

***Just the Facts, Ma’am***

A lesson on identifying bias in information and writing objectively

***Summary***

Students will learn about the ethical mandate that requires news to be free from personal opinion. Students will learn to identify common statements of opinion. This is the fourth lesson in a week-long unit on news literacy.

***Objectives***

* Students will examine the importance of writing news in an unbiased fashion.
* Students will evaluate news stories to determine whether statements of opinion are present, and will identify these statements with 80% mastery.

***Common Core State Standards***

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| **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1** | Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. |
| **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.2** | Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text. |
| **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.3** | Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them. |
| **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.4** | Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper). |

***Partnership for 21st Century Skills—Student Outcomes***

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| *Skills* | *P21 outcomes* |
| Critical Thinking | 1. Reason effectively 2. Use systems thinking 3. Make judgments and decisions |
| Communication | 1. Communicate clearly |
| Information Literacy | 1. Access and evaluate information 2. Use and manage information |
| Media Literacy | 1. Analyze media |

***Length***

50 minutes

***Materials/Resources***

1. Local or national news story (class set of two different stories)

2. Attached finding bias worksheet.

3. Bias Quiz: [http://www.proprofs.com/quiz­school/story.php?title=detecting­bias­quiz](http://www.proprofs.com/quiz%C2%ADschool/story.php?title=detecting%C2%ADbias%C2%ADquiz)

For advanced students who can self reflect on their own bias, try any of these quizzes:

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html>

***LESSON STEP-BY-STEP***

**1. Building background**—10 minutes

Explain to students that while knowing how to write a news story is important, it's equally important to know that news journalists must approach their stories with an unbiased perspective. Ask: What is bias? What does it mean to be unbiased? Do you think it's possible to keep your opinions out of stories? Respond to answers. Remind students that being unbiased does not mean trying not to have opinions or feelings on things or people, but it means we keep our own perspectives out of news stories so that we can focus on facts and expert opinions. Ask: why would it be bad if we approached stories with our own personal opinions, or our own personal agendas? Explain that all journalists, like doctors, try to work within a code of ethics that tells them to treat all stories and people fairly. This means not inserting their own opinion in their stories.

**2. Types of bias**—10 minutes

Explain to students that there are many ways (besides putting in your own opinion) to demonstrate bias in a news story. These include the following:

*(Write 1-4 on board without the definition, and stop to ask students what they think each one means. Then, explain. Give examples as necessary.)*

1. *Bias by omission:* leaving out facts that you don't "like" or you don't "think are true." Or, leaving out an important perspective.

2. *Bias by selection of sources:* including sources that only support one view. Including sources that are trying to further their own agenda.

3. *Bias by story selection:* choosing stories that further a cause, or ignoring stories that you don't like or that might cause trouble for friends.

4. *Bias by word choice:* using loaded words or labels that convey certain meanings instead of more neutral terms ("freedom fighter v. terrorist")

(*Bonus activity:* Students can take the bias quiz at this website to test what they just learned about bias: http://www.proprofs.com/quiz-school/story.php?title=detecting-bias-quiz)

**3. Activity**—20 minutes

Explain that as a journalist, the best way to fight bias in a story is to be aware of your own personal opinions and your own subconscious preferences. This way, you can identify bias that might make its way into your stories or your newspaper.

Pair students up, and pass out copies of the two news stories. Each pair should have both stories, so students can read, compare, and switch with their partner. Using any local newspaper story (or you can use a story from a national news site, like CNN.com—either way you will need half as many stories as there are students in your class), ask students to individually read the story and see if they can identify instances of the four types of bias listed above. (See attached activity sheet.) Then, they should trade their story with a fellow classmate, and see if they come up with the same type of bias for the same story. This activity helps to illustrate how bias is a very personal thing, and we don’t all interpret bias in the same way.

The teacher should walk the room and comment on examples students are finding to check for understanding.

**4. Class discussion and debrief**—10 minutes

After students have swapped stories with their partner and discussed the different examples of bias, come back together as a class to reflect on the activity. Ask and discuss: Was it easy to find all the examples of bias? Did they always find the same ones as their partners? Why or why not? What do they think this says about how personal bias is? What steps could they take as a journalist to make sure that readers don't find bias in their stories?

**5. Follow-on assessment**—take home assignment

Pass out the attached worksheet (Power of Words: a semantic stylebook) as homework, and ask students to think about which term they think is most fair, or least biased, while they complete the assignment.

*Note:* You’ll want to preview this follow-up assignment with students in case they need help understanding the terminology. If they are still confused, remind them that looking up the words and their usages should help inform their decision on which term is most appropriate.

***Finding Bias***

*Name:*

*Story Headline:*

*Directions:*  Using the story provided, read through the story looking for any examples of bias you may be able to find. For each type of bias listed below, consider the questions to help you find any examples in the story. Write down any examples of bias you find, and explain in one sentence why you think it’s biased. When you are done, switch stories with a partner who has a different story, and repeat the exercise.

Finally, work with your partner to compare what each of you found in the two stories. Do you agree on all the examples of bias you found? Why or why not?

**Bias by omission:** *What sources are present? What are missing? What perspectives or sides to the story aren’t being told? What information is missing that might change your view?*

**Bias by selection of sources:** *Which perspectives are present? Which ones are missing? Whose voices aren’t being heard? Who do you think should have been interviewed to give a more well-rounded story?*

**Bias by story selection:** *Is this story really important? Is the story treated with respect and neutrality? Is there a reason this story was printed now? Do you think there could be any other agenda behind telling this story now?*

**Bias by word choice:** *are there any loaded words or words that unfairly describe or characterize a person or event?*

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| **Example of bias (words, sources, etc)** | **Explanation (in one sentence)** |
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***The Power of Words: A semantic stylebook***

***Directions*:** For each pair of words, circle the term you think is most neutral, or least biased. Then, explain why you believe that term is most appropriate to use in a publication.

**1. Black/African American**

**2. Illegal alien/Undocumented immigrant**

**3. Gay marriage/Same-sex marriage**

**4. Homeless/Transient**

**5. Censorship/Prior review**