

LESSON PLAN

Writing the News

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



LEVEL: Grade 6 to 9

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Overview

In this lesson, students will write a news article by developing ‘lede paragraphs’ and by using the ‘inverted pyramid’ model. Once this is done, they will be given time during class to select topics, conduct research, write their articles and proof read and peer edit their own and other’s works.

Learning outcomes

Know: Students will learn the following essential domain knowledge:

- Reading media: Elements of a news article
- Consumer awareness: Markers of reliable news outlets and processes they use to provide reliable information
- Making and remixing: How to write a news article in “inverted pyramid” structure

Understand: Students will learn the following key concepts/big ideas:

- Media are constructions: Media works were made many people who made choices that affect the final work
- Media have social and political implications: News plays an important role in informing the public; whose voices are (or aren’t) included in news stories influences audiences’ views
- Each medium has a unique aesthetic form: Different media communicate in different ways

Do: Students will use tools to create a media work, *understand* how media makers’ choices and industry standards influence how works are made and experienced, and *engage* with issues of representation in news

Preparation and Materials

- *Photocopy the following student handouts:*
- *Functions of the News*
- *Writing the News*
- *Sample News Article*

Procedure

WHAT IS NEWS?

Start by asking students whether or not they read a newspaper, watch or listen to TV or radio news, or regularly visit an online news source. For those who do, ask which outlets they read, watch or listen to. For those that don't, ask: Where do you get your news?

Tell students that most young Canadians are likely to say they heard about a news story because somebody shared it with them on social media, and feel that news will “find them” if it's important.

At the same time, Canadians are almost three times as likely to say they trust traditional news sources (newspapers, TV/radio news, and their online outlets) as to trust information that comes to them through social media.

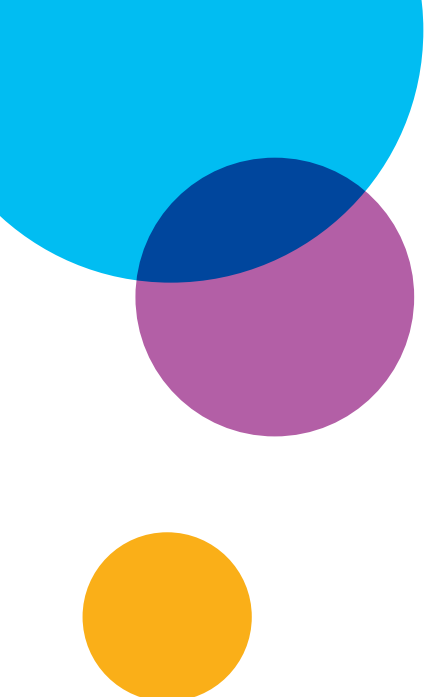
Ask students: Why might people feel that news outlets are more trustworthy than social media as a source for news?

After students have discussed this for a few minutes, distribute the handout *Functions of the News* and go through it with the class. When you have finished reading it, ask students: How can you find out if a news outlet does the things that make it a *reliable* source of news? (Possible answers: Look to see if they've posted their standards and processes; look to see if their corrections are easy to find; look to see if they keep news and opinion articles separate, and don't mix news and opinion in the same article.)

WRITING THE NEWS

Now distribute *Writing the News* and go through it with the class.

Ask students: What parts of this *process* help to make sure that a news article is reliable?



Make sure the following points come up (you may want to write them on the board):

- Interviewing sources
- Making sure that interviews are on the record
- Confirming facts
- Fact-checking
- Giving people mentioned in the story a chance to respond

NEWS ARTICLE ANALYSIS

Now distribute the handout *Sample News Article* and have students read it and answer the questions. Take the questions up in class.

Optional: Have students find a news story of their choice, or assign them individual news stories, and have them answer the same questions as they did for the *Sample News Article*.

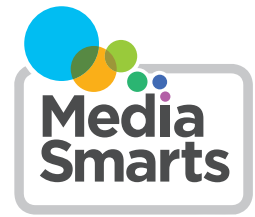
WRITING YOUR NEWS

Have students brainstorm ideas for newspaper article topics about things in the school, in their lives, or that they think deserve news coverage.

Once the list is finished, distribute the assignment sheet *Creating a News Article* and allow students to sign up for topics and form pairs if they wish. Give students time to research and write their articles.

When students have finished rough drafts, have them exchange news articles and ask them to check that the 'lede' paragraph answers the 5 W's. Ask them to answer the questions, "Did this article 'hook' you into reading more? Why or why not?" and "Have you confirmed all of these facts and given everyone mentioned in the article a chance to comment?" Ask students to revise their articles if it is necessary.

WRITING THE NEWS



Functions of the News

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The news serves several functions:

- News informs by supplying facts, figures, charts, maps, photos and illustrations.
- News educates, going beyond the basic facts to in-depth analysis in opinion pieces, feature stories, columns and editorials.
- News provides a marketplace for advertisers and prospective customers.
- News sets the *public agenda* by telling audiences which stories are worth their attention.

TYPES OF NEWS: HARD NEWS AND SOFT NEWS

News can be divided into two general categories: hard news and soft news.

Hard news refers to a story in which time is a factor. In a hard news story, the task of reporters and editors is to get the details of the event (what happened? to whom? when? where? why? and how?) into the newspaper as quickly as possible - either the same day or the following day at the latest. Crime, politics and business are generally considered “hard” news.

Soft news is usually not time sensitive. Nor is it necessarily related to a major event. A daily newspaper strives for a mixture of local and national, hard and soft news so its pages will have variety and offer something for every interest. Entertainment, fashion, and trends are typical soft news topics.

Some topics may be hard or soft news depending on the particular story. A health story about a new virus that’s spreading widely would be a hard news story, while one about how to get better sleep would probably be soft news.

NEWS VERSUS OPINION

A newspaper’s primary purpose is to provide reliable information to its readers. To do so, it must maintain certain standards. A reporter has to write from an objective point of view.

Opinions supporting or opposing policies and ideas usually appear on the editorial page (if they’re written by the editors) or on the opposite page (if they are written by columnists or guest writers.) Some news outlets, especially online ones, mix news and opinion articles together

Some news outlets also include *analysis* articles. Unlike an editorial or an opinion piece these aren’t usually taking a position on the story, but instead feature an expert reporter’s *interpretation* or what’s going on in the news. (These are sometimes also called “explainers.”)

RELIABLE NEWS

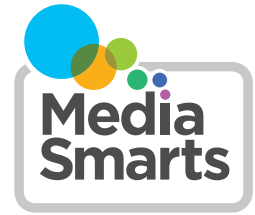
Reliable news outlets follow a process for making sure that what they report is correct. That means:

- A commitment to accuracy. While every news outlet makes mistakes sometimes, frequent errors can suggest that accuracy is not a top priority for them. (Dodging this question by reporting on inaccurate stories spread by other outlets falls under this category as well.)
- Openly retracting and correcting errors. Just as importantly, when an outlet does make a mistake they should be upfront about correcting it.
- Following a story whether or not it supports the outlet's political leanings or bias. News and editorial (where the editorial board publishes opinion or analysis pieces) should be separate: failing repeatedly to cover stories that conflict with their position, or focusing most heavily on stories that agree with it, are signs that bias is influencing the coverage.
- Seeking out and presenting different viewpoints. News outlets have no obligation to amplify hate, harassment or pseudoscience, but in general they should make sure that all sides of an issue are represented.

Some new outlets also take steps to be more **transparent** about their coverage, including:

- Openly acknowledging their viewpoint and possible bias. Including not just what is known about a story but what is currently not known, to help consumers tell the difference between genuine gaps and things that have been deliberately left out.
- Whenever possible, linking to original sources such as transcripts, databases, and so on, so that consumers can verify the accuracy of what's being reported.

WRITING THE NEWS



Writing the News

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A reporter may find a news story in a few different ways. Sometimes somebody may send them a press release about something like a protest, a new scientific discovery or a research paper. Other times they may learn about something that’s happening from a source, a colleague or even social media. Usually the *editor* (in print or online news) or *producer* (in TV news) then decides whether or not the story is worth covering. Often there will be a meeting early in the day where reporters, editors and producers discuss what stories to cover.

If they decide to do the story, the reporter starts to write it. They will do research and interview people connected to the story. Reporters rely on different kinds of sources to provide and verify the facts in the story:

Quoted sources are people who have agreed to go “on the record” (their words can be quoted and attributed to them.) A conversation between a reporter and a source is only *off the record* if both people agree that it is before they start.

News articles may sometimes include quotes or information from *anonymous* or *unnamed* sources. The reporter and editor/producer do know who they are! However, in some cases they will agree not to give the person’s name in the story (or other identifying details) if the person would be in danger of getting hurt or losing their job.

Usually, a reporter will want at least one on-the-record source or two unnamed sources to confirm everything in the story. If they can’t confirm important details in the story, it may be *spiked* (cancelled.)

News articles have a structure that’s called an *inverted pyramid*. That means you start with the most important facts, then add important details related to those facts, and then background information that gives context. The last part of the story contains information that readers are least likely to read and that editors are most likely to cut.

Here are the different parts of a story and what’s in them:

The *lede* is usually the first 1-2 sentences. It has to grab the reader’s attention and show what the story is about and why the story is newsworthy. In a science story, that usually means what’s new or surprising about it or why it might be important to the audience. It could be something a reader would want to tell a friend.

Next, the *nut graf* (usually one or two paragraphs) explains the Who, What, Why, When, Where and How of the story. News articles are written so that you’ll know all the most important information even if you stop reading here. The reporter will often interview sources to get quotes from people involved in the story.

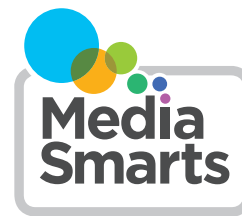
The *body* of the story is for people who want to know more – details that are interesting or add context but aren’t essential to understanding the story.

It will often end with a *kicker* that says why this is important or what you can do about it.

Next, the editor or producer will review the story and the reporter may rewrite it based on their edits. Many news outlets have fact-checkers whose job it is to double-check everything important in the story. Anyone who is mentioned in the story is usually given a chance to comment before the article is published.

Finally, a *copy editor* will write a *headline* for the story. A headline’s job is to get your attention so it sums up the most interesting parts of the story in as few words as possible.

WRITING THE NEWS



Sample News Article

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Polyurethane plastic substitute can biodegrade in seawater, say scientists

Tuesday, September 27, 2022

On Thursday, September 22, scientists at the University of California San Diego reported in the journal *Science of the Total Environment* that a type of polyurethane already used in biodegradable land-based products can also break down when immersed in seawater. This polyurethane is already used as a substitute for plastic in foams and shoes.

The research team performed their experiments at the Ellen Browning Scripps Memorial Pier and Experimental Aquarium. They cut the polyurethane into cubes similar in size and shape to those naturally formed by EVA plastics. They wrote that several types of marine bacteria and fungi stick to the polyurethane and break it down to its component chemicals, which they then consume for food. The polyurethane microbes had already made detectable progress when the scientists checked the samples after four weeks in the water.

“Improper disposal of plastic in the ocean breaks down into microplastics and has become an enormous environmental problem,” said study co-author Stephen Mayfield, director of the California Center for Algae Biotechnology. “We’ve shown that it’s absolutely possible to make high performance plastic products that also can degrade in the ocean.”

Humans deposit roughly 8 billion kg of plastic in the ocean each year, where it can be mistaken for food by marine organisms. Natural forces break the plastic into the small pieces that we call microplastic, while larger chunks form near-islands, such as the Great

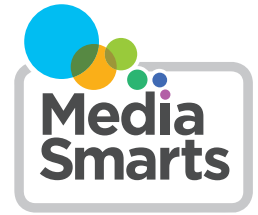
Pacific Garbage Patch. By mass, about half the patch is commercial fishing waste, such as discarded nets, but reducing the amount of post-consumer plastic in the ocean would still make a considerable dent in the planet’s plastic problem.

This type of polyurethane can be used to make flip-flops and parts of other shoes, which make up a large portion of the world’s plastic waste.

From Wikinews

QUESTIONS (ANSWER ON SEPARATE PAPER)

- 1) Is this a *news* story, an *opinion* story, or an *analysis* story? How do you know?
- 2) What is the story’s *headline*? How does it grab the reader’s attention?
- 3) What is the story’s *lede*? How does it show that the story is newsworthy?
- 4) What are the 5 *Ws* (*Who, What, When, Where, Why*) in the *lede* and *nut graf*?
- 5) What extra information is added for context in the *body* of the story?
- 6) What is the article’s *kicker*? How does it show how this story is important?
- 7) Whose voices are included in the article? Are there any people who might reasonably have been included in the article who aren’t?



WRITING THE NEWS

Sample News Article: Answers

- 1) Is this a *news* story, an *opinion* story, or an *analysis* story? How do you know?

A news story. Its focus is reporting facts instead of making an argument or explaining a situation.

- 2) What is the story's *headline*? How does it grab the reader's attention?

The headline is "Polyurethane plastic substitute can biodegrade in seawater, say scientists." It grabs the reader's attention by highlighting what is new about the story.

- 3) What is the story's *lede*? How does it show that the story is newsworthy?

The first paragraph is the lede. It gives the date (showing that this happened recently) and says what is novel (the discovery that this substance can break down in seawater.)

- 4) What are the 5 Ws (*Who, What, When, Where, Why*) in the *lede* and *nut graf*?

Who: Scientists at University of California San Diego

What: Did an experiment to see if seawater would break down a kind of polyurethan

When: September 27, 2022

Where: Ellen Browning Scripps Memorial Pier and Experimental Aquarium

Why: Because other kinds of plastic don't degrade and cause pollution in the ocean

- 5) What extra information is added for context in the *body* of the story?

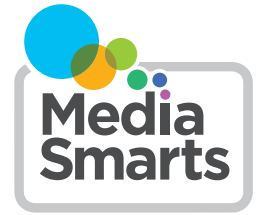
How much plastic in the ocean, where it goes, and how much comes from consumer products

- 6) What is the article's *kicker*? How does it show how this story is important?

That this material can be used to make shoes. It's important because those make up a lot of the world's plastic waste.

- 7) Whose voices are included in the article? Are there any people who might reasonably have been included in the article who aren't?

The co-author of the study was quoted. Other people who might reasonably have been included are other scientists who have studied the same thing, people whose lives are impacted by ocean plastic pollution (fishers, people who live in places where plastic washes up on beaches), people who work in the shoe industry (to say whether they would use this substance instead of the plastics they currently use) or marine biologists (to talk about how this would affect ocean plants and animals.)



WRITING THE NEWS

Creating a News Article

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For this assignment, you will choose **one** of the topics we brainstormed in class and **write a news article about it.**

You will need to **research** your article. This will probably mean **interviewing** at least one person and **looking up** information in the library or online.

Your news article should have a **headline**, a **lede**, a **nut graf** and a **body paragraph** and should be written in **inverted pyramid style.**

When you have completed the article, write **another paragraph** that explains:

- Why you chose this story to write (why was it newsworthy?)

- Why the details you chose to include were important
- How you confirmed all the details in your article
- Whose voices were included in your article
- Whose voices might reasonably be included but were not, and why not