

Teaching from the Newspaper

If our students are to become effective citizens, they must learn to extract essential information from journalists' reports, to detect bias, and evaluate sources. In short, they must be able to inform themselves.

This section offers some ideas for teaching from the newspaper. Working from that day's newspaper and teaching students to "read between the lines" piques their interest and appeals to their vanity because they feel "in the know."

Logistics: Local newspapers often have programs that provide class sets to schools. This is the ideal situation in which each student has her own newspaper. Students may also share papers or read stories on the paper's web site, or read copies of downloaded stories or stories photocopied from the paper.

Purposes: To teach students to read critically, to detect bias, and to extract essential information while taking into account any bias that may be present.

Exercise One: A Single Story

Choose a story on a current issue or a particular leader, the better known, the better.

Critical Thinking: Ask the students to read and summarize the story. Assign specific questions to specific students such as:

- Identifying each of the main actors mentioned
- Summarizing the issue or issues
- Summarizing the pros and cons or the contending positions.

Qualitative Assessments: Then ask the students to assess the story in its entirety. Is it fair? Balanced? Does it seem to favor one side or the other? Does it seem favorable to a particular person or unfavorable?

Quantitative Assessments: Ask them to test their impressions by quantifying:

- a) ask them to count the number of paragraphs that support a particular point of view;
- b) ask them to count the number of sources quoted that reflect a particular point of view.

Rewriting the Headline: Ask them to assess the fairness of the headline. Does it reflect what's in the story accurately or not? If they say no, ask them to rewrite the headline to make it more fair?

Also ask them to rewrite the headline to make it more biased. First, make it more favorable to one side or person, then do the opposite, make it more favorable to the other side or person.

For example, the class could read a story on the Middle East and then rewrite the headline to make it more favorable to Israel and then rewrite the headline to make it more favorable to the Palestinians.

Assessing Importance: Position, Length, Photographs

Students should assess the relative importance accorded this story. Where is it in the paper? Is it on page one? If so, is it above or below the fold? Is it on the right or left side of the page (some authorities believe the right hand upper corner is the most prominent spot of all)?

How long is the story? Is it accompanied by photographs or an explanatory chart or table, any of which would make it more prominent and give it more impact?

If there is a photograph, what impression does it convey? Which policy position or person does it favor?

Assessing the Overall Impact of a Story

You can help students to sharpen their discussion of a story's impact by posing these questions:

Who benefits by having this story in the paper?

Who would have benefited if the story had been left out?

If this story were an advertisement, what or who would it be advertising?

Exercise Two: Comparisons

Compare the coverage of the same issue in two newspapers on the same day, using the questions above.

Exercise Three: Writing Your Own

Have your students write their own newspaper story. This can be done as an individual assignment in which each student is researcher, reporter, editor, headline writer or it can be a group assignment in which roles are assigned.

Students can be asked to write a story on an historical event such as the Battle of the Little Big Horn, the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, the Reichstag Fire, or the beginning of the Korean War. They can also be asked to write on contemporary issues such as income inequality, global warming, or teen pregnancy. They can also be asked to write a newspaper story about incidents in their own lives, or, this can be tricky, incidents at school.

In all these cases, students can be assigned to write from a particular point of view—the Indians at Little Big Horn, the owners of the factory, etc. Comparisons can then be made, and fairness, etc., assessed.