook, in the wild — the segment that grew a download link and a cost estimator because readers asked.

Say yes to these asks. They are the clearest signal you will ever get about what your publication is actually for.

Name three to five.

Each one needs a defined scope, a likely contributor, and enough subject matter to return for ten issues.

If you can't name the contributor, it isn't a segment yet — it's an idea. Write the idea down anyway, in the last column, and go find the person.

Three real segments beat six aspirational ones. You can add in issue four.

SEGMENT NAME	WHO CONTRIBUTES	TEN ISSUES?

THE FIRST THREE CARRY TO PAGE 039

[The real cost.]

The missing line item is almost always time.

Most guides to starting a publication give you a budget line for printing and a budget line for web hosting and call it done. That accounting is honest as far as it goes — but it misses the line item that actually determines whether a publication survives: **your time**.

Before the first issue ships, walk the ledger opposite. Not as a deterrent, but as a calibration. Every item on it is solvable — each one just needs a plan before you start, not after you're three issues in and already exhausted.

RE: THE LEDGER

The realities should only deter you if they truly should — no money, no content, no hours. Otherwise they're just the terrain.

Nobody has ever finished this page and felt worse. Most people finish it and realize the number was smaller than the dread.

The ledger.

SEVEN LINE ITEMS · ALL SOLVABLE · FILL THE RIGHT COLUMN IN PENCIL, BECAUSE IT WILL CHANGE

LINE ITEM	WHAT IT ACTUALLY COSTS YOU	YOUR NUMBER
01	Pages How many per issue? More pages means more content to source, more design time and more printing cost. Start with fewer than you think you need. <i>You can always add.</i>	
02	Paper Stock weight and finish affect both cost and feel. Newsprint is affordable and nostalgic. Matte coated reads as intentional. Gloss can cheapen photography. Ask your printer for samples before you commit.	
03	Printer Local offset builds community relationships and supports the local economy, but requires larger runs. Print-on-demand offers flexibility at a higher per-unit cost. Digital scales down well for test runs. Know your minimum viable quantity first.	
04	Delivery Drop locations, subscriptions, mail, digital — each has a different cost and labor profile. Build the distribution network <i>before</i> issue one. At ERL, Ken and Cyndi deliver much of the run themselves; the magazine is free, and hand delivery keeps it that way.	
05	Website Probably yes, eventually. But a publication does not need a full editorial site to exist. A simple page with subscription information, back issues and contact details is enough to start. <i>Don't build the website instead of the magazine.</i>	
06	Design If you're not the designer, factor design costs per issue. If you are, factor the time as an honest opportunity cost. Building a clean template once reduces this dramatically — the first issue is the investment; the rest is execution.	
07	Your time The most underestimated line item. Editing, coordinating contributors, managing printing, handling subscriptions, social, email — this is where publications fail. Map the hours honestly. <i>Then add 40%.</i> If the number still works, proceed.	

Then add forty percent.

Add up the hours you just wrote down. Multiply by 1.4. That is the real number.

The forty percent is not pessimism. It is the phone calls, the file that won’t export, the contributor who needs one more week, the printer’s proof that comes back wrong, and the two hours you will spend looking for a photograph you know you have.

If the number still works: proceed, and stop deliberating. If it doesn’t: cut pages, lengthen the cadence, or find one more person. Those are the only three levers, and all three are fine.

PRINTING

quantity · stock · binding

DISTRIBUTION

delivery · postage · pickup

PEOPLE

paid · volunteered · exchanged

HOURS, HONESTLY

per issue

× 1.4

the real number

CARRIES TO PAGE 038

[Community & commerce.]

The businesses in your pages are not revenue with a logo. They are co-authors of the same project — a town worth reading about.

A local publication is a microeconomic asset. This is not incidental — it is structural. The editorial relationship between a publication and its local business community is one of the most durable models for small-press sustainability.

Local businesses advertise in local publications because the readers are their customers. Unlike digital advertising, a physical local publication has a captive, targeted, trusted audience by definition. The subscriber lives in the same place as the business. The trust a well-made local publication earns with its readers extends, partially, to the advertisers who appear in it.

Do not expect them to arrive knowing how to be advertisers, either. If you had asked most of the businesses along the Elk River what their advertising budget was, they would have laughed — they had never needed one, because the community had always carried their word for them. So ERL met them halfway: any business that agreed to advertise got its ad designed for free, revisions and all, and kept the finished files for anything else they wanted. The rates, too, were set to what the valley could actually carry. More than one owner laughed at the first proof — they had never expected to see their business represented that way. In a town without ad budgets, the design is your half of the exchange.

Which means your editorial integrity directly affects your advertising value. If you take bad ads, write puff pieces or compromise stories to protect sponsors, you erode the trust that makes your platform worth advertising in.

Celebrate them, show up to their ribbon cuttings, and mean it. *The economics follow the sincerity, not the reverse.* Every publisher who has tried it the other way around can tell you how that went.



The healthiest relationship is one where the publication actively covers local business as a beat — not just in advertising pages, but in editorial. A story about a new bakery opening, a profile of a long-running hardware store, coverage of an economic development project: these serve readers as news and businesses as visibility simultaneously.

That overlap is the loop. It is also the reason a good local publication is very hard to compete with — you cannot buy your way into a relationship that was built by showing up.

A test for the whole diagram: if you removed the advertising entirely, would the business still want to be in the magazine? If yes, you have built the loop. If no, you have built a circular.

FIG. 07 · THE MICROECONOMY LOOP

Coverage flows one way, support flows back, and nobody is the product. The healthiest version of this diagram is the one where you cannot tell which arrow started first.



Fig. 08 · Business appears as part of the community's fabric, not as a separate commercial register. Features run alongside community stories, with the same care and the same voice.



Fig. 09 · a piece of home, mailed. *The magazine is free in the valley — and \$50 a year brings it to the mailboxes of everyone who had to leave for work but never really left. The envelope announces itself: it's here!*

“These businesses care a great deal about the community.”

That orientation — seeing businesses as community actors, not just commercial entities — keeps the editorial relationship clean and honest. It also means the ad conversation is never the first conversation.

The envelope is worth studying on its own. It is the cheapest loyalty product ERL has ever made: a subscription that is really a homesickness subscription, sold to people who moved away and still want to know who died, who married and what opened on Main Street.

[Draw the line *early*.]

ERL runs no politics and no religion. Your town may need a different line — but it needs *a* line.

Ours is a choice about inclusion, not avoidance — the magazine should be the one place in town where everyone is simply a neighbor. What it holds up to the valley is the good already happening in it, reflected back month after month until people can’t help but see it. If your publication is a church newsletter, write the opposite rule. **Know your audience; draw the line early; enforce it warmly.**

OUR LINE

We do not run...

WRITE IT BEFORE THE FIRST CONFLICT, NOT DURING.

RELATIONSHIP MAP · MAKE THE EXCHANGE VISIBLE

RELATIONSHIP	WHAT THEY GIVE	WHAT THEY GET BACK	NEXT CONTACT
Nottingham's Store	A quarter-page, every issue	A feature in year one; his morels in April	Before the June proof

THE FIRST ROW IS OURS, FILLED IN, SO THE SHAPE IS CLEAR. THE REST ARE YOURS. NOBODY ON THIS PAGE IS A “SPONSOR.”

[Make the next issue possible.]

*A publication is sustainable when it can produce the next issue without a crisis.
That’s the whole bar.*

Not profitable. Not growing. Not award-winning. Just: **the next issue happens**, more or less on schedule, without someone having a breakdown to make it happen.

The systems that produce sustainability are boring to describe but decisive in practice: contributor agreements, editorial calendars, template files, a submission inbox, a clear ad booking process. Each of these, built once and maintained, saves hours per issue indefinitely.

01 · THE EDITORIAL CALENDAR

A simple document listing your upcoming issues, their themes and their deadlines. Share it with contributors six weeks ahead. Follow it imperfectly. Revise it quarterly. Having a calendar — even an imperfect one — converts the publication from a series of crises into a series of manageable sprints. Seasonal themes generate structure naturally: a spring gardening focus, a back-to-school issue, a holiday community feature.

NEXT FOUR ISSUES

THEME

DEADLINE

The boring systems are the whole trick.

02 · THE TEMPLATE, MAINTAINED

Your design template is a piece of infrastructure. Treat it like one. Update it when needed, don’t improvise around it under deadline, and make sure anyone who touches it understands what is fixed and what is flexible. A broken template is the most efficient way to turn a manageable deadline into an emergency. Master pages with locked elements and unlocked content areas prevent the drift that accumulates over years. Version them.

03 · THE CONTRIBUTOR RELATIONSHIP

Treat contributors as collaborators, not vendors. Send a thank-you note when something runs. Acknowledge their work in the issue. Give them lead time. Ask for feedback. The difference between a contributor who submits once and one who has been with you for five years is almost entirely a function of how they were treated after the first piece ran.

A publication that has been running for eight years has usually solved the contributor problem. The segments become institutions; the contributors become part of the identity.

BUILT ONCE · TICK WHEN IT EXISTS

- ☐ The editorial calendar, shared
- ☐ The template file, versioned
- ☐ A submission inbox that someone reads
- ☐ A contributor thank-you habit
- ☐ A written ad rate and booking process
- ☐ The style reference from page 013
- ☐ A list of where the copies go

SEVEN THINGS. NONE OF THEM ARE CREATIVE. ALL OF THEM BUY BACK HOURS.

Begin before you're ready.

The most common failure mode for aspiring local publishers isn't lack of resources or talent. It's waiting for the conditions to be exactly right before starting. The logo isn't good enough yet. There aren't enough contributors yet. The template needs one more round of refinement.

There is a publication in your community that doesn't exist yet, about people and places and businesses that aren't being written about, read by neighbors who would subscribe immediately if someone simply made the thing. You have, in all likelihood, everything you need to begin a first draft of it right now.

The bar for a local publication is not *the New Yorker*. The bar is: did someone who lives here make something worth reading about where we live? That is achievable. That is worth doing. That is, over time, how a place comes to know and value itself.

[Start simple.
Start honest.
Start **now**.]

Turn the page. Everything you answered is about to be one object, and it will be the first time you see it whole.

Issue N^o1.

COPY YOUR OWN ANSWERS UP FROM THE PAGES BEHIND YOU. NOTHING HERE WAS PRINTED FOR YOU – THIS PAGE IS THE ONE YOU MAKE.

THE PUBLICATION

FROM PAGE 012

PURPOSE

FROM PAGE 007

CADENCE

FROM PAGE 007

READER

FROM PAGE 007

WHO MAKES THE FINAL CALL

FROM PAGE 019

MISSION

FROM PAGE 015

SEGMENTS · 01 · 02 · 03

FROM PAGE 027

HOURS PER ISSUE, × 1.4

FROM PAGE 030

THE FIRST CONTRIBUTOR YOU WILL CALL

FROM PAGE 021

THE DATE ISSUE NO. 1 GOES TO THE PRINTER

THE ONLY LINE ON THIS PAGE NOBODY ELSE CAN WRITE FOR YOU

The cover.

Rough it out here, at the shape it will really be.

Your name across the top in the display font you chose on page 011. One line underneath saying who it is for. Three segments down the side so a stranger can see, in two seconds, what is inside.

That is a cover. Everything else — the photograph, the color, the price that is probably nothing — is decoration on top of those four decisions, and you have already made all four.

Draw it badly. Pencil, ten minutes, no software. The version you sketch here is the one you will still recognize in issue nine.

THEN GO CALL THE FIRST CONTRIBUTOR.

THEIR NAME IS ON PAGE 021, AND THEY ARE ALREADY EXPECTING TO BE ASKED.

ISSUE NO. 1 · EST. _____

THE MASTHEAD · YOUR NAME, IN YOUR DISPLAY FONT

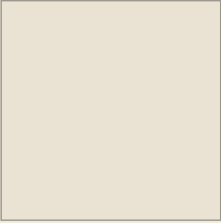
THE LINE UNDER IT · WHO THIS IS FOR

SEGMENT 01 · NAME, THEN ONE LINE

SEGMENT 02 · NAME, THEN ONE LINE

SEGMENT 03 · NAME, THEN ONE LINE

FREE · TAKE ONE



YOUR PLACE

ACTUAL PROPORTION OF A 8.5 × 11 COVER



[Start simple. Start honest. Start now.]

The publication does not need to be perfect. It needs to exist, return, and pay attention.

USE & PERMISSIONS · VERSION 2.14 · 2026

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