



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 9 to 12
About the Author: Adapted from *News is Not Just Black and White*, a workbook created by the Canadian Newspaper Association (CAN)

The Front Page



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

This lesson begins by helping students to identify and understand the different aspects of news outlets. Using these skills, students will then collect and identify news stories and categorize them according to subject matter.

Learning Outcomes

Know: Students will learn the following essential domain knowledge:

- Reading media: Differences between hard and soft news stories and news, opinion and analysis articles
- Consumer awareness: How news outlets determine “newsworthiness”

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; what things are and aren’t considered “newsworthy” influences audiences’ views
- Each medium has a unique aesthetic form: Different media and genres communicate in different ways

Do: Students will access news stories using digital tools, use media tools to create a news outlet front or home page. *understand* how media makers’ choices and industry standards influence how works are made and experienced, and *engage* with the social and political impacts of values of newsworthiness

Preparation and Materials

Ensure that students have access to daily newspapers and/or internet-connected devices.

Distribute the following handouts:

- *Newsworthiness*
- *Functions of the News*



- *Front Page Worksheet*
- *Spheres of Debate (optional)*

Procedure

Setting the agenda

Start by writing or displaying the following on the board: “News doesn’t tell us what to think, but it does tell us what to think about.” (Paraphrased from *Press and Foreign Policy* by Bernard Cohen.)

Ask students what they think this means: what is the difference between telling someone what to think and telling them what to think *about*? Do they agree with this statement? Why or why not? (If you prefer, you can give students this quote the day before and have them write a brief reflection.)

After students have discussed this question for a few minutes, explain that even if we as individuals don’t read or watch the news, it has what’s called an *agenda-setting* effect. Research has consistently shown that when something gets a lot of news coverage, people are more likely to think that it is important (and vice-versa.)

What makes the news?

Explain that the *front page* (of a print newspaper) or *home page* (of an online news source) are particularly important because they contain what the news outlet considers to be the most important or *newsworthy* stories. Generally speaking, the more pages you have to turn (or the more links you have to click) the less important a story is seen to be. (For TV or radio news the rule is that the most important stories are closest to the beginning of each news segment)

Now ask: How do you think editors or producers decide which stories go on the front/home page, which are harder to find, and which don’t get covered at all?

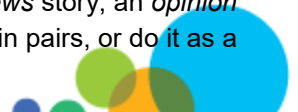
Let students discuss this for a few minutes, then explain that journalists have a set of general rules for deciding what stories are *newsworthy*. While some outlets may lean more towards particular topics, in general they all follow the same guidelines of newsworthiness.

If students raised the issue of political bias in the discussion, explain to them that in most cases the biggest bias is simply towards what is seen as newsworthy. While that does have political elements, they are based mostly on *assumptions* and *conventional wisdom* in the news industry rather than a desire to side with any political party or movement. If you’d like to explore this question further, see the lesson [Bias in News Sources](#).

Distribute the handout *Newsworthiness* and go through it with the class. After reading each of the factors that contribute to newsworthiness, ask students if that seems like a reasonable standard. In most cases students will probably agree that they are: things like freshness, novelty and impact are all common-sense guidelines to decide what makes the news.

Functions of the news

Now distribute the handout *Functions of the News* and go through it with the class. Have them look at the homepage on the other side (from *The Guardian*, a UK newspaper) and try to spot a *hard news* story, a *soft news* story, an *opinion* story and an analysis story. (You may choose to give students a few minutes to do this alone or in pairs, or do it as a whole-class activity.)



Answers:

Most of the stories in the top half of the page are *hard* news stories because they are about topics like war and politics.

Examples of *soft news* stories are the release of the Netflix documentary, the human trials of the brain chip, and the top YouTube video. The story about teens' brains showing more signs of ageing after the pandemic is probably a soft news story unless there is something that makes it urgent (such as if some teens were being hospitalized as a result.) Sports stories, like the World Cup story here, are a good example of soft news because they have little real *impact* but are still important to the people who read them.

This news source makes it easy to find *opinion* stories by marking them clearly. A clear sign that these are opinion pieces is the use of the first person (“I am grateful”, “we have the tools.”)

There is only one clear *analysis* article, the “Explainer” on what led to the royal resignation.

The front page

Now tell students that they are going to do the same analysis on a Canadian news outlet. Divide students into groups and distribute the *Front Page* worksheet. Have each group choose a Canadian news outlet and then analyze its *front page* (if you are using print newspapers) or *home page* (if you are using an online news source.) Make sure that no more than two groups choose the same outlet.

Ideally, students should look at the outlet’s front or home page for at least three separate days. Palewire (<https://palewi.re/docs/news-homepages/bundles/canada.html>) archives screenshots of many different Canadian news outlets. Students can also search for the outlet’s web address at the Internet Archive (<https://web.archive.org/>) and look at past snapshots. Some Canadian newspapers’ home pages are also archived at <https://www.freedomforum.org/todaysfrontpages/#> (search the page for “Canada” to find them.)

When students have finished their analysis, have each group share their findings with the class and ask them:

- How many hard news stories were there, compared to the number of soft news, opinion and analysis stories?
- Were opinion stories clearly marked or were they mixed in with news and analysis stories?
- Which newsworthiness factors appeared most often?
- What does that tell you about what this outlet considers “newsworthy”?
- Based on your analysis, what might be an example of a potential story that this outlet would definitely consider “front page” material? What would be a potential story that would definitely not make the front page, or wouldn’t be covered at all?

When all of the groups have finished presenting their findings, ask students whether there might be news stories that, while important, might not be covered or might be “buried” as a result of these standards.

Some possible prompts for discussion:

- Might a problem be ignored by the news because it is so common it’s not “novel”? (Point out that drinking and driving was considered to be normal, and drunk driving deaths received little news coverage, until advocacy groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving were able to draw attention to it)



- Might a crisis be ignored, or receive little coverage, because it's happening far away (low proximity), or because it's happening slowly (low specificity)?
- Might a focus on freshness lead to people forgetting about an issue after a while, even if that problem hasn't been solved?
- Might people or groups “game the system” by saying or doing outrageous things because they know they will be considered newsworthy? (Point out that for anyone who advertises themselves, their business or their cause, news coverage is called “earned media” and is seen as being at least as valuable as paid advertising. Doing something that gets a lot of people upset can get you a lot of earned media in the news, and even more on social networks.)
- Might the need to make their cause “newsworthy” push a group to do something that hurts their cause? (Tell students that in 2022 a group threw soup at a famous painting to draw attention to the need to address climate change. Although this event made the news, it may also have made people who saw the news story less sympathetic to their cause.)

Assessment activity: My front page

Now tell students that they are going to create their own front page, with the five stories that *they* think are most important.

Working either individually, in pairs or in groups at your discretion, have students create a mockup newspaper front page or home page. (This can be done by hand or by using a graphics or blogging program.) They are to choose five news stories that they think are most important for people to see. These stories can come from any source including the stories in the front pages they have analyzed or other news exposure.

For each of the five news stories, students should write a short paragraph in which they explain why they feel it is newsworthy.

Extension activity: Spheres of debate

Distribute the handout *Spheres of Debate* and go through it with the class.

Have students return to their groups from the *Front Page* activity. Based on the analysis they did in that activity, which topics or ideas are in the *sphere of consensus* for that outlet? Which are in the *sphere of deviance*? Which are in the *sphere of legitimate controversy*?

Have the groups compare their analysis. How are the spheres similar or different for different outlets? What do the findings say about what is in different spheres in Canada generally? Are there ideas or topics that students feel are placed in the “wrong” sphere, and why?



Newsworthiness

"The news is supposed to be a mirror held up to the world, but the world is far too vast to fit in our mirror. The fundamental thing the media does all day, every day, is decide what to cover – decide, that is, what is newsworthy."
Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized*

Trying to define what constitutes news is a delicate business. Some of the key factors include:

Conflict: People who study news have consistently found that violence, especially violent crime, is much more likely to be covered than other topic. Other kinds of conflict are newsworthy too: a union negotiating a new contract probably won't be newsworthy, but if they go on strike it might.

Competition: What does another newspaper or outlet have today? Journalists don't like to get "beat" on a story and some decisions about coverage are made so that they don't fall behind or get beat in coverage. If a story is "trending" or "going viral" on social media there will be pressure to cover it as well.

Freshness: News has a short shelf life. The longer ago something happened, the less likely it is to get covered. Even an opinion or analysis article needs a "news hook" to connect it to something newsworthy that happened recently.

Impact: Is the only factory in town closing down? That has a bigger impact than two people being laid off, so it's bigger news. A disaster is big news because of its impact, leaving people hurt and homeless. Stories with a *negative* impact are usually seen as more newsworthy: a billion-dollar space telescope launching successfully will only get coverage on a slow news day, but if it blows up on the launch pad it will definitely be news.

Novelty: There's a saying that "if a dog bites a man it isn't news, but if a man bites a dog it's news." That means that things that happen a lot, like car accidents, rarely get covered, while things that are less common like plane crashes do. (Journalists use the term "Hey Martha" for something that will make a reader want to tell someone else about it.)

Prominence: Are celebrities or politicians involved in a story? If so, it's a bigger story. A failed marriage in the Royal Family is a big headline around the world, but your next-door neighbour's problems wouldn't even make the local paper.

Proximity: How close to your audience is the story? This principle applies not just to stories that are close in *distance* but also close in *identity*: if the audience can't identify with the people in the story they're less likely to be interested in it. That's why a story usually has to have some kind of *human interest* to be newsworthy. A storm that knocked down some trees in a forest probably wouldn't be newsworthy by itself, but if some of those trees knocked down someone's house, or if the trees were at a Christmas tree farm, it might.

Specificity: Stories about a single event are more likely to be seen as newsworthy than ones about something that's ongoing, and stories about specific people are more newsworthy than stories about groups or systems.

Visual impact: A story is more likely to be newsworthy if there are striking photos or video to illustrate it.

As well, most news outlets have "**beats**" that are topics assigned to different reporters: the crime beat, City Hall, the stock market, etc. Anything that fits one of these beats is more likely be seen as "newsworthy." To find out an outlet's beats, look for *bylines* (where the reporter's name is listed) like "tech reporter" or "City Hall correspondent."

Functions of the News

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 agenda* by telling audiences what 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.”)

Turn the page over and try to spot:

- A hard news story
- A soft news story
- An opinion article
- An analysis article



Functions of the News: The Front Page

Ukraine / France backs plans for tribunal for Russian officials over war

France is first major western country to publicly support proposal for special court to try for crime of aggression

Live Russia-Ukraine war: Russia pulls back forces from towns opposite Kherson, says Ukraine



Trump tax returns / US House committee gets access after long court fight



World Cup 2022 / Belgium crash out as Lukaku's misses let Croatia off hook

Romelu Lukaku missed several glaring chances for Belgium as they crashed out of the World Cup to let Croatia off the hook after their goalless draw

255

Morocco Atlas Lions top group after Ziyech and En-Nesyri see off Canada



Live / Macron says Russia's war in Ukraine 'first topic of discussion' with Biden

France Bidens to serve Macron and first lady US cheeses

Salah Hamouri / Israel strips Palestinian-French rights lawyer of Jerusalem residency

China / Former leader Jiang Zemin's body arrives in Beijing

Elon Musk / Billionaire says brain chip to begin human trials soon - and plans to get one himself

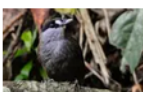
Canada / 'Cease and desist' warning issued to China over 'police stations' in Ottawa

YouTube / Video of Will Smith slapping Chris Rock at Oscars tops chart



Ranked / Girls Aloud's 20 best songs

236



Lost and found / Twitchers delight at sweet song of the black-browed babbler



Dining across the divide / 'It was exhausting being with someone as bright as that'

Opinion



One of us is a millionaire, the other a care worker. The cruel divide between rich and poor disgusts us both

Julia Davies and Winsome Hill

724



Nature positive and 30x30 - just soundbites or the foundations of a Cop15 deal?

The Secret Negotiator

As participants arrive in Montreal to negotiate this decade's targets for protecting biodiversity, two themes are getting the lion's share of attention

I am grateful to Trump for one thing: mainstreaming 'gaslighting'

Emma Brockes



385

We have the tools to end HIV, so why is England falling behind its 2030 goal?

Deborah Gold

28

China's anti-government protesters are risking much. They deserve our admiration - and support

Xuyang Dong

130

Endless debates about soup and paintings serve those who'd prefer we ignore the climate crisis

Zoe Williams

781



Front Page Worksheet

News outlet:

List and analyze the top six stories on the front or home page. (For online news, start counting at the top of the page.)

Headline	Type of Story (Hard or soft news? Opinion? Analysis?)	Topic	What Makes it Newsworthy?

Complete one copy of this handout for each day.

Now take a look at the newsworthiness factors in the last column.

Based on these, what kinds of stories does this outlet consider *newsworthy*?



Spheres of Debate

Whether or not they're aware of it, journalists put different topics in one of three *spheres* when thinking about their newsworthiness. These are:

The *sphere of consensus*, which includes things that are so widely agreed upon that they don't need discussing;

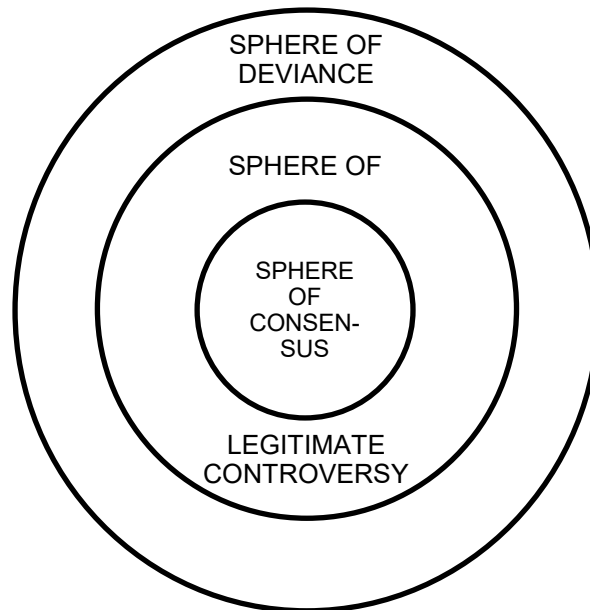
The *sphere of deviance*, which includes things that are so far outside of the mainstream that they aren't worth discussing; and

The *sphere of legitimate controversy*, which includes things that are neither accepted by everybody nor rejected by most people.

Which sphere a topic falls into may be different in different places. The idea that criminals should be given the death penalty is mostly in the *sphere of deviance* in Canada but is in the *sphere of legitimate controversy* in the United States.

Different news outlets also have different spheres, though they tend not to be *too* different.

Spheres can also change over time. The idea of marriage equality for 2SLGBTQ+ people has moved in just a few decades from the *sphere of deviance* to the *sphere of legitimate controversy* and finally the *sphere of consensus* in Canadian news.



If a story is in the sphere of legitimate debate, it will probably be seen as newsworthy and both sides of the issue will be included.

If a story is in the sphere of consensus or the sphere of deviance, either it will not be seen as newsworthy or only one side will be represented. Which sphere a topic is put in can lead to *false consensus* (if it makes it seem like everyone agrees on a topic where there is actually still debate) or *false dissent* (if it makes it seem like there is still debate on an issue where nearly all experts agree.) For example, the vast majority of climate scientists agree the human activity is causing major changes to the climate, but because the topic was put in the sphere of legitimate debate for many years many people believe it is still under debate by scientists.

