

Sample Detailed Lessons

LESSON #2 (MEDIA ANALYSIS): DETECTING BIAS IN A TELEVISION NEWSCAST

INTRODUCTION

This detailed lesson provides students with an opportunity to think critically as they look for bias in televised news stories. By deconstructing a newscast, students come to realize that events that provide good photographs or footage are the ones most likely to “make the news”, that narratives are created and tailored to fit a predefined and limited amount of airtime, and that facts in the news run the risk of being misrepresented.

Students are encouraged to consider a newscast as the presentation of a series of stories. They will learn that news stories may have a predictable and potentially misleading structure that incorporates a hero or heroine, a villain, and conflict leading to a climax and resolution. These narrative elements are created by the people who bring us the news. Critical analysis will also show students that the stories thus created reflect a particular point of view. Students explore how stories are shaped and from whose perspective they are being told. They learn that television newscasts present only a slice of the real story: the actual events are usually much more complex. The lesson provides a number of discussion prompts to help students deconstruct the news.

HINTS AND SUGGESTIONS

To teach students how to detect bias in televised news, teachers need to:

- obtain samples of authentic newscasts;
- verify board policies before “capturing” newscast excerpts from television stations;
- preview and gauge the appropriateness of all media materials before using them with junior students;
- consider collaborating with the school’s teacher-librarian, a colleague, or board media specialists.

For archival radio and television clips on a variety of themes and topics, visit the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s Archives FOR TEACHERS* website at http://archives.cbc.ca/for_teachers.

To help students make connections between media analysis and reading for meaning, consider introducing regular media-log writing opportunities. Students can use media logs to record their responses to media texts they have just analysed or created.

NOTE: Depending on the length of the newscast segment, this lesson may take place over two to three periods.

LESSON FOCUS

What is the focus of the lesson? How will I teach it?

The lesson uses all three sides of the Media Triangle - *Text, Audience, and Production*. Students will participate in the guided viewing of a television newscast and will conduct critical analysis to detect bias in the way the news is presented.

RATIONALE

Why am I teaching this lesson?

News stories presented in the media can make the trivial seem important, can sensationalize events, can often be graphic, and can sometimes frighten students and create feelings of insecurity. Understanding how news stories are constructed and why they are produced in this way will enable students to respond to them intelligently and pragmatically.

ASSESSMENT

How will I know when my students are successful?

- from my anecdotal records
- from students' media-log entries

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

What prior knowledge do my students need in order to be successful with the focus of this lesson?

Prior to this lesson, students need to:

- understand the concept of "bias" through the study of narratives;
- read and retell a familiar story from the perspective of another character;
- talk about common themes and characters in stories;
- discuss the following ideas: How is the news like a story? How is it different? How are we affected by the point of view of the person telling the story? Why is it important to get more than one point of view on a story?
- be familiar with making media-log entries.

CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS

Which expectations will I address?

Oral Communication**Overall**

1. Students will listen in order to understand and respond appropriately in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes and
2. use speaking skills and strategies appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes

Specific**Clarity and coherence**

- 2.3 Students will communicate orally in a clear, coherent manner, presenting ideas, opinions, and information in a readily understandable form

Media Literacy

- 1.1 Students will identify the purpose and audience for a variety of media texts and
- 1.2 use overt and implied messages to draw inferences and construct meaning in media texts and
- 2.1 describe in detail the main elements of some media forms and

- 3.3** identify conventions and techniques appropriate to the form chosen for a media text they plan to create, and explain how they will use the conventions and techniques to help communicate their message and
- 4.1** identify, with some support and direction, what strategies they found most helpful in making sense of and creating media texts, and explain how these and other strategies can help them improve as media viewers / listeners / producers

MATERIALS/PREPARATION FOR TEACHING

What will I need to have before I can begin the lesson?

- a pre-recorded video or DVD of a content-appropriate television newscast, including its commercials (suggested segment length: 10 minutes)
- a television and VCR or a computer with DVD player, LCD projector, and screen
- chart paper, markers
- copies (one per student) of "Characteristics of Stories in Print and in Newscasts" Venn diagram (Appendix 2)
- copies (one per student) of "Focus Questions for Viewing Groups" (Appendix 3)
- copies (one per student) of "Media Log Entry Assignment" (Appendix 4)
- Teacher Resource: News Reporting Activity (Appendix 5)

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

How can I ensure that I am meeting the needs of all my students?

- By working with students to create a student-generated anchor chart to remind them how media reports can reshape a story;
- By providing each student with a copy of the "Characteristics of Stories in Print and in Newscasts" Venn diagram (Appendix 2);
- By allowing repeated viewings of the newscast to help students consolidate new learning;
- By placing students into homogeneous groups and encouraging everyone to participate in the discussion.

INSTRUCTION

MODELLED/SHARED LESSON

Before Viewing:

- Review the concept of bias with the whole class. Recall a narrative the students have recently read and use a think-aloud to demonstrate ways in which an opinion or perspective in the narrative was biased.
- Work with students to create an anchor chart showing how media reports can reshape a story.
- Review the characteristics of newscasts, using the anchor chart. Distribute the "Characteristics of Stories in Print and in Newscasts" Venn diagram.

- Tell students they will be viewing a pre-recorded newscast. Inform them that they will be asked to respond independently to several questions and that afterwards they will work in groups to complete a viewing task.

During Viewing:

Activity 1

- Post the following questions on chart paper or provide the questions on a student handout with space for answers:

What is this story about?

Who is telling this story?

Who is interviewed or shown in the story (e.g., politicians, journalists, military officials, survivors, victims, others)? Whose perspective do we hear?

Who is not given the opportunity to present and discuss the issue or story? Whose perspective is missing?

What difference would it make if some of the people who were left out were given an opportunity to speak?

In the story that is presented, what is fact? What is opinion?

Review the questions with the class to make sure that everyone understands them.

- Play the newscast while students watch.
- Play the newscast again (perhaps starting and stopping it periodically) so that students can answer the posted questions.
- Circulate to ensure that students are recording responses to the questions.
- Have students discuss with their elbow partner three of the During Viewing questions and answers. (The students may choose which questions they want to discuss. However, before discussions start, ensure that no questions are left out.)
- Circulate, making sure that students are engaged in purposeful talk, and record anecdotal observations. Conference one-on-one with students as they respond to the questions.
- Reconvene the class for whole-group reflection on the discussions.

Activity 2

- Divide the class into groups of three or four and assign each group a viewing task from "Focus Questions for Viewing Groups" (Appendix 3).
- Ask the groups to read their focus questions and be ready to make notes as they watch the newscast again.
- Replay the entire newscast, including the commercials. (Note: if possible, have groups work at a bank of computers so that they can replay part of the newscast whenever and as often as they need in order to answer the questions).
- Record anecdotal observations during the group work.
- After students have completed their analysis, have them report their findings to the rest of the class.

Guided focus:

- Review the characteristics of newscasts using the Before Viewing anchor chart and the “Characteristics of Stories in Print and in Newscasts” Venn diagram. Ask students to offer reasons why a story about a ten-car pile-up on the highway might appear on television instead of one about a late-night two-hour power outage in a local community.

Independent focus:

- Have students respond to the During Viewing questions on their own and then work in small groups to analyse pre-assigned aspects of the newscast. Circulate and conference one-on-one with students as they respond to the During Viewing questions.

After Viewing:

- Ask students to share their opinions, concerns, and impressions about the newscast they viewed.
- Have students reflect on their learning by completing the first two activities of the “Media-Log Entry Assignment”.
- Ask students to complete the Home Connection activity of the “Media-Log Entry Assignment” as homework.

Extension

- Have students brainstorm ways in which they can share their learning with others. They might: include excerpts of the class discussion in a class or school newspaper or place them on the school’s website; write an individual letter or class e-mail to the creators of the television newscast to share their concerns, questions, and suggestions; work with younger students to write news stories; or interview each other for a specific audience and purpose (see “News Reporting Activity” (Appendix 5)) and prepare a report.
- Use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast two media forms - the newscast and its commercials - from a *Production* and *Audience* point of view.

REFLECTION

Were my students successful? Did my instructional decisions meet the needs of all students? What worked well? What will I do differently in the future? What are my next steps?

**APPENDIX 2 – CHARACTERISTICS OF NEWS IN PRINT AND IN NEWSCASTS
VENN DIAGRAM**

News Reporters' Print may:

- Have one main topic
- Usually have a topic selected by the author
- Include author's own experiences
- Have space to include background and detail
- Come in multiple forms, genres
- Be published hours, months, or years after the event

Newscasts may:

- Be very short (minutes or seconds) because of time constraints
- Get priority if they have good images
- Simplify events, give little background
- Use short video-clips and sound-bites to support reports
- Emphasize the unusual or sensational
- Be broadcast on the day of the event

- Contain bias
- Be shaped as narratives with heroes/heroines, villains, conflicts, climax, resolution
- Present "partial reality"; actual event might be much more complex

APPENDIX 3 – FOCUS QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING GROUPS**Group 1: News Stories**

List the stories covered by the television newscast in the order in which they appeared. If possible, record the running time for each story. What questions do you have about the order of the stories? Why do you suppose the lead story was chosen to be first? What patterns did you notice in the order, length, and content of the stories?

Group 2: Interviews

Did the newscast include the names of the people interviewed? Who were these people (politicians, lawyers, passers-by)? What effect does the interview have on the story? Describe the camera angles and camera distances used during an interview. What effect do these have on the viewer? Create a list of other people who could have been interviewed in order to present a different point of view.

Group 3: News as Entertainment

What production elements were used to attract the viewer? What elements were used to "entertain" the viewer? If you were to change any of these elements, in what way might your change alter the impact and appeal of the newscast?

Group 4: Language Use

Examine the use of language in each story's introduction. What descriptive words did the anchor or reporter use when introducing the story? What effect does the choice of language have on the viewer?

Group 5: Visual Information

Describe the visual images presented in the newscast. How did the images help the viewer understand the story? What images would you use to accompany one of the stories? Would your images present a different point of view from the one in the newscast? How might your choice of images change the way a viewer understood the story?

Group 6: Commercials

The newscast is paid for by sponsors whose commercials are shown during the program. List all the products and sponsors referred to. What connections can you make between the target audience of the newscast and the commercials? Were any commercials related to the news stories? Why or why not? Pick one commercial and discuss the following questions: Who is in this advertisement? Who is missing? Whose point of view is represented here? Whose is missing?

APPENDIX 4 – MEDIA LOG ENTRY ASSIGNMENT

Chose **ONE** of the two activities below and record your reflections in your media log.

Activity #1

Reflect on the ways in which this newscast may have presented biased information of a news event. Refer to the responses you recorded earlier while watching the newscast.

Answer these questions in your media log:

- Were there examples of simplification, repetition, bias? Explain your thinking.
- What media techniques or effects (conventions) were used to appeal to the audience?

Activity #2

Choose two or three of the questions below and respond to them in your media log:

- Should a graphic image of a victim be shown? Why or why not?
- What images are missing from the news report that would help viewers better understand the story? Why do you think they are missing?
- How might receiving the news from a visual medium such as television affect the way people feel about the issues?
- Can newspapers and news magazines provide information that television and radio cannot? What type of information about the story you have viewed is more likely to appear in a print source than on television or radio?
- What information might the Internet provide that other sources do not?
- Are there risks associated with relying on Internet information? If so, what are they?
- Why is it important to seek information from a variety of sources?
- Choose one of the stories. How might it change if it were presented from the point of view of someone else in the story (e.g., the victim/suspect, a member of the victim's/suspect's family, a witness)?

Home Connection

At home, seek out several presentations of a news story selected by the teacher. For example, watch a newscast of the story on television, listen to coverage on the radio, and read about the story in a newspaper.

In your media log, record your thoughts and opinions on **representation** and on **point of view** in the various presentations of the news story. List ways in which the reports might have given a biased account of the event.

APPENDIX 5 – TEACHER RESOURCE: NEWS REPORTING ACTIVITY

- Ask partners to choose who will be the interviewer (A) and who will be the interviewee (B).
- Inform students that A is to interview B about a recent interesting event that has occurred in B's life, making point-form notes as the interview proceeds. Explain that the interview is to be processed into a news story and presented to the class; so it should not be about something distressing or embarrassing. Encourage students to choose an event that took place over a relatively short period of time. By the end of the interview, A should have answers to these six news journalistic questions: Who?, What?, Where?, When?, Why?, and How?
- Have A interview B.
- Now ask students to reverse roles so that B interviews A about a recent event in A's life.
- Leave A and B to process independently their point-form notes into news stories - either newspaper articles (using writing skills) or radio news reports (using writing and speaking skills). Explain that the report must reflect "hard news"- that is to say, facts - and remind them that the product should include answers to the six journalistic questions. The sentences should be short and direct.
- Invite students to share their newspaper or radio news stories with the rest of the class.
- Ask students to reflect, through discussion or in writing, on how it felt to read or listen to their personal experiences as processed into news stories. Prompt them to describe the decisions they made as they turned their partner's information into a report that looked and sounded like news.