



NSDAR Educational Resources Committee

“Understanding the Basic Rules of Journalism and the Free Press”

Lesson Plan

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Grade Level: 8-12

1. **Identify the standards to be addressed:**

English Language Arts, Social Studies, Civics

2. **Statement of the objective and lesson outcomes:**

A free press is a vital part of a democracy, providing an independent check on the powers of government and other societal institutions. Students will learn how to identify whether a news story meets the basic rules of journalism and what those rules are.

3. **Materials, resources, and technology to be used by teacher/students:**

News sources either print, broadcast or web-based. Links provided to websites on the basic rules of journalism: [American Press Institute defines journalism](#), [Columbia Journalism Review](#) – What is journalism for? (Note fees may be required for complete text.) , [Canadian Association of Journalists](#) – What is Journalism?

4. **Introduction of the topic:**

The rules of journalism give us a way to decide how much validity we assign to a news story. Information meets the criteria of journalism if:

- It can be verified
- Comes from credible, identified sources
- Is checked for accuracy
- Is placed in an appropriate context.

Information that can be verified and which comes from credible sources go hand in hand. If a news story tells us the unemployment rate based on Department of Labor statistics, we can verify it. We can go to the department’s website or contact department officials directly to confirm it. When a person is quoted, we can track that person down, just as the reporter did, and confirm the quote.

Of course, very few of us will do that because that’s what we expect reporters to do. There are times when journalists use unidentified sources. This is an important issue and is covered in its own lesson plan.

In checking for accuracy, journalists don’t just take one person’s word for what they say. The information is usually checked with other credible sources, even though those verifications may not be disclosed in the story. In verifying the information, the journalist knows whether the information he or she was given is reliable enough to be passed on to readers.

Lastly, the information must be placed in the proper context. Bare facts, without context, can be misleading. The man who steals a loaf of bread may be a common thief in one context or a dedicated father trying to help his starving family in another.

The decision of what context will be used to explain the facts is the result of decisions made by reporters, editors and even the nature of the medium where the story appears. News consumers also have their views about what context is appropriate. If Congress appropriates additional money for student loans, some may believe the

context should be from the standpoint that too many student loans are in default, while others may applaud the opportunity for more people to go to college. Both viewpoints are valid, but readers will often label news as biased if the story is not put in a context that matches their world view.

5. **Procedure for instruction:**

Select stories from the news and ask students to identify the four elements of journalism in the stories. Selections should be made via the internet of content from newspapers, broadcast TV or cable and web-based sources.

Students should be encouraged to pick stories from websites where they regularly get their news to see if they meet journalistic standards.

6. **Lesson closure:**

Students share the news they selected and the medium (print, broadcast, Internet) and discuss the elements of journalism in the story. Students can also discuss what efforts they take, if any, to discover news about things they don't usually explore such as business, science, the arts and news about other countries.

7. **Assessment of student understanding:**

If students can accurately pick out the elements of journalism in a story and explain why they made their decision, the teacher can assess if the class has an understanding of journalistic principles.

Student Worksheet

Select three stories from news websites.

Story 1 headline: _____

Source: _____

Story 2 headline: _____

Source: _____

Story 3 headline: _____

Source: _____

Story 1 – Why did you pick this story and did it meet the criteria of journalism? Why or why not?

Story 2 – Why did you pick this story and did it meet the criteria of journalism? Why or why not?

Story 3 – Why did you pick this story and did it meet the criteria of journalism? Why or why not?
