

## Media Literacy: Where News Comes From

**Rationale/Main Concept:** Where does news come from? How do you know if it's reliable? After studying examples of news stories and charting the sources of information, students stage a mock press conference to experience the process and challenges of effectively communicating and disseminating information. By charting the sources of information in a news story, students understand where the information in the news comes from and how it is disseminated.

**Objectives** – Students will understand:

- How reporters gather and communicate information.
- What a press conference is and how it works.

**Time:** 30-minute worksheet (can be completed as homework) and 45 minutes for classroom discussion and activity

**Materials:**

- Handout 3-1: "Where News Comes From" (one per student, included in this packet).
- Handout 3-2: "Preparing for a Press Conference" (half of the class will need the "Press" version and half of the class will need the "Governor's Office" version, included in this packet).

**Procedure:**

- Tell students they're going to explore where information comes from after a major event and how it travels.
- To begin, ask: Where do reporters get the information they use in their news stories? (Possible ideas: event participants, bystanders, experts, public documents, anonymous sources, politicians, etc.)
- Tell students they're going to complete a worksheet that will help them track specific examples of how reporters get the information for their stories.
- Have all students complete Handout 1-3 in class (individually or in groups) or as homework. They will need to consult newspapers in print or online and/or social media to find a written news source (article, blog post, etc.) about an event relevant to their lives.
- After students complete the worksheet, discuss their answers. Possible prompts include:
  - What sources did journalists use in their reports?
  - When were you unable to identify the source of the information? Why do you think this was the case?
  - Do you trust some sources more than others? Why or why not?
- Explain to students that today they're going to stage a press conference. One way reporters can gather information is by attending a press conference. Ask students to define a press conference.

- A press conference is a prearranged gathering with news reporters, held by a government official/dignitary/notable personality, to gain publicity, fulfill a request from the press or share needed information with the public.
  - What do the officials who call a press conference want to achieve? (They want to share information with the public, using the press/journalists as a means of reaching the general public.)
  - What do the attending reporters want to get out of a press conference? (They want to find out about new developments in a story and gather fresh information that they can then report to the public.) Keep in mind that members of the public generally don't or can't attend press conferences, so we rely on reporters to be there and funnel the information to us.
- Tell students they're now going to experience how a press conference works, including the challenges of both sharing and gathering information in this setting.
  - Distribute Handout 3-2. Half of the class will be reporters, and the other half will be representatives from the governor's office. If your class is large, you may want to create two teams representing the press and two teams representing the governor's office.
  - Give students time to read the background information and prepare their facts and questions.
  - Conduct the press conference simulation according to the directions on the worksheets.
  - After the simulation, discuss the students' experiences. Possible prompts include:
    - What was that experience like? Was it stressful? Frustrating? Informative?
    - What was the most difficult part of the experience? What was the easiest?
    - What was it like being a reporter in this situation? How did you decide which questions to ask? Were all of your questions answered?
    - What was it like being a public official in this situation? Was it difficult to field the reporters' questions? How did you decide which questions to answer?
    - Did the reporters and the officials have the same goals for the press conference?
  - Make a chart of the pros and cons of using press conferences as a source of information for reporting on a major event, from the perspective of the general public.

## Extension Activities

1. Try it! Help inform your community about relevant news. Talk to your principal, PTA or student council leaders to gather information about upcoming events that you think the school community should know about. As a group, brainstorm ways to share the information with the public, then break into teams to spread the word through different media. Reconvene to analyze which techniques were successful, which were not, and why.

2. Watch a local government's press conference. Do the same for a White House press conference on a similar topic. (You can find coverage on your local news channel, on YouTube or sometimes on the city or state's official website; the White House posts videos of press conferences [here](#).) With your class, evaluate how informative these press conferences are. Some questions to consider include:

- What did you notice about the sources cited, if any?
- Which questions were answered? Which questions were not answered, or were not answered directly?
- Can you tell if any information was being withheld from the journalists and the public? If so, why might that be?

**For elementary school students:** As a class, watch two recordings of press conferences from the same office on the same event but on different days. (One example is White House briefings on Hurricane Sandy on Oct. 28, 2012, and Oct. 29, 2012.) Ask students to identify information that stayed the same in both videos and information that changed. Then, analyze the information the reporters received. Questions to consider may include:

- Did you learn anything new from the second conference? If so, why was there new information? If not, why do you think nothing else was added?
- Was any information clarified or corrected in the second conference? If so, why? If not, do you think the reporters or public will learn new information later?
- What sources, if any, were mentioned? (Possible sources: national reports, surveys, interviews with citizens, etc.)
- Do you trust the information in one report more than another? Why or why not?

## Media Literacy: Evaluating the News

**Rationale/Main Concept:** In this activity, students look at newspaper coverage of a recent front-page event and evaluate the information it provides. By exercising analysis and critical thinking skills, they improve their media literacy and gain an understanding of the vital role the press plays in informing the public.

**Objectives** – Students will understand:

- The many types of sources for news.
- The strengths and weaknesses of different news sources.

**Time:** 30-minute worksheet (to be completed as homework) and 30 minutes of class discussion

**Materials:**

- Handout 3-3: “Evaluating Breaking News” (one per student, included in this packet).
- Access to recent news stories in print or online.

**Procedure:**

- Tell your students they’re going to be exploring the role of the press. What is the press? What does the press include? (Make sure students name a wide array of news media: print newspapers, cable news, public access TV, radio, weekly newsmagazines, online newspapers, etc.) Has the press always included all of these things? (No. The First Amendment was written with the printing press in mind, but new technologies have developed that expanded the forms of press.)
- Freedom of the press is one of the five freedoms protected by the First Amendment. What does it mean that the press is free? Discuss your students’ ideas. Sum up the discussion by telling them that freedom of the press means the government can’t stop us from publishing information, even if government officials don’t like that information, or if it is upsetting or unpopular.
- Tell students they’re going to focus on how reporters exercise freedom of the press in the wake of momentous events.
- Distribute Handout 3-3. Tell students they will need to consult printed and/or digital materials to find two sources of news (articles, video clips, blog posts, etc.) about a recent important event. This could be a natural disaster, an election result, etc. You can have all students find news sources about the same event or allow students to choose their own events.) You may choose to direct students to focus on social media to compare and contrast this information to that found in a traditional news source.
- Once students choose their articles, they will analyze them according to the consumer’s questions that follow. Review the questions as a class to make sure students have a clear understanding of what each question means.

- **Who made this?** Who are the authors? (Professional journalists? Citizen journalists? Average Joes? Qualified experts? Consider both those named and those unnamed.)
  - **How was this made?** What tools/techniques were used?
  - **Why was this made?** What is the reason for its existence?
  - **When was this made?** Is it current? Outdated? Has enough time passed to verify the facts?
  - **What is this missing?** Is this the whole story? What perspectives aren't represented? What questions aren't answered?
  - **Where do I go from here?** Where can I find verification of these facts? Where can I find other perspectives on this topic?
- After students have completed their worksheets, discuss their answers to the consumer questions. (Students' answers will vary depending on the type of news source they analyzed.) Possible prompts include:
    - **Who made your news sources?** Who are the people reporting about this type of event?
    - **How were your news sources made?** Where did the information come from? How was it communicated to readers/viewers?
    - **When were your news sources made?** How long did it take to get information about this event? How did the information communicated change over time?
    - **Why were your news sources made?** What is the role of your type of report after a major event?
    - **What were your news sources missing?** What other information would you like to have about this event?
    - **Where do we go from here?** Where could we find more information about these events?
  - Conclude by discussing students' answers to the questions comparing different forms of disaster news.
    - How many ways are there to share news about major events? (List the various media.)
    - What are the pros and cons of each type of news? (Make lists on the board.)
    - Which news source did you find most engaging? Why might this matter when trying to communicate information after a major event?
    - Did one type of news source emerge as the most useful and informative?
    - If you were on the scene after a major event, what method of sharing news would you use to report about what was happening? Would your choice depend on the type of event? Why or why not?

## Extension Activities

1. Social media sites are becoming an increasingly popular source of news. Read [this article](#) about Twitter use during Hurricane Sandy in October 2012 and discuss: What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of using online sources for information? What examples can you find of responsible and irresponsible use of social media for updates on catastrophes? Have you ever been fooled by fake news? If yes, how? If not, why not?

2. What was it like to reporting breaking news in the 19th century? Read through the Newseum's [collection of Civil War front pages](#). Then, in small groups, discuss: What can you tell about the challenges journalists faced? The technologies available? Are there any differences in the type and reliability of sources then and today?

**For elementary school students:** Introduce students to the reporter's questions, also known as the 5Ws and H (who, what, where, when, why and how). Tell them it is their turn to write an informative news report on a story that matters to them. In pairs, students interview each other about an important event in their lives. They should refer to the reporter's questions to make sure no important information is missing.

## Handout 3-1: Where News Comes From

Name:

Date:

Find a written news report (in print or online) about a recent major event. Read the report and identify at least eight facts in the text. You may want to underline or highlight the facts as you read. Then fill out the chart below, identifying each fact's source (eyewitness account, statement by the mayor, etc.). If you cannot identify the source of any of the facts, write "unknown" and then write your best guess as to where the information may have come from.

Fact	Source

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**Handout 3-2: Preparing for a Press Conference**

**Name:**

**Date:**

**PRESS**

**Background:**

Your state just had elections for a new congressional representative, and the results are contested.

One candidate has accused election officials of miscounting or misplacing the ballots in your district.

In the last congressional race, the current accuser won by fewer than 2,000 votes.

Your newsroom has received hundreds of calls from voters who are angry that they waited several hours to vote and their ballots are in question.

**Your task:**

On a piece of paper, work together to write at least 10 questions that you would like to ask the public officials holding the press conference in order to fill in the gaps in the information above. You will have the opportunity to ask these questions at the press conference. Keep in mind that your ultimate goal is to get vital information to the public so that everyone will understand what has happened and will happen.

**Steps for the simulation:**

1. Seat members of the press and the governor's office on opposite sides of the room.
2. A representative or representatives for the governor's office will go to the front of the room and present a two-minute overview of the situation.
3. The governor's office will answer questions from the press for five minutes. Members of the press must raise their hands and wait to be called on by a member of the governor's office.
4. The press conference will conclude after no more than 10 minutes.

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**GOVERNOR'S OFFICE**

**Background:**

Your state just had elections for a new congressional representative, and the results are contested.

One candidate has accused election officials of miscounting or misplacing the ballots in your district.

If the recount lasts beyond a certain deadline, state law dictates that the ballots from that district will be thrown out.

That deadline (and all other election deadlines, such as the one for absentee voting) was set during the last session of the state legislature.

Since the accusation, two election officials have approached you privately to share concerns that the optical scan inspectors and the voter registration inspectors were not thoroughly trained on the equipment. They did not state specific names.

An investigation is under way to determine if the electronic voting booths were functioning and maintained properly. There is no evidence yet that there were deliberate or accidental errors in counting votes.

Investigation officials do not know how long it will take to analyze the ballots and voting procedures in the district.

There was record voter turnout this year, possibly due to aggressive registration drives by each party.

**Your task:**

On a piece of paper, work together to write a two-minute statement summarizing the information above. You will deliver this statement and then take questions from the press. Before the press conference begins, decide if you want to invent any details beyond the facts listed above. When answering questions, be prepared to deal with questions you can't answer, either because you do not think it wise to share the information or because you do not know the answer. Keep in mind that your ultimate goal is to satisfy public curiosity without misinforming people.

**Steps for the simulation:**

1. Seat members of the press and the governor's office on opposite sides of the room.
2. A representative or representatives for the public officials will go to the front of the room and present a two-minute overview of the situation.
3. The public officials will answer questions from the press for five minutes. Members of the press must raise their hands and wait to be called on by an official.
4. The press conference will conclude after no more than 10 minutes.

**Handout 3-3: Evaluating Headline News**

**Name:**

**Date:**

Find two news reports (articles in print or online) about a recent important event. You should choose two different forms of media. Read or watch the reports and answer the questions below.

News Report 1

Headline/Title:

Source:

Apply the consumer's questions to your source of information.

**Who** made this report?

**How** was this report made?

**Why** was this report made?

**When** was this report made?

**What** is this report missing?

**Where** do I go from here?

News Report 2

Headline/Title:

Source:

Apply the consumer's questions to your source of information.

**Who** made this report?

**How** was this report made?

**Why** was this report made?

**When** was this report made?

**What** is this report missing?

**Where** do I go from here?

**Handout 3-3: Evaluating Headline News**

**Name:**

**Date:**

Which news report did you find more engaging? Why?

Which news report did you find more useful/informative? Why?