Perceptions of Youth and Crime

This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools: http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework.

Overview

In this lesson students develop an awareness of the ways in which public perceptions regarding young people have been affected by media portrayals of youth violence and youth crime. Students begin by assessing their own attitudes towards youth and crime through class discussion and a Youth Crime Quiz. Next, they learn how to recognize bias in news reporting and then apply this knowledge by monitoring youth-related stories that appear in newspapers, magazines and television news. Finally, students study industry best practices on reporting on marginalized groups and then develop their own best practice guide for reporting on youth.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- become aware of the gap between Canadian's perceptions about crime and actual crime statistics.
- understand the media's influence on society's perception of young people.
- understand the impact that the media's portrayal of youth violence has on their own lives.
- understand how media bias can result in negative depictions of young people in the media.

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy:

- *Youth and Crime Quiz* (educational handout)
- *Youth and Crime Quiz Answer Sheet* (educational handout)
- *Detecting Bias in the News* (educational handout)
- *Best Practices* (assignment sheet)

Procedure

- Distribute the *Youth Crime Quiz* to students.

- When students have completed the quiz, discuss the answers as a class. (Were they surprised by the results of the quiz? Do they agree with the reactions to media violence identified in Question 9?)
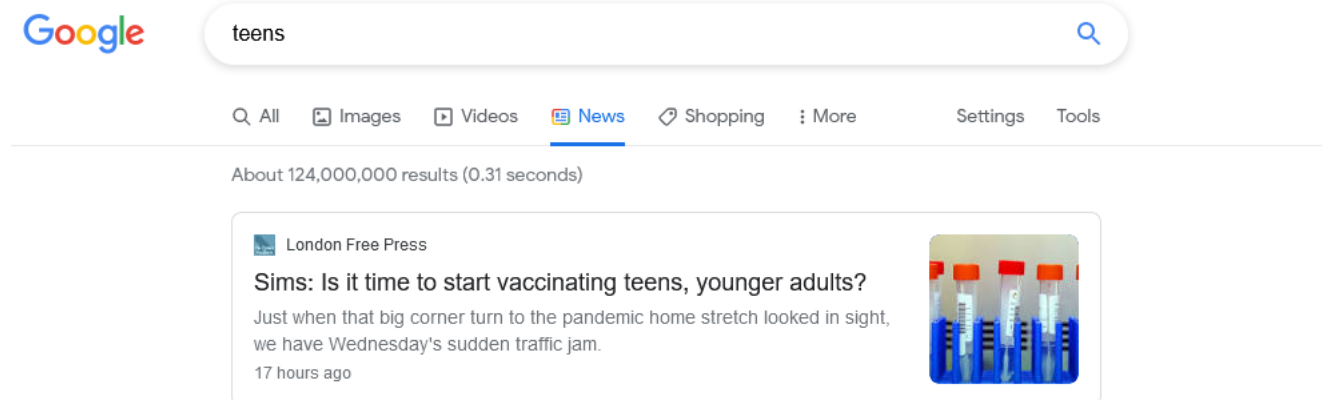
Ask your students:

- In terms of crime, how old is a "youth"? (*Between 12 and 17 years of age*)

- When you see stories about teenagers in the news, or read stories about teenagers in the newspapers, what types of stories come to mind? *Stories connected to crime and violence will likely dominate student responses. A 2007 study found that 71 percent of articles about young people were negative, and a third focused on crime. Source: HM Treasury and Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007). Aiming High for Young People: a Ten Year Strategy for Positive Activities.*

- When you hear stories about teens and violence in the news, how does it make you feel? *(Answers will vary; many students may feel offended that teenagers are often portrayed in a negative light; some may feel that these stories reflect reality. Give your students the opportunity to fully explore their feelings)*

- Do you ever see teenagers like you and your friends in the media?

- Why are there so little emphasis on stories about regular kids, and so much emphasis on negative stories about kids?

- How do media stories about teenagers and crime affect your perceptions and attitudes on this issue?

- How do they affect your parent's perceptions and attitudes?

- The term "media myth" is used to describe the media's continued portrayals of images and information that are not based on fact. A "media myth" is created when whole groups of people are misrepresented because the extreme actions of a few of them dominate the media.

- Can you think of any examples of groups of people who have been affected by media myths?

- What media myths have been created regarding teenagers?

- Do you think media myths about teenagers have ever affected how you have been treated?

Detecting Bias in the News

Distribute the *Detecting Bias in the News* handout to class and discuss with students. Next, divide the class into six groups and:

- Have each group do a search for at least twenty news stories about young people from at least three different news sources. They can do this either by browsing news sources (they can use the links available at https://www.newspapersland.com/canada-newspapers/) or doing a search on Google for search terms such as "youth," "young people," "children" and "teens" and then selecting the News tab:

- As a group, students are to tally the total number of stories by category – i.e.; violence/crime, human interest, sports, education, and 'positive portrayal' – and create a chart of their results.

- Students will summarize each story, noting the prominence of the story, i.e. whether it was a lead story or front-page news, or buried in the newspaper or newscast.

  - any bias contained in the story

  - the reaction of at least one person who has seen or read the story

- When each group is finished, they are to present their findings to the class.

Class Discussion

- Identify the similarities and differences between the reporting styles of three news sources.

- For stories dealing with the same news item, was there a difference in how the story was presented by each news source?

- In stories relating to youth and crime, were the young people involved portrayed as victims or perpetrators?

- How does the portrayal of teens as victims affect our perceptions of them?

- What about the portrayal of teens as perpetrators?

- Which news source are teenagers most likely to get this story from? What about their parents?

- Does the news source make a difference to a person's perception of a story?

Assessment Activity: Best Practices

Distribute the assignment sheet *Best Practices* and explain to students that because many newsrooms in Canada follow Canadian Press style, their policies have a big influence on how reporters and editors cover diverse groups.

In the same groups as before, have each group read one of the following *Canadian Press Policies* https://www.thecanadianpress.com/about/our-team-values/our-news-principles/) articles and answer the questions on the assignment sheet:

- Indigenous Peoples
- Age
- Disabilities
- Race and ethnicity
- Sexism
- Sexual orientation and gender identity

When students have read the articles and answered the questions, have them share their findings with the class.

Next, have students (individually, in pairs or in groups) write a suggested policy for reporting on young people.

Youth and Crime Quiz

What are the facts regarding youth crime in Canada? Test your crime-I.Q. with the following quiz.

1. **According to the Statistics Canada, how many youths were charged with homicide in 2018?**

   a) 13

   b) 37

   c) 94

   d) 136

2. **What is the total violent crime rate (including murder, sexual assault, assault, robbery with a weapon and abduction) of youth in 2018?**

   a) 3,372

   b) 16,903

   c) 1,323

   d) 521

3. **Of the following property crimes, which were youths most often charged with?**

   a) Motor Vehicle Theft

   b) Robbery

   c) Theft Under $5,000 (includes bicycles, goods stolen from automobiles and shoplifting)

   d) Breaking and Entering

4. **Identify the drug that youths were most often charged in connection with (either for possession, importing or trafficking).**

   a) Cannabis

   b) Cocaine

   c) Heroin

   d) Other Drugs

5. **If you are female, you are most likely to be a victim of violence from:**

   a) a stranger

   b) a friend or acquaintance

   c) a family member

   d) a romantic partner

6. **If you are male, you are most likely to be a victim of violence from:**

   a)   a stranger

   b)   a friend or acquaintance

   c)   a family member

   d)   a romantic partner

7. **The largest percentage of accusations for Criminal Code incidents involves people between the ages of:**

   a)   12 and 17

   b)   18 and 24

   c)   25 and over

8. **The majority of Canadians believe that youth crime has**

   a)   decreased in the past decade

   b)   increased in the past decade

   c)   remained the same

9. **Many academics believe that the media are chiefly to blame for false public perceptions regarding crime. Media sensationalism of violence has been cited as the cause of:**

   a)   increased fear

   b)   desensitization to real-life violence

   c)   aggressive behaviour

   d)   all of the above

10. **Distorted portrayals of youth in the media have led to:**

   a)   increased demand for tougher young-offender laws

   b)   demands for curfews for children under 16

   c)   more regular transferring of young offenders to adult courts

   d)   all of the above

Sources: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*

Answers: Youth and Crime Quiz

1. **According to the Statistics Canada, how many youths were charged with homicide in 2018?**

    a) 13

    b) 37

    c) 94

    d) 136

    Answers:

    a) Incorrect.

    b) Correct! In 2018, 37 youths were charged with homicide. Compare this to 650 total reported homicides that year!

    c) Incorrect.

    d) Incorrect.

    Source: Statistics Canada, "Persons accused of crime," Table 2.; Police-reported youth crime, Table 19.

2. **What is the total violent crime rate (including murder, sexual assault, assault, robbery with a weapon and abduction) of youth in 2018?**

    a) 3,372

    b) 16,903

    c) 1,323

    d) 521

    Answers:

    a) Incorrect. This was the total reported youth crime rate (per 100,000 youth) in 2018.

    b) Incorrect.

    c) Correct! In 2018, 1,323 youths were charged with violent crimes.

    d) Incorrect. This was the reported youth assault rate (per 100,000 youth) in 2018.

    Source: Statistics Canada, "Persons accused of crime," Table 21

3. **Of the following property crimes, which were youths most often charged with?**

   a) Motor Vehicle Theft

   b) Theft Over $5,000 (includes bicycles, goods stolen from automobiles and shoplifting)

   c) **Theft Under $5,000 (includes bicycles, goods stolen from automobiles and shoplifting)**

   d) Breaking and Entering

   Answers:

   a) Incorrect - 108 per 100,00 youths were charged with Motor Vehicle Theft in 2014.

   b) Incorrect - 114 per 100,00 youths were charged with Robbery in 2014.

   c) **Correct! 960 per 100,000 youths were charged with Theft Under $5000 in 2014.**

   d) Incorrect - 288 in 100,000 youths were charged with Breaking and Entering in 2014.

   Source: Statistics Canada, "Persons accused of crime," Table 2.

4. **Identify the drug that youths were most often charged in connection with (either for possession, importing or trafficking).**

   a) **Cannabis**

   b) Cocaine

   c) Heroin

   d) Other drugs

   Answers:

   a) **Correct! The crime rate for cannabis possession was 531 per 100,000 youth and 51 per 100,000 youth trafficking, production or distribution in 2014.**

   b) Incorrect.

   c) Incorrect.

   d) Incorrect. The crime rate for possession, trafficking, production or distribution of other drugs was 75 per 100,000 youth in 2014.

   Source: Statistics Canada, "Persons accused of crime," Table 2.

5. **If you are female, you are most likely to be a victim of violence from:**

    a)   a stranger

    b)   a friend or acquaintance

    c)   a family member

    d)   a romantic partner

    Answers:

    a)   Incorrect. In 2011, 16% of violations against females were committed by strangers.

    b)   Incorrect. In 2011, 27% of violations against females were committed by friends or acquaintances.

    c)   Incorrect.

    d)   Correct! In 2011, intimate partners, including spouses and dating partners, were the most common perpetrators in violent crime against women. They represented 45% of all those accused of victimizing women.

    Sources: HillNotes, "Violence Against Women in Canada"; Statistics Canada, "Prevalence and Severity of Violence against Women."

6. **If you are male, you are most likely to be a victim of violence from:**

    a)   a stranger

    b)   a friend or acquaintance

    c)   a family member

    d)   a romantic partner

    Answers:

    a)   Correct! In 2011 55% of violations against males were committed by strangers.

    b)   Incorrect.

    c)   Incorrect.

    d)   Incorrect

    Source: Sources: HillNotes, "Violence Against Women in Canada"; Statistics Canada, "Prevalence and Severity of Violence against Women."

7.   **The largest percentage of accusations for Criminal Code incidents involves people between the ages of:**

   a)   12 and 17

   b)   18 and 24

   c)   25 and older

   Answers:

   a)   Incorrect.

   b)   **Correct! Across Canada, the crime rate for people aged 18 to 24 was 5,428 per hundred thousand. The rate for youth aged 12 to 17 was 4,322 per hundred thousand; the rate for 25 and up was 2,048 per hundred thousand.**

   c)   Incorrect.

   Source: Statistics Canada, "Youth Crime in Canada" (2014).

8.   **Many Canadians believe that youth crime has**

   a)   decreased in the past decade

   b)   **increased in the past decade**

   c)   **remained the same**

   Answers:

   a)   Incorrect.

   b)   **Correct! Studies show that most Canadians feel that youth crime has either increased (40% believe this) or remained that same (48% think this.) In fact, youth crime overall has decreased consistently since 2009 and violent crime by youth has remained about the same since 2015 after a heavy drop from 2009-2015.**

   c)   Incorrect.

   Sources: McPhail et al (2017), "Taking the Pulse: Perceptions of Crime Trends and Community Safety and Support for Crime Control Methods in the Canadian Prairies."; Statistics Canada (2019), "Police-reported crime statistics in Canada."

9. **Many academics believe that the media are chiefly to blame for false public perceptions regarding crime. Media sensationalism of violence has been cited as the cause of:**

   a) increased fear

   b) desensitization to real-life violence

   c) aggressive behaviour

   d) all of the above

   Source: Grosholz and Kubrin. *Crime in the News: How Crimes, Offenders and Victims are Portrayed in the Media* **(2007)**

   Answers:

   a) You're partially right. When faced with constant sensationalism of violence in the media, some people develop a "mean and scary world" syndrome, where they feel victimized and fearful.

   b) You're partially right. When faced with constant sensationalism of violence in the media, some people become desensitized to suffering and violence in the real world.

   c) You're partially right. Some people, especially younger children, can become more aggressive when they are exposed to violence in the media.

   d) Correct! Increased fear, desensitization to real-life violence and aggressive behaviour have all been linked to the media's representation of violence.

   Source: Ghosholz and Kubrin.

10. **Distorted portrayals of youth in the media have led to:**

    a) Increased demand for tougher young-offender laws.

    b) Demands for curfews for children under 16.

    c) More regular transferring of young offenders to adult courts.

    d) All of the above.

    Answers:

    a) You're partially right. Try again.

    b) You're partially right. Try again.

    c) You're partially right. Try again.

    d) Correct! When youth crime is sensationalized in the media, the public often responds with a cry for tougher treatment towards youth – even though media coverage often sharply contrasts the official data on youth crime.

    Source: Grosholz and Kurbin

Detecting Bias in the News

At one time or another we all complain about "bias in the news." The fact is, despite the journalistic ideal of "objectivity," every news story is influenced by the attitudes, assumptions and background of its interviewers, writers, photographers and editors.

Not all bias is deliberate. But you can become a more aware news reader or viewer by watching for the following journalistic techniques that allow bias to "creep in" to the news:

1. **Bias through selection and omission**

    An editor can express a bias by choosing to use or not to use a specific news item. This has a significant impact on what audiences think is important: for many years large news outlets didn't cover police violence against Black people in Canada or the United States, but when they began to public opinion on the issue — and public perception of whether or not it *was* an issue—began to change significantly. Within a given story, some details can be ignored, and others included, to give readers or viewers a different opinion about the events reported.

    Remember that the biggest bias is always towards what journalists see as being "newsworthy" — but this question is always political, even if it isn't seen that way. Though crime is more likely than many other topics to be seen as newsworthy, research has found that in most cases there needs to be something else about a crime—something unusual about the perpetrator or victim, something that makes the crime seem like a violation of our sense of right or wrong, or some connection to a broader issue — to make the news. Stories about a single event are also more likely to be seen as newsworthy than about something that's ongoing, and stories about specific people are more newsworthy than stories about groups or systems.

    Bias through omission is difficult to detect. Only by comparing news reports from a wide variety of outlets can this form of bias be observed. You can use the News tab on Google or MediaSmarts' custom News search (bit.ly/news-search) to see how different outlets cover the same story.

2. **Bias through placement**

    Readers of papers judge first page stories to be more significant than those buried in the back. Television and radio newscasts run the most important stories first and leave the less significant for later. Online news puts the most important stories on the home page and promotes them on social media. What section a story appears in matters too: if a story about sexual harassment in the movie industry appears in the Entertainment section, example, we'll probably take it less seriously than if it appears in News.

    News / Canadian Politics / Canada

    Trudeau 'very optimistic' vaccine rollout can be accelerated and move closer to U.S. goals

    Trudeau held to his September target, but said with vaccine deliveries being moved up and new candidates being approved, the timeline could be moved up

    Ryan Tumilty
    Mar 03, 2021 • March 3, 2021 • 4 minute read • 💬 119 Comments

    Bias through placement can happen when a story is placed *near* something else. Putting a news story next to an opinion article on the same topic, or a political cartoon about the subject of the story, changes how we read it.

    How the story is organized is also significant. Most news stories are written in what is called "inverted pyramid" style, beginning with what is considered the most newsworthy facts, followed by the important details relating to those facts, and finally background information to provide context. The last

    "We're very optimistic that we're going to be able to accelerate some of these timelines," Trudeau said. PHOTO BY GARY CLEMENT/NATIONAL POST

part of the story contains information that readers are least likely to read and editors are most likely to cut. This can be a form of bias because context often helps you fully understand a topic: for example, if an article about the number of sufferers of mental illness in prison (the newsworthy facts) waits until the fourth paragraph to note that sufferers of mental illness are no more likely to be violent than anyone else (context), readers who only read part of the story may come away with a very inaccurate view of mental illness and violence.

3. **Bias by headline**

   Many people read only the headlines of a news item. Most people scan nearly all the headlines in a newspaper. Headlines are the most-read part of a paper. They can summarize as well as present carefully hidden bias and prejudices. They can convey excitement where little exists. They can express approval or condemnation. Even when a story avoids significant bias, because headlines are shorter they often give a much simpler and more biased picture.

4. **Bias by photos, captions and camera angles**

   Some pictures flatter a person, others make the person look unpleasant. A paper can choose photos to influence opinion about, for example, a candidate for election. On television, the choice of which visual images to display is extremely important. The captions newspapers run below photos are also potential sources of bias.

5. **Bias by word choice**

   What words are used to in a story has a major effect on how we read it. For example:

   - Using metaphors like describing a politician as "attacking" an issue can provoke an emotional reaction.

   - Sentences in the passive voice make it seem like an event just happened, without anyone doing it: compare "Three protestors were injured by police" (passive voice) to "Police injured three protestors" (active voice).

   - The choice of verb to describe an action affects what we think about it: Compare "Police *confiscate* gun collection," "Police *seize* gun collection" and "Police *grab* gun collection." Was something a "death," a "killing" or a "murder"? Did a politician "state" something, "claim" it or "allege" it?

   - Similarly, how a person or group is described affects how we see them. Is a candidate an *experienced* politician, a *long-serving* politician or an *old* politician? If something is described as a *gang*, that can imply that it is a large, well-organized group—even if it's actually just a handful of young people.

   - Using a particular word also suggests that the word describes something real. For example, in the 1990s the news media coined the word "superpredator" to suggest that there was a group of young offenders who committed crimes for fun and had no conscience. Although there was never any evidence this was true, its use in news stories promoted fear of youth crime and led to stricter sentencing laws in the United States.

6. Bias by source and quote

Always consider where the news item "comes from." Is the information supplied by a reporter, an eyewitness, police or fire officials, executives, or elected or appointed government officials? Each may have a particular bias that is introduced into the story. Companies and public relations directors supply news outlets with press releases that hurried reporters can easily turn into news stories. Journalists will also often base their ideas of what is newsworthy on what they see on social media—which allows groups to engage in "source hacking" by manipulating trending topics or creating a fake controversy.

You should also always consider *who* is quoted. Are all of the quotes from authorities, like government and police? Are people from the community that is affected quoted? It's important to look past a single story: most news outlets quote men more often than women overall, and White people more than non-White people.

7. Bias through false balance

It's important for news articles to give both sides of a story, and journalists take that responsibility seriously. Unfortunately, some groups take advantage of that fact—and the fact that many news outlets no longer have reporters who have special training in covering things like health and science—to make it seem like stories have more sides than they really do. The tobacco industry started doing this in the 1970s by trying to get "equal time" for idea that cigarettes don't cause cancer, when basically all scientists agreed that it did. Today, other groups use the same strategy to make it seem like there isn't a clear consensus on topics like climate change and vaccination.

8. Bias through statistics

Many news stories include statistics: crowd counts, vote totals, temperature records, and so on. There can be bias in *which* statistics are included (showing temperatures dropping from August to December doesn't give you an accurate picture of the whole year, for example) and also in *how* those statistics are described or interpreted.

For example, the first of these stories focuses on the fact that "millions" of people in the US did not get their second dose of Covid-19 vaccine. The second story focuses on how many people *did* get it (the "majority") and describes the number who aren't as "only 5 million."

Both of these stories are from reliable news outlets, and both are biased! This shows that instead of looking for "unbiased" news (which doesn't exist) we need to learn to recognize bias so we can read through it.

▤ Top stories ⋮

Millions Are Skipping Their Second Doses of Covid-19 Vaccines
The New York Times · 1 day ago

2nd vaccine shot statistics show majority getting it, only 5 million missing it: CDC
ABC News · 20 hours ago

Adapted from Newskit: A Consumers Guide to News Media, by *The Learning Seed Co. Reprinted with their permission*.

Detecting Bias Exercise

For this exercise you will be finding news articles about young people and evaluating them for bias.

To start, do a search for at least **twenty** news stories about young people from at least **three** different news sources.

You can do this either by browsing news sources (they can use the links available at https://www.newspapersland.com/canada-newspapers/) or doing a search on Google for search terms such as "youth," "young people," "children" and "teens" and then selecting the News tab:
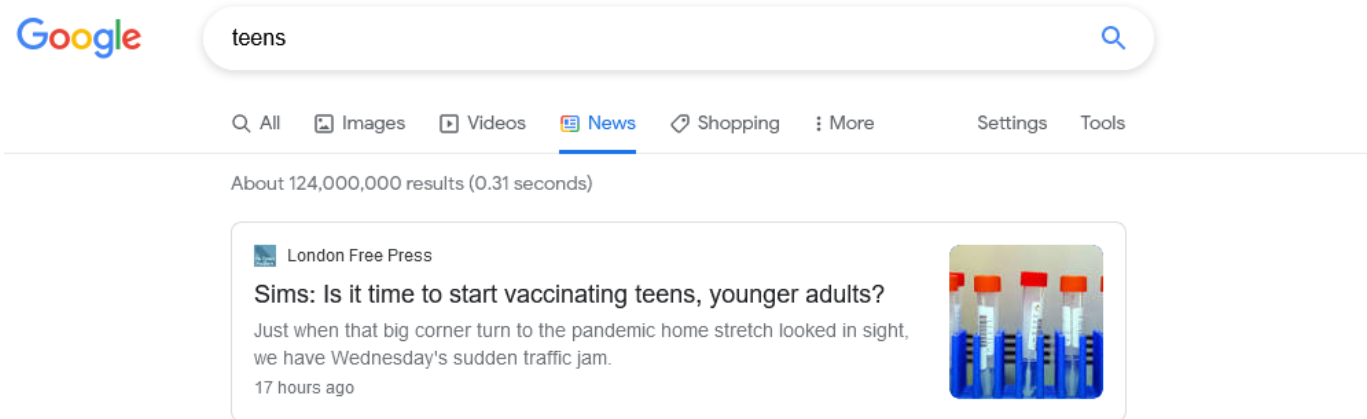
Next, identify at least five different **categories** of stories and then count the total number of stories by category, such as violence/crime, human interest, sports, education, positive portrayals, etc.

Make a chart of your results:

- Summarize each story.
- Note the prominence of the story, i.e. whether it was a lead story or front-page news, or buried in the newspaper or newscast.
- Identify any bias contained in the story
- Describe the reaction of at least one person in your group who has seen or read the story
- Identify the similarities and differences between the reporting styles of three news sources.

When your group is finished you will present your findings to the class.

Best Practices

For this assignment, you will be studying best practices for reporting on marginalized groups and then developing your own best practice guide.

Start by going to https://www.thecanadianpress.com/about/our-team-values/our-news-principles/ and reading the article assigned to your group:

- Indigenous peoples

- Age

- Disabilities

- Race and ethnicity

- Sexism

- Sexual orientation and gender identity

Then answer the following questions:

- What words or phrases are reporters recommended to use? If reasons are given why, what are they?

- What words or phrases are reporters asked to avoid? Why?

- What words should be used only in specific contexts? Why?

- Are there details reporters are encouraged to include or leave out? Why?

- What other advice is given for reporters? If reasons are given, what are they?

- Are there parts of this policy you disagree with? If so, why?

After your group has shared its findings with the class, you will then **write a best practice policy for reporting on youth**. It should include all of the items you analyzed in the other policies above:

- Recommended words or phrases

- Words or phrases to avoid

- Words or phrases only to be used in specific contexts

- Details reporters are encouraged to include and/or leave out, and when

- Issues reporters and editors should be sensitive to when covering young people

- Other advice for reporters

Assessment Task Rubric

	Learning Expectations	*Achievement*
Understand	*Finding and Verifying:* • recognize bias, loaded language and other persuasive techniques *Media Representation* • understand how media representations can influence our view of reality • understand how media representations can influence our opinions on a social issue • understand how different audiences can see the same text differently *Consumer Awareness:* • understand how the media industry works and how that affects the creation and meaning of media texts *Community Engagement* • understand how meaning is produced through multimedia (text, images, audio, video) and how culture is produced through the Internet and social media in particular • understand how political and cultural issues are influenced by media	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)
Create	*Reading Media:* • create a text that shows an understanding of a medium, format and/or genre *Media Representation* • create a text that demonstrates an understanding of media representation issues *Finding and Verifying* • Create a text that shows an understanding of bias, loaded language and other persuasive techniques	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)