



TEACHING MEDIA LITERACY: A FRAMING EXERCISE

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LESSON: “Rat Bites Baby: Three Versions of a Story”

Adapted from Charlotte Ryan, *Prime-time Activism*

On the next page are three newspaper stories about the same incident. By comparing these stories, you can alert your students to the choices that are always made when reporting a situation.

Notice that the young mother is the focus of the first story, but she is absent from the second story. Instead, the story focuses on landlord-tenant relations, which might be considered a “group focus.” The third story takes an even broader focus – it could be considered a class analysis or a system analysis.

The point is that there are many ways to tell the story, and **two things follow:**

1. A human being or a group of human beings decided how to tell the story – they decided what to put in and what to leave out, and who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. So, the news is produced by human decisions.
2. These decisions are based on the person’s or the group’s values and ideas. Those values and ideas underlie the story. They guide the choices about what to put in and what to leave out. They determine how the story is *framed*.

For example, the first story reflects an individualistic view of the world – the young mother is the focus. She has made bad choices. First, she got pregnant before she was old enough to care for a child. Second, she went out to cash her welfare check and left the baby unprotected. This is a right-wing conception.

The second story is more centrist; it emphasizes groups, not individuals and suggests that there are multiple factors at work.

The third story proceeds from left wing values and conceptions – wealthy powerful elites dominate the society and cause others to suffer.

EXERCISE: See if you can get your students to recognize these points in discussion. Ask them:

- What’s emphasized and what is left out or neglected?
- Who are the good guys and bad guys?
- How does the story get its point of view across?
- What does the story tell you directly and what does it imply?

“Rat Bites Baby: Three Versions of a Story”

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Version 1: Rats Bite Infant

An infant left sleeping in his crib was bitten repeatedly by rats while his 16-year-old mother went to cash her welfare check. A neighbor responded to the cries of the infant and brought the child to Central Hospital where he was treated and released in his mother's custody. The mother, Angie Burns of the South End, explained softly, “I was only gone five minutes. I left the door open so my neighbor would hear him if he woke up. I never thought this would happen in the daylight.”

Version 2: Rats Bite Infant: Landlord, Tenants Dispute Blame

An eight-month-old South End boy was treated and released from Central Hospital yesterday after being bitten by rats while he was sleeping in his crib. Tenants said that repeated requests for extermination had been ignored by the landlord, Henry Brown. Brown claimed that the problem lay with tenants' improper disposal of garbage. “I spend half my time cleaning up after them. They throw garbage out the window into the back alley and their kids steal the garbage can covers for sliding in the snow.”

Version 3: Rat Bites Rising in City's “Zone of Death”

Rats bit eight-month-old Michael Burns five times yesterday as he napped in his crib. Burns is the latest victim of a rat epidemic plaguing inner-city neighborhoods labeled the “Zone of Death.” Health officials say infant mortality rates in these neighborhoods approach those in many third world countries. A Public Health Department spokesperson explained that federal and state cutbacks forced short-staffing in rat control and housing inspection programs. Tawana James, a local community organizer, commented, “The same billionaires who lobbied for the tax cuts that produced the cutbacks also made large contributions to the fancy medical complex two miles away. The working people in the neighborhood can't afford lobbyists to fight for them in Washington, and they can't afford the fancy hospitals either.”