

LESSON PLAN

Framing 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 9-12

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Overview

In this lesson, students consider the idea that a news source can be “accurate but misleading” through the concept of framing. Students learn about the different ways that news stories may be framed, identify examples of framing in a news story, then find and evaluate examples of framing in news stories on a particular issue.

Learning Outcomes

Framework topics: Students will learn...

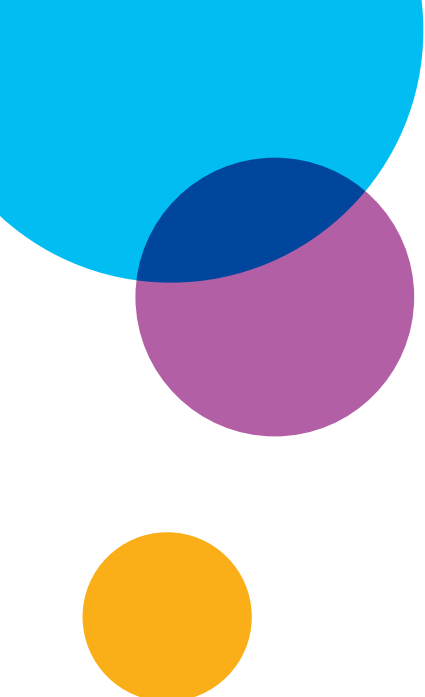
- Reading media: different forms of framing in news media
- Finding and verifying: how framing can lead to works that are accurate but misleading
- Media representation: how framing can contribute to our perceptions of others and the world

Key concepts/big ideas: Students will understand...

- Media are constructions: media makers choose what to include or exclude and how to present what they include
- Media have social and political implications: media can influence politics and social change through agenda-setting
- Each medium has a unique aesthetic form: the structure of news stories may contribute to bias or framing

Core competencies: Students will be able to...

- Access: Search for and research a current news issue
- Understand: critically evaluate a variety of news sources to assess how framing is used in them
- Engage: demonstrate an understanding of the impacts of framing



Student-friendly outcomes: We will learn how news stories use different types of framing, and how this can make us see the world and different people in certain ways. We will think about how media can influence important social and political topics. We will research a current news issue and identify how different news sources frame it.

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the following documents:

- *Framing Headlines*
- *How to Detect Framing in the News*
- *Framing Evaluation Worksheet*

Prepare to show the video [*Reading Media: Framing*](#)

Procedure

FRAMING MEDIA

Start by writing or projecting the following:

“A news story can be 100 percent factually accurate yet not fully truthful.”

(The quote is from Eric Weiner, from the article “The Media is Biased, But Not in the Way You Think.”)

Ask students: How could something be accurate but not truthful?

Let the class discuss this for a few minutes, but do not make any definite conclusions.

Next, show the video *Reading Media: Framing* and then ask students:

What are some of the ways that media can be “framed”?

- What’s included and what’s left out
- What’s emphasized and what’s minimized
- When a story begins and ends
- What kind of work something is
- Our own experiences

Now distribute or project the handout *Framing Headlines*.

Explain to students that different news sources will often use very different headlines for the same story. Everything in each of these headlines is true – but what is included, and the words that are used, is different.

Ask students:

- What does each headline include? What is included in some but not others? How does the specific choice of words change how you think about the story?
 - You can choose to have students answer the questions in point form before taking them up, or just lead a discussion in class. You don't need to get a definitive answer to the follow-up questions, just let students share what they think the answers might be.

Ultraprocessed food: How does each headline make you see the story differently?

- The first headline highlights the decrease (“slightly less”) while the second one highlights the total amount (“more than half”)
- Now ask: The newspaper that ran this story changed from the first headline to the second one. Why do you think they might have done that?

Crime: How can all these headlines be correct?

- Each one is compared to a different year: the first (up 3%) is compared to 2022, the previous year; the second (up 14%) is compared to 2014; and the third (down 25%) is compared to 2003.
- Now ask: Which do you think gives the most meaningful information? Why?

COVID vaccines: How might these headlines give you different impressions about how safe COVID vaccines are?

- The first includes only the risks and uses a word (“slight”) that suggests they are small but not tiny.
 - The second also includes only the risks but uses the phrase “very rare” which makes them seem much less likely; it also includes how large the study was, which shows how reliable it's likely to be.

- The third is the only one that includes the fact that the risk of those same effects from getting COVID is much higher than it is from getting the vaccine.
- Now ask: How might seeing these different headlines affect someone's decision about whether or not to get the COVID vaccine?

Warning labels for junk news: How do these headlines draw opposite conclusions from the same study?

- One focuses on what the study found about most news readers. The second focuses on what the study found on readers that read the most “fake news.”

Now ask: Which of those might be more important in deciding if warning labels on “fake news” articles are useful?

Now show students the video [Reading Media: Framing](#).

After the video, have students return to the quote from the beginning of the lesson: “A news story can be 100 percent factually accurate yet not fully truthful.” How does what they’ve learned about framing help them understand that idea?

FRAMING IN THE NEWS

Distribute the article *How to Detect Framing in the News* and either have students read it and answer questions or go through it as a class. Which of these forms of framing might be difficult for people to notice if they're not aware of them? (For example, “Framing through omission” might be difficult to detect because we don't often think about what's **not** in a story, or what news **isn't** covered.)

Now introduce the idea that each medium *has a unique aesthetic form* and discuss the “inverted pyramid” (described in *How to Detect Framing in the News*) to understand how **where** in a story something appears that might affect how a story is read. (Point out that TV and radio newscasts are written in the same way, but because time is so much more precious on TV the background and context that form the “bottom” of the pyramid is often left out.)

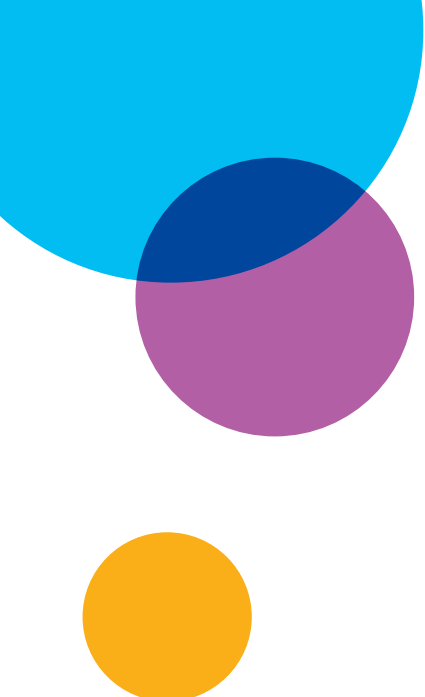
Now distribute the article *Florida girl, 7, suspended for 36th time for not wearing mask to school*. (Reprinted from *The Toronto Sun* under Fair Dealing rights to education and criticism.) Have students read it and identify examples of framing such as:

- Framing through selection and omission: We are told that Fiona “loves arts and crafts, drawing, painting and making jewelry,” which give us a positive impression of her. What is not included is any information about the risks of getting COVID or the effectiveness of masks in preventing infections.
- Framing by headline: Including her age makes her seem more vulnerable.
- Framing by photos: The photo of Fiona makes her seem very likeable and innocent. (Compare it to other photos you’ve seen of people who are in trouble for breaking rules or laws.)
- Framing by word choice: We are told Fiona “refuses to comply.” What other phrases might be used to say the same thing?
 - She is described as “politically inclined,” “strong-minded” and “fearless.” Based on what we know from the article, what other words might be used to describe her?
- Framing by source and quote: Almost all of the quotes, and even the photo, are provided by Fiona’s mother. The only other quote is from the Governor of Florida, who is on Fiona’s side. There are no quotes from the school, the school district, or any public health authorities.

FRAMING IN THE WILD

Select one or more issues in the news and divide the class into 4-6 groups. Assign each group a different news/information source with which to research the topic. (You can use <https://www.newspapersland.com/canada/> to find news sources.)

Have students evaluate the material they have found using the *Framing Evaluation Worksheet* and report their findings to the class. What forms of framing did they find? Did some news sources use some kinds of framing more than others? Were some kinds of framing more difficult to detect or recognize than others (for example, “Framing through omission” can be difficult to detect unless we know from other sources that a story is going unreported)?

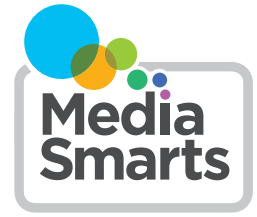


EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Have each student select a minority group and a news source. For a period of one week, have students follow their chosen news source and make note of every story or article that involves members of their chosen minority group. At the end of the week, students should analyze what they have found using the *Framing Evaluation Worksheet* (remind students that a lack of coverage is itself a form of bias).

If any students wish to analyze bias against a group that you feel is dominant or advantaged (Whites, males, heterosexuals, etc.) take a few minutes to do the [Unpacking Privilege](#) mini-lesson and make your decision based on the students' analysis in that activity.

FRAMING THE NEWS



Framing Headlines

Different news sources often use very different headlines for the same story.

Look at each group of headlines. Everything in each headline is true, but the content and words used differ.

What does each headline contain? What is in some headlines and not in others? How does the specific choice of words change your perception of the story?

- “Americans are consuming slightly less ultra-processed food, according to data.”
- “Ultra-processed foods still make up more than half of Americans’ diets.”

How does each headline make you view the article differently?

- “Crime in Canada rose 3% in 2023.”
- “Crime in Canada rose 14% in 2023”
- “Crime in Canada fell 25% in 2023”

How can all of these headlines be correct?

- “COVID vaccines linked to slight increase in heart, brain, and blood disorders: study”
- “Two very rare side effects of COVID vaccines detected in global study of 99 million people.”
- “COVID vaccines linked to slight increase in heart and brain disorders, study finds, but risk of infection much higher.”

How might these headlines give you different impressions about the safety of COVID vaccines?

- “Labeling fake news sites does not deter most readers.”
- “Heavy consumers of fake news could benefit from warning labels.”

How do these headlines draw opposite conclusions from the same study?

FRAMING THE NEWS

How to Identify Framing in the News

Despite the journalistic ideal of “objectivity,” every news story is influenced by the attitudes, assumptions and background of its interviewers, writers, photographers and editors.

1. Framing 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.

Framing through omission is difficult to detect. Only by comparing news reports from a wide variety of outlets can this form of framing 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. Framing 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.

Framing through placement can also 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 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 framing 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. Framing 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. Framing 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. For example, news stories about climate change often have “fun in the sun” photos that frame it as being a less worrying issue.

5. Framing 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. Framing 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. False balance framing

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. Framing through statistics

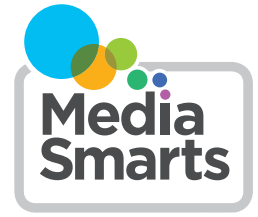
Many news stories include statistics: crowd counts, vote totals, temperature records, and so on. There can be bias in *which* statistics are included (showing temperatures dropping from August to December doesn’t give you an accurate picture of the whole year, for example) and also in how those statistics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

For example, consider a story that focuses on the fact that “millions” of people in the US did not get their second dose of Covid-19 vaccine and another that focuses on how many people *did* get it (hundreds of millions) 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.

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

FRAMING THE NEWS



Florida girl, 7, suspended for 36th time for not wearing mask to school

Denette Wilford, Ottawa Sun. November 4 2021



Photo by Bailey Lashells

Fiona Lashells, a student in Palm Beach County, has already been suspended 36 times, and has also faced multiple in-school disciplinary actions – and we’re only at the beginning of November.

Encouraged by her mother, Bailey Lashells, little Fiona refuses to comply with mask mandates and is “on a mission to take back, not only her rights but every American child’s constitutional rights from the tyrant school board,” the proud mom told The Free Press.

Lashells said her daughter “has been steadfast in her unwavering decision to

not back down to tyranny and lunacy vowing to do everything she can for every child going thru these lawless mandates.”

Who would’ve thought a second grader, who loves arts and crafts, drawing, painting and making jewelry, would also be so politically inclined?

“Fiona is a strong-minded and fearless young girl who was ready to conquer the world at seven,” her mom said. “Unfortunately, the blows just seem to not stop as she was recently told after completing every assignment her teacher will provide that she is not only failing second grade but that there is no way she could catch up, per her teacher.”

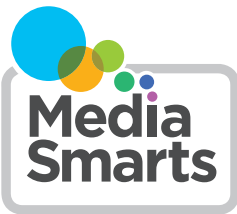
In July, Governor Ron DeSantis shared that he believed it was parents’ choice to send their children to school wearing a mask, but various school boards in the state have enforced their own rules. DeSantis’s press secretary said the “singling out” of one student is in direct violation of state law and the Parents’ Bill of Rights.

Fiona’s first punishment came on Aug. 31, in the form of eating her lunch alone, in silence, in an office hallway.

What examples can you find of the framing techniques we learned about?

How does that affect how you read the story?

FRAMING THE NEWS



Framing Evaluation Worksheet

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For your news source, list all examples you can find of each form of framing, along with a quote or other evidence that shows how it is framed that way.

Source: _____

Framing by headline:

Framing through selection and omission:

Framing through placement:

Framing by photos, captions and camera angles:

Framing through word choice:

Framing through false balance:

Framing by source control:

Framing through statistics:
