

The Walkley Awards

Wisdom and Inspiration · By Simon Townsend · 3 min read

The Walkley Awards are Australian journalism's most prestigious honours. They were founded in 1956 by Sir William Gaston Walkley, a New Zealand-born oilman who had made his fortune with Ampol and wanted to give something back to the journalism community that he felt had treated him well over a long commercial career.

The first Walkley Award was presented in 1956 to Jim Macdougall of The Daily Mirror, for a story about the Hungarian uprising. Since then the Walkleys have grown into a suite of more than thirty awards covering every form and format of Australian journalism, from breaking news to long-form documentary, cartooning to photography, investigative reporting to podcasting.

Who runs them

The Walkley Foundation is an independent body that administers the awards, runs the Walkley Journalism Hall of Fame, and maintains significant programs around press freedom, ethics, and journalism education. The Foundation is funded by a mix of philanthropy, sponsorship, and industry partnerships, and is headquartered in Sydney.

The Foundation's CEO at the time of writing is Shona Martyn. The judging panels rotate each year and draw from senior working journalists, editors, and academics.

What the Walkleys reward

There are several tiers:

The Gold Walkley is the night's top prize, given to the single most outstanding piece of journalism across all categories in the year. Winners are chosen from the category winners.

Category Walkleys cover specific formats: print feature writing, short-form broadcast news, investigative journalism, photojournalism, cartooning, podcasting, business journalism, sports journalism, and more.

Specialised awards include the Gold Quill (for print), the Nikon photography awards, and category-specific sponsorships from organisations including the National Press Club, the ABC Alumni, and the Foxtel group.

The Walkley Book Award. Separate category for non-fiction books, announced at a separate ceremony earlier in the year.

The Mid-Year Celebration of Journalism. A more recent ceremony held each June, honouring press freedom, regional reporting, and beginner-level work.

The Women in Media Awards, administered through the Foundation, recognise work by women journalists across Australia.

How entries work

Entries typically open in July and close in September. Any working journalist, freelancer or staffer, can enter work that was published or broadcast in the previous twelve months. Entry fees apply, with discounts for MEAA members, students and regional journalists.

The short-list is announced in October or November. The winners are announced at a black-tie ceremony in late November or early December.

Work can be entered in multiple categories. A strong investigative piece might be entered for Investigative Journalism, for Print Feature, and for the Gold Walkley short-list.

The Walkleys as a signal

A Walkley win is a significant career event. It lifts your profile. It gets attention from editors you previously could not reach. It appears on your CV for the rest of your working life. Hall of Fame induction is the senior version of the same signal.

The awards are not the whole story, though. Plenty of distinguished Australian journalists have never won a Walkley, and plenty of Walkley winners produced their best work before or after the award. The signal is real, but the absence of the signal is not the opposite.

Criticism and context

The Walkleys have been criticised over the years for the usual reasons: that big-newsroom entries have more resources to produce polished submissions than regional or freelance work; that the same outlets tend to be short-listed year after year; that the ceremony has drifted toward a commercial sponsorship event. The Foundation has responded with category changes, new regional awards, and the Mid-Year Celebration.

For most working journalists the Walkleys remain the industry benchmark. Winning one matters. Judging at one matters. Attending one is where the Australian journalism community meets itself once a year.

Simon's connection

Simon never won a Walkley. He was nominated more than once. He was also a judge for several years in the children's and family categories. He was clear in private about what he thought of awards in general: the work is the thing, the trophy is the courtesy of the industry. He was even clearer in public: congratulations were generous, criticism was tough but fair.

If you are a young journalist, the best use of the Walkleys is to read the winning work. Each year's short-list is on walkleys.com. Read every winner for the last ten years. It is the best continuing-education program in Australian journalism, and it is free.

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.