Screen Stigma: Looking at Mental Illness in the News

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

LEVEL: Grade 9 to 10

DURATION: 1 to 1 ½ hours, plus time for the assessment/evaluation

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Overview

In this lesson, students learn about the ways in which news coverage of an event or issue can be biased, focusing on the aspects of the medium and industry that can lead to bias. They read an article that examines the coverage of mental illness in the news and then participate in an interactive activity that lets them compose their own article. Finally, students find and analyze a recent news story on a mental health topic and write a letter either praising or critiquing it.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Learn about bias in news coverage
- Learn how biased news coverage affects our views on mental illness and contributes to stigma
- Critically evaluate a media text
- Create and receive feedback on a media text
- Write a critical text

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the following handouts:

- *Mental Illness in the News*
- *How to Detect Bias in the News*
- *Sorting Out Bias: Mental Illness in the News*
- *Bias Evaluation Worksheet*

Photocopy the assignment sheet *Letter to the Editor*

Review the teacher backgrounder *Sorting Out Bias: Mental Illness in the News (Teacher's Copy)*

If you feel your students need a primer on the key concepts of media literacy explored in this lesson, you can prepare to show them the videos *Media Have Social and Political Implications* and *Each Medium Has a Unique Aesthetic Form*.

Procedure

UNDERSTANDING BIAS

Start by writing the following three sentences on the board:

"Student activists stand up to axing of arts program"
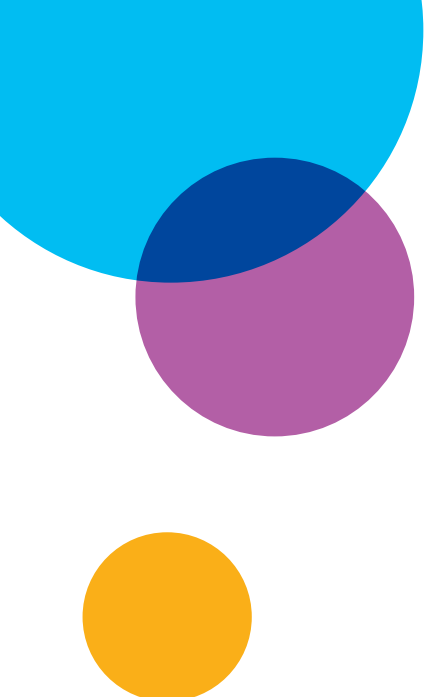
"Student group protests school budget cuts"

"Youth mob disrupts school board meeting"

Ask students: How do each of these give a different impression of the same event? What can you tell from each headline about how the writer feels?

Tell students that each of these is an example of *bias*, even the middle one. Explain to students that while all news stories (and news outlets) have some kind of bias, reliable outlets take steps to limit or acknowledge their bias.

Introduce the idea that *media contain ideological messages and have social and political implications* and ask students why news is particularly significant when it comes to bias. (Because we expect news to be objective and unbiased; because we use news to learn about and understand what's going on in the world.) Ask students to brainstorm other ways in which bias might occur in news sources: what choices might writers, editors, producers, and so on, make (consciously or unconsciously) that would lead to a biased view of the subject they're covering?

Distribute the article *How to Detect Bias in the News* and go through it as a class. Compare the forms of bias in the article to the list the students brainstormed in the previous activity. Which forms of bias did they miss? What about these forms of bias might be difficult for people to notice if they're not aware of them? (For example, "Bias 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 Bias 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.)

MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE NEWS

Distribute the article *Mental Illness in the News* and have students read it and answer questions. Take up the questions with the class:

1. How does news coverage of mental illness reinforce stigma?

It mostly shows people with mental illness in connection with violent acts. This reinforces stigma by making people less willing to talk about their mental illness.

2. Briefly describe the three ways the article says news media could improve how they cover mental illness.

Use responsible language; make sure the voices of people with mental illness are represented; correct misconceptions about mental illness.

3. Why is it not enough to just not talk about mental illness in articles about violent acts?
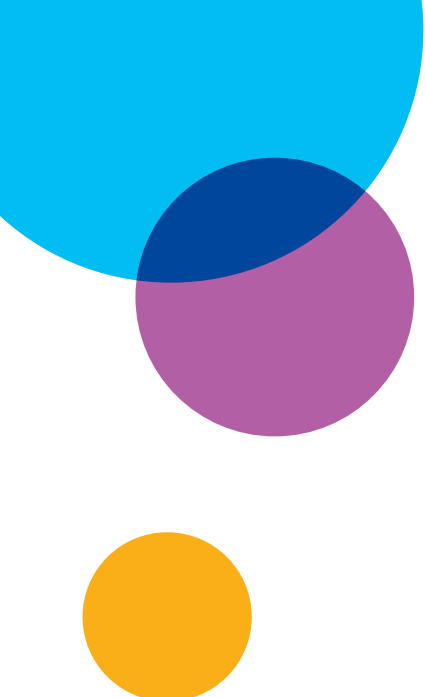
Because even articles about violence that don't mention mental illness make people more likely to think that people with mental illness are violent.

4. What reason did researchers give for why media coverage of mental illness in Canada had improved between 2005 and 2015?

A campaign to educate journalists on how to cover mental illness responsibly.

SORTING OUT BIAS

Put students in pairs and distribute the handout *Sorting Out Bias*. Have each student read the headline for the three stories in the handout and then select four of the eight possible sentences for the news story, trying to avoid any with a negative bias.

If you like, you can have them do the activity using a newspaper article generator such as The Newspaper Clipping Generator (https://www.fodey.com/generators/newspaper/snippet.asp) or the Free Newspaper Generator (https://newspaper.jaguarpaw.co.uk/).

Have them read their article to their partners, then have students discuss with their partners the choices they made. Which sentences did they both choose and which were different? Were there examples that looked neutral (or even positive) to one student that another felt was negative?

Using the *Teacher's Copy,* go through the three stories with the class and discuss the choices they made.

When you have gone through the third story, ask students to consider how the order in which they appeared in the story might also affect what impression readers took away from it:

- "More than half of Canadians who died in encounters with police since 2000 were dealing with mental health issues or drug abuse."

- "Many people with mental illness don't have access to resources to help them manage their condition."

- "People with mental illness are no more likely to be violent than anyone else."

- "One in five Canadians lives with a mental illness."

How would we read it differently if each of those sentences were the first one mentioned in the article? (For example, opening with the first one might contribute to the idea that people with mental illness are violent.)

LETTER TO THE EDITORS (ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION ACTIVITY)

Distribute the assignment sheet *Letter to the Editors* and have students find a newspaper article or TV news segment that deals with mental issue. After analyzing the article to determine whether and how it is biased, students will write a letter or e-mail to an appropriate recipient (the newspaper or broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council, their province's Press Council) either praising or critiquing the piece.
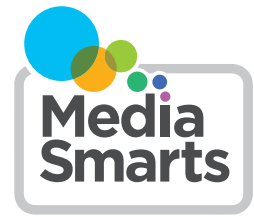
SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE NEWS

Mental Illness in the News

Imagine that you never saw dogs in real life, and that the only time you ever saw dogs in the media was in news stories about people being bitten by them. You'd almost certainly think that dog bites happened a lot, and if you ever actually saw a dog you'd probably be scared of it.

That's the way that the news mostly portrays mental illness. Most of the time, when mental illness in general -- or any specific mental illness -- is mentioned in a news story, it's connected to a violent act. Sometimes that's because someone who did (or is accused of doing) something violent actually has a mental illness, sometimes it's news writers speculating on why someone did something violent.

Either way, the result is the same: even though people with mental illness are no more likely than anyone else to commit violent acts, news readers and viewers come to believe that they are more likely to be violent. (They are more likely to be *victims* of violence, though that's also rarely mentioned in news stories.)

Even worse, this increases the *stigma* that is felt by people with mental illness, so that they are less likely to talk about it. Because of that, there are probably people in your life who are living with mental illness and you don't know it -- which means that these media portrayals are more likely to be the only place you see it.

How can the news do better? One easy step is to be careful in what *language* they use to talk about mental illness: resources like the Mental Health Commission of Canada's *Mindset* guide (https://sites.google.com/a/journalismforum.ca/mindset-mediaguide-ca/mindset-download) give reporters and editors guidelines on non-stigmatizing ways to talk about mental illness.

It's also important to make sure that the voices of people with mental illness are heard in the story. This is essential to making the story about a person, rather than the illness, and it helps to fight stigma by letting readers see multiple sides of the issue.

News stories should also make a point of correcting common misconceptions about mental illness. Researchers have found that even if articles about violent acts don't mention mental illness at all, they still make readers more likely to believe that people with mental illness are more likely to be violent. This is probably because there have been so many inaccurate articles about mental illness and violence that it doesn't need to be mentioned to reinforce that belief. Because of that, journalists should make sure to clearly state that people with mental illness are no more likely to be violent than other people.

The good news is that things *are* getting better -- and that you can help. A recent study found that news coverage of mental illness in Canada improved significantly between 2005 and 2015, which the authors thought was partly because of campaigns to educate journalists about how to cover it responsibly. The next time you read an article where mental illness is mentioned, remember that you can help by writing to news outlets or press councils when you see inaccurate coverage of mental illness.
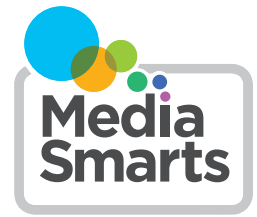
QUESTIONS

1. How does news coverage of mental illness reinforce stigma?

2. Briefly describe the three ways the article says news media could improve how they cover mental illness.

3. Why is it not enough to just not talk about mental illness in articles about violent acts?

4. What reason did researchers give for why media coverage of mental illness in Canada had improved between 2005 and 2015?
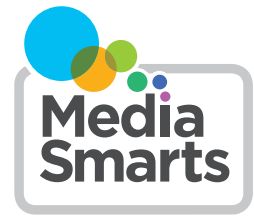
SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE NEWS

How to Detect Bias in the News

At one time or other 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 and background of the people involved in its creation.

You can become more aware of bias by watching for the following journalistic techniques that allow it to "creep in" to the news:

BIAS THROUGH SELECTION AND OMISSION

A journalist can express a bias by choosing to use or not to use a specific news item. Within a given story, some details can be ignored, and others included, to give readers or viewers a different opinion about the events reported. For example, if, during a speech, a few people boo, the reaction can be described as "remarks greeted by jeers" or they can be ignored as "a handful of dissidents."

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.

BIAS THROUGH PLACEMENT

Readers of papers judge first page stories to be more significant than those buried in the back, while news websites place the most important stories on their home page. Television and radio newscasts run the most important stories first and leave the less significant for later. Where a story is placed, therefore, influences what a reader or viewer thinks about its importance.

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 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.

BIAS BY HEADLINE

Many people read only the headlines of a news item. Most people scan nearly all the headlines in a newspaper or website. 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.

BIAS BY WORD CHOICE AND TONE

The use of words with a positive or negative connotation can strongly influence the reader or viewer: consider how a hockey game might be seen differently if it's described as a "loss," a "close game" or a "near-win."

BIAS BY PHOTOS, CAPTIONS AND CAMERA ANGLES

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

BIAS THROUGH USE OF NAMES AND TITLES

News media often use labels and titles to describe people, places and events. A person can be called an "ex-con" or be referred to as someone who "served time 20 years ago for a minor offense." Whether a person is described as a "terrorist" or a "freedom fighter" is a clear indication of editorial bias.

BIAS THROUGH STATISTICS AND CROWD COUNTS

To make a disaster seem more spectacular (and therefore more newsworthy), numbers can be inflated. Compare "More than 900 people attended the event" with "Fewer than 1,000 people showed up at the event."

BIAS BY SOURCE CONTROL

To detect bias, 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 "fluff pieces" through news releases, photos or videos. Often news outlets depend on pseudo-events (demonstrations, sit-ins, ribbon cuttings, speeches and ceremonies) that take place mainly to gain news coverage.
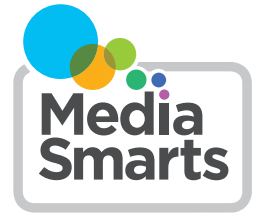
SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE NEWS

Bias Evaluation Worksheet

For your news source, list all examples you can find of each form of bias, along with a quote or other evidence that shows the bias is there.

SOURCE:

BIAS THROUGH SELECTION AND OMISSION: **BIAS BY WORD CHOICE AND TONE:**

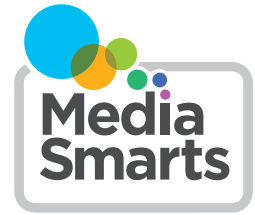**BIAS THROUGH PLACEMENT:**   **BIAS BY HEADLINE:**

BIAS BY PHOTOS, CAPTIONS AND CAMERA ANGLES:

BIAS THROUGH STATISTICS AND CROWD COUNTS:

**BIAS THROUGH USE OF NAMES AND TITLES:**

BIAS BY SOURCE CONTROL:

SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE NEWS

Letter to the Editors (Assessment/Evaluation Activity)

For this assignment, you will need to find a newspaper article or TV news segment that deals with a mental health issue. You can do this by searching Google for "mental health" or "mental illness," or for specific mental health conditions such as "depression", "anxiety," "bipolar" or "schizophrenia" and clicking on the News tab or by using MediaSmarts's custom News search, bit.ly/news-search.

Make sure it is a news story and not an editorial or opinion piece.
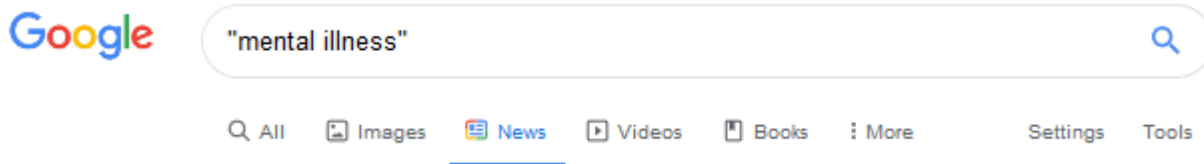
Use the *Bias Evaluation Worksheet* to identify whether and how the article is biased.

Based on your analysis, write a letter expressing your opinion about the article. Make sure to be specific about the positive and/or negative aspects of the article.

Do some research to find out which of the following would be most appropriate to send the letter to:

• Canadian Broadcast Standards Council

• National NewsMedia Council

• The newspaper or broadcaster itself (find out if they have a Public Editor or ombudsperson; if not, find out the appropriate address for letters to the editor)
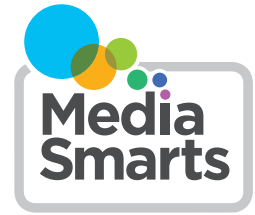
SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE NEWS

Sorting Out Bias: Mental Illness in the News

Small changes can make a big difference in what people take away from a news story about mental illness. For each of these three stories, pick the four sentences that you think do the best job of giving important facts and avoiding stigma. You can show which ones you chose by highlighting or circling them, then read your story to your partner.

HEADLINE: "SINGER DRAWS STRENGTH FROM HER STRUGGLES WITH MENTAL ILLNESS"

Pick **four** of the following sentences to write the rest of the article:

"Kacy Rose, lead singer of Sugar Rush, was diagnosed with mental illness in her late teens."

"Kacy Rose, lead singer of Sugar Rush, might not look like someone who's dealing with mental illness."

"Mental illness is a lifelong struggle."

"Rose has been receiving treatment since she was 18."

"Rose's struggles with mental illness have fueled her creative energies."

"73 percent of musicians say they suffer some symptoms of mental illness."

"Rose's treatment, including medication, lets her manage her condition and pursue her music career."

"Art and mental illness have been tied together since the beginning of history."

HEADLINE: "MOVIE DRAWS CRITICISM FOR MENTAL ILLNESS STEREOTYPES"

Pick **four** of the following sentences to write the rest of the article:

"The upcoming movie Skorpio has received criticism for the portrayal of its villain as schizophrenic."

"The upcoming movie Skorpio has received criticism for the portrayal of its villain as having schizophrenia."

"'Every time a movie like this comes out, it gets harder to talk about mental illness,' said writer Michael Wong, who has been receiving treatment for schizophrenia since his early twenties."

"Despite the many movie villains shown as having mental illness, in real life people with mental illness are actually more likely to be victims of violence."

"Hank Wilman, who plays the character, made an intense study of schizophrenia before filming the movie."

"'Portrayals like these have a negative effect on how society views people with this condition,' according to Doctor Helen Diaz, a psychiatrist who specializes in schizophrenia treatment."

"Jerome Breihan, a longtime fan of the Skorpio comic book on which the movie is based, pointed out that the character was described as mentally ill in his first appearance in 1974."

"Skorpio adds to the long list of movies whose villains are portrayed as mentally ill."

HEADLINE: "TRAIN POLICE TO DEESCALATE CONFLICTS, MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATES SAY"

Pick **four** of the following sentences to write the rest of the article:

"More than half of Canadians who died in encounters with police since 2000 were dealing with mental health issues or drug abuse."

"Mental illness was the cause of more than half of police-related deaths since 2000."

"Police often see people with mental illness as threatening because they react in unpredictable ways."

"Many people with mental illness don't have access to resources to help them manage their condition."

"People with mental illness are no more likely to be violent than anyone else."

"Fewer than a third of Canadians with mental illness seek help for their condition."

"One in five Canadians suffers from a mental illness."

"One in five Canadians lives with a mental illness."
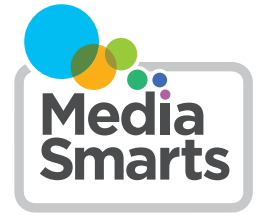
SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE NEWS

Sorting Out Bias: Mental Illness in the News (Teacher's Copy)

HEADLINE: "SINGER DRAWS STRENGTH FROM HER STRUGGLES WITH MENTAL ILLNESS"

"Kacy Rose, lead singer of Sugar Rush, was diagnosed with mental illness in her late teens."

Positive. This choice presents the facts neutrally, without promoting any negative tropes about mental illness.

"Kacy Rose, lead singer of Sugar Rush, might not look like someone who's dealing with mental illness."

Negative. Don't fall into the stereotype that people with mental illness look different from other people.

"Mental illness is a lifelong struggle."

Negative. Some people do recover fully from mental illness, and lots of others manage it successfully.

"Rose has been receiving treatment since she was 18."

Positive. It's important to make readers understand that mental illness can be treated successfully.

"Rose's struggles with mental illness have fueled her creative energies."

Negative. This is a dangerous stereotype that can keep people from seeking treatment.

"73 percent of musicians say they suffer some symptoms of mental illness."

Positive. This choice makes clear that this is a common and important problem without promoting any myths or stereotypes.

"Rose's treatment, including medication, lets her manage her condition and pursue her music career."

Positive. This choice focuses on treatment instead of

suggesting that mental illness is a source of inspiration.

"Art and mental illness have been tied together since the beginning of history."

Negative. Untreated mental illness is much more likely to keep artists from having a full career than it is to inspire them.

HEADLINE: "MOVIE DRAWS CRITICISM FOR MENTAL ILLNESS STEREOTYPES"

"The upcoming movie Skorpio has received criticism for the portrayal of its villain as schizophrenic."

Negative. Always refer to a mental illness as something a person has, not what a person is.

"The upcoming movie Skorpio has received criticism for the portrayal of its villain as having schizophrenia."

Positive. Always refer to a mental illness as something a person has, not what a person is.

"'Every time a movie like this comes out, it gets harder to talk about mental illness,' said writer Michael Wong, who has been receiving treatment for schizophrenia since his early twenties."

Positive. It's important to include the voices or people with mental illness in any story on the topic.

"Despite the many movie villains shown as having mental illness, in real life people with mental illness are actually more likely to be victims of violence."

Positive. It's not enough not to spread the myth that people with mental illness are violent: you need to counter it as well.

"Hank Wilman, who plays the character, made an intense study of schizophrenia before filming the movie."

Negative. That might make his performance better, but he didn't write the script.

"'Portrayals like these have a negative effect on how society views people with this condition,' according to Doctor Helen Diaz, a psychiatrist who specializes in schizophrenia treatment."

Positive. It's good to include quotes from people who are genuine experts on the topic of mental illness.

"Jerome Breihan, a longtime fan of the Skorpio comic book on which the movie is based, pointed out that the character was described as mentally ill in his first appearance in 1974."

Negative. The fact that a negative stereotype has been around for forty years doesn't make it less of a stereotype.

"Skorpio adds to the long list of movies whose villains are portrayed as mentally ill."

Negative. This looks neutral – but if you don't actively counter the idea that people with mental illness are violent, you can spread it without meaning to.

HEADLINE: "TRAIN POLICE TO DEESCALATE CONFLICTS, MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATES SAY"

"More than half of Canadians who died in encounters with police since 2000 were dealing with mental health issues or drug abuse."

Positive. Phrasing it this way shows that mental illness was a factor in the deaths, but didn't cause them.

"Mental illness was the cause of more than half of police-related deaths since 2000."

Negative. Saying that mental illness "caused" the deaths suggests that nothing could have been done to prevent them.

"Police often see people with mental illness as threatening because they react in unpredictable ways."

Negative. Including inaccurate quotes or perspectives without questioning them can spread misinformation.

"Many people with mental illness don't have access to resources to help them manage their condition."

Positive. Phrasing it this way avoids blaming people with mental illness for not seeking help.

"People with mental illness are no more likely to be violent than anyone else."

Positive. It's essential to mention this in any article about mental illness and violence.

"Fewer than a third of Canadians with mental illness seek help for their condition."

Negative. Phrasing it this way suggests that people at mental illness are to blame for not seeking help, without asking if the help they need is available.

"One in five Canadians suffers from a mental illness."

Negative. Little things can make a big difference! Phrasing it this way suggests that there is no way to treat mental illness.

"One in five Canadians lives with a mental illness."

Positive. Phrasing it this way shows that mental illness is just a part of people's lives.

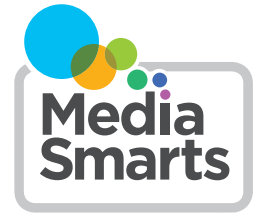# SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE NEWS
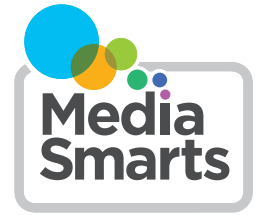
Writing a Letter to the Editor

As well as traditional letters to the editor, many newspapers, magazines and websites allow you to comment on stories. If you want your voice to be heard, here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Make one point (or at most two) in your comment. State the point clearly, ideally in the first sentence.

- Be specific. Refute or support specific statements, address relevant facts that are ignored, but do avoid blanket attacks on the media in general or the newspaper in particular.

- Keep it brief. (Generally, roughly two short paragraphs are ideal.) If you want your letter to appear in the print edition you usually have to include your name, signature, address and phone number.

- Look at the letters that appear in your paper. Is a certain type of letter usually printed?

- Support your facts. If the topic you address is controversial, consider sending documentation along with your letter but don't overload the editors with too much information.

- Always sign your letters as an individual or representative of a community group.

Source: From FAIR's Media Activism Kit. Originally posted on the FAIR website. Republished with permission.

SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE NEWS

Evaluation Rubric

Access	Finding and Verifying: • Find information needed for your task and avoid unwanted or irrelevant content Community Engagement: • Actively seek out information that provides new perspectives and viewpoints	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)
Understand	Reading Media: • Understand how different media and genres communicate meaning through codes and conventions Media Representation: • Analyze biases in oneself and one's community and how those influence how and what news and other content are consumed • Understand how media, including those produced by one's peers and oneself, influence our views of reality and our identity • Identify frequent gender, racial and other stereotypes in media and analyze their origins and impact • Understand how media representations can influence self-perception and identity, including relating to gender, race and ability Consumer Awareness: • Understand the norms and practices of key media industries such as news, film, advertising, search engines and social networks Community Engagement • Understand the commercial, legislative and regulatory contexts and implications of different media and tools	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)
Engage	Community Engagement: • Respond to the social and political implications of a media work • Use digital and other media tools for civic engagement purposes • Know and exercise avenues for redress as a citizen, user and consumer Media Representation • Compare media representations to one's own identity and experience	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)