



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 5 to 12

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How to Analyze the News

Overview

The following lesson offers an analytical framework teachers, media specialists and parents may use with children and students of various ages, to help them understand the process by which news is constructed.

Preparation and Materials

- Read the educational backgrounder *Analyzing the News: Introduction*

Procedure

An Analytical Framework: Exploring the News as Stories For the Young Child

A rather simple approach to begin this process with younger children, links broadcast news to literature by exploring the news as stories. Since K-6 students typically study stories and children's literature, this method provides a context with some potentially useful consequences.

The first thing this does is move the news from the sheltered and protected domain where it is seen as a reflection of reality, to a position among all other television programs. Now it can be seen as a construction or representation of a partial reality, rather than reality itself. It can be revealed as a series of selected stories (national, state, regional, local), each of which fits a particular genre (human interest, political, crime/violence) and comes to us replete with codes, conventions and a cast of characters—both stereotypical and non-stereotypical.

Serving as our guide, master (or mistress) of ceremonies and electronic shaman or storyteller, is the anchor. He or she joins all the stories together, presenting them in a way meant to both inform and entertain us. Any analysis of these stories in terms of both form and content will reveal assumptions about what constitutes news, what interests the American public and the relationship between news, public opinion and public policy.

While these issues are perhaps beyond the realm of young children, this age group is perfectly capable of exploring how stories are created and from whose perspective or point of view they are told. In fact, the types of activities often covered in their work with children's literature, fit nicely into the media literacy framework. It is now quite common to find



young children being asked to retell a famous story from the perspective of another character. For example, telling the story of *Jack and the Beanstalk* through the eyes of the giant or the giant's wife. One excellent book based upon this concept is *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (Scieszka) which goes directly to the question of how the facts of the story must be related to who is doing the telling. Having used this book with children, student teachers and adults, I have found it to be an excellent introduction to critical thinking and viewing skills.

Classroom Application:

- Talk with students about stories.
- What kinds themes and characters do you find in stories?
- How is the news like a story?
- How is it different?
- How does the point of view of the person or character telling a story affect us?
- What is a possible problem when we only get one person's point of view?

Describe the term *Bias*:

Bias is a one-sided view, which a person may have because of some reason or motivation to see things in a certain way. For example, if two people had a fight in the schoolyard, each one would report the incident according to his/her point of view. Other people who saw the fight might also have a certain bias or point of view when they tell the story, depending on the experience they brought to the fight, and their feelings about the people involved in the fight.

Ask students to recount the story of the *Three Little Pigs*.

- Who is/are the bad guy(s) in this story? How do you know?
- Who is/are the good guy(s) in this story? How do you know?

Read Jon Scieszka's story *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* to students.

- Who are the good and bad guys in this version of the story?
- How is this version different from the usual version?
- Who are we more likely to believe—the wolf or the three pigs? Why? (*This might be a good opportunity to discuss stereotypes.*)
- How would you define a reliable story-teller?
- How can you tell the difference between fact and opinion? (An optional activity here is the activity sheet *Wolves: Fact or Opinion.*)

Tape a couple of age-appropriate news stories (as presented by a network anchor) and play them for students. For each, ask:

- What is this story about?
- Who is telling these stories?
- Whose perspective do we hear?



- Whose perspective is missing?
- How might another perspective affect the story?
- What is fact?
- What is opinion?

For the Upper Grades

From the upper level of the elementary school onwards, the following framework is a practical method for helping children deconstruct news, recognizing its various components and the how it is assembled. This method can help them become critical thinkers and viewers as they evaluate the way the mass media selects and filters information. Those teachers who are interested in multicultural education can study the news to examine ethnocentric bias and the way other cultures and countries are covered. While ABC, for example, claims to be "world news," any honest appraisal of their content would have to ask just whose world is being represented.

A Framework for Deconstructing News: Recognizing its components and the process of assembling it

The Stories: Have students create an itemized list of each story covered on a broadcast or in an issue of a newspaper. This is fascinating when compared to a paper or broadcast from the same day. If it is news, why do they not all cover the same stories, or cover them the same way?

The Sequence: Have students list the stories in the order in which they appear. This could be according to the front page, the lead or opening story etc. Students intuitively know that the most important story is up front. Comparing lead stories in newspapers and news programs again reveals the subjective nature of this priority.

The Scope: Here students concentrate on the running time, the space or column inches devoted to a story. Students will begin to note that some stories that do not rank as high in sequence, actually rank quite high on the scope scale, especially if there is graphic footage with entertainment values or high levels of conflict.

The Structure: How is the story structured? What does it consist of? This includes aspects such as a lead-in by the anchor, live interview in studio with a key figure in the story; analysis from a reporter or commentator; news box or graphics behind the anchor's head; on the scene report from place with high recognition, e.g. Congress, or the Supreme Court.

The Style: Related to the structure, this now deals with the look and feel of the piece. This can be described as the aesthetics or *mise en scene* (see *Visual Messages*, Considine and Haley 1992). It can include posture and body language of the reporters and anchor as well as consideration of the camera angle. Students can begin to look at the framing process and ask not just what is shown but what is left out, what the camera is not showing. This helps them to recognize that the camera can lie by showing only a partial picture. The set in which the anchor is located also is part of the style. Tom Brokaw's newsroom, with its monitors and computer banks, seems like the control tower at Cape Kennedy or some government war room. The overall style conveys power upon the anchor or network and encourages the viewer to surrender to their authority and point of view.

The Statement and Slant: This can be presented on a simple scale of bias running from neutral in the center to positive or negative. Students need to evaluate each story in terms of its objectivity. When bias is detected, students have to agree upon the bias, locating it in terms of visual or verbal cues. We have described this elsewhere in terms of "weighted words," "loaded language," and "prejudiced pictures."



The Sponsor: Since the news exists because of advertising revenue, it should not be isolated from those who bring it to us. The advertisements enable us to read the news in terms of who brings it to us--and more importantly, what assumptions they have about us. By reading the commercials we are in fact reading ourselves. We intuitively know that Saturday morning cartoons are often presented by the makers of fast food, action toys and high-sugar cereals that are based on toy or cartoon characters. Those sponsors are targeting what they see as the nature and needs of young viewers. If television news is heavily sponsored by insurance companies, alcohol manufacturer's, headache relief remedies, hemorrhoidal suppositories and ocean cruises, what do we learn about audience demographics? What age group, what income bracket and what fears and fantasies does the news and its sponsors target? How might the content of the news shape the products that it promotes and vice versa?



Wolves: Fact or Opinion

Identify which of the following statements are facts, and which are opinions. How can you find out this information?

Statement	Fact or Opinion?	Why?
Wolves are sly, cunning and mean.		
Wolves live in packs or families.		
Some North American native people think that the wolf is brave, loyal and		
Wolves are carnivores.		
A wolf will only eat meat from a freshly killed animal.		
Wolves have supernatural powers.		
Wolves are very clever.		
Wolves are always hungry.		
Wolves will accept humans into their pack.		
Some Inuit people use wolves as work animals.		
Wolves can dig with their paws.		
Wolves will gang up on a member of their own pack.		
Wolves have a nine-week gestation period.		



Analyzing the News: Introduction

I had already agreed to write this piece for *Telemedium* and was well under way on the article when the October 24th [1992] issue of *TV Guide* hit the stands. For those who missed the issue, this was the one with the front page proclaiming "Teaching Kids How to Watch TV." Many of us involved in the media literacy movement had been contacted by the reporter and had assisted in the preparation of this piece. I myself had been interviewed extensively, consulted during the editing of the piece, and I had written dealing with various aspects of media literacy. The staff of National Telemedia Council and other media organizations around the country, well aware of the enormous circulation of *TV Guide* looked forward to the publication of the piece in the belief that it could make a significant contribution to the public's awareness of the media literacy movement. While most of us had, in the past, had some experience with telling the press one thing and seeing another in print, we blissfully suspended disbelief, opting instead to believe that this time the press would get it right.

"Point of View" Matters

Before I get down to the reality of what actually found its way into print, let me respond to those of you who are asking, "what has *TV Guide* got to do with news?" The answer rather depends on how we define news. For our purposes the article in question contained information, that for many readers would have been new. This information had been researched, collected, written, edited and published. During the process, the reporter had to assemble the facts and opinions from a variety of sources, review them, verify various elements for accuracy about the target audience (reader) and the various time, space and format constraints of the publication. That process radically curtailed the initial length of the story, gutting key facts with the result that a potentially powerful contribution to the media literacy movement was severely undermined and went to press full of inaccuracies and confusion. However, this didn't undermine the power of the piece, which reached *TV Guide's* extensive readership audience. I discovered this first-hand. Since the article named me and told readers I was at Appalachian State University in North Carolina, any number of enterprising individuals from all over the country consulted their directory assistants and ended up at the other end of my Darth Vader speaker/telephone. Happily, many of these individuals wanted to buy a copy of my book, which the article referred to but never named. Happily many of these callers were from other publications or television stations wanting to do follow up pieces. Unhappily, all of them fixated on television rather than on media literacy. This was the direct result of the article's failure to put television viewing within the broader context of media education.

Indeed, though the media now pay attention to our movement, it seems to be invariably filtered through their eyes and their perspective. This trend was also evident on March 3rd, 1992 when ABC's *American Agenda* segment of their evening news, reduced the media literacy movement to a simple case of critical viewing of television. Having been interviewed for the piece and having spoken to numerous individuals whose words and/or faces finally made their way to the screen, the consensus seems to be that the reporters arrived with preconceived assumptions about what the content and format would be. In the end, they merely fitted "reality" into this framework as they constructed their "story."

This experience demonstrates the importance of understanding how news, like other genres, is a constructed text. Working with news analysis is central to any education system that claims to produce responsible citizens for a democratic society. Teachers and media specialists wishing to win support for media literacy in their schools can do so by focusing attention on the critical thinking and viewing skills associated with analyzing the news.

