

What Makes the News?

Adapted from the lesson
developed by Maria Byck

Overview: We read newspapers, watch news on television and listen to news on the radio, but how is it decided what is news? How is it decided what are the important events of the day? What makes news?

Aim: To guide students to think critically about the news, develop their own criteria to assess the elements of a newsworthy story, collect data on the local news and create their own news story

Objectives: At the end of this session, students will be able to:

- examine and evaluate the local news.
- develop criteria to assess what is newsworthy.
- conduct a simple content analysis of the local news.
- present their findings through a mock newscast.

Target group: GED

Length: Two one and a half-hour sessions

Vocabulary: impact, weight, controversy, emotion, the unusual, prominence, proximity, timeliness, currency, usefulness, educational value

Materials and Resources:

- markers and flip charts (or chalk and chalkboard), VCR, television
- prerecorded video of a local newscast
- copies of two handouts
 - Handout 1: “Eleven Elements of Newsworthy News”
 - Handout 2: “Newsworthy Evaluation Sheet”
- poster paper–sized Newsworthy Evaluation Chart (a large-scale version of Handout 2, “Newsworthy Elements Sheet”) for class to fill in
- related Web sites:
 - <http://www.tvsurveys.com/index.html>
 - <http://www.newslab.org/main.htm>
 - <http://www.georgetown.edu/bassr/511/projects/letham/final/intro.htm>

Session 1

Activities:

1. Invite students to define and discuss what constitutes news. News has many definitions, but a popular one is *an account of the important events of the day*.

“[N]ews is history in its first and best form, its vivid and fascinating form, and ... history is the pale and tranquil reflection of it.”

—Mark Twain

Encourage students to respond to this quotation. What do they understand it to mean?

2. Have students brainstorm a list of what makes a story newsworthy and write their ideas on the board. Divide the class into small groups and distribute the “Eleven Elements of Newsworthy News” handout. Have each group review the definitions, clarify any terminology they don’t understand, change any element that they disagree with, and finally, refine the definitions based on the elements that resulted from the brainstorming and their group discussion. Then bring the students out of their groups and have them put together their own master list of elements of newsworthiness.
3. List the elements of newsworthiness on the board. This should look very much like the “Newsworthy Evaluation Sheet” provided. View the first story on the video of the local newscast; pause the video at the end of the story and ask students to determine the elements of newsworthiness that the story contains. Mark their answers on the poster paper-sized Newsworthy Evaluation Sheet.

View and evaluate the five stories using the list of elements of newsworthiness. Clarify or refine the elements of newsworthiness and their definitions as needed.

4. Have the class work in small groups to create their own Newsworthy Evaluation Sheet, based on the sample provided. This should look very much like the table that was created on the board in Activity 3.

Homework:

Give students a homework assignment of watching their local news and collecting data on at least five stories.

Session 2

Activities:

1. Ask students to report back on their homework assignment. What did they notice in the news they watched? Were there any surprises? Have each student read aloud their findings from their homework research and tally the results on the large Newsworthy Evaluation Chart for the whole class to see. Discuss.
2. In groups of three or four, have the students write a mock news story to present the class's findings. Students should create a script and consider what visuals they could use to get their story across to the viewers. Each news story should be 2 minutes or less (the average news story is only 1 minute, 30 seconds). Have each group present its story to the class. Have other students determine what elements of newsworthiness the story contains.
3. Discuss the production process with the class. How did they get their information across? Did they have to leave things out because of time restrictions? What were some of the difficult decisions they faced in conveying information? Would their story ever make it into the real news? Why or why not?

Follow-up:

Use same criteria to evaluate news stories from other sources, such as newspapers and radio.

What Is News? Handout 1
"Eleven Elements of Newsworthy News"

Impact: The facts and events that have the greatest effect on the audience are the most newsworthy.

Weight: The significance of a particular fact or event lies in its value with respect to other facts or events.

Controversy: Arguments, debates, charges, countercharges and fights increase the value of news.

Emotion: Take into account human interests that touch our emotions.

The unusual: When a dog bites a man, it is not news. But when a man bites a dog, it is news. (This is an old journalistic cliché.)

Prominence: More prominent individuals are given more attention.

Proximity: Concentrate on news that is of local interest; the closer to home, the better.

Timeliness: Emphasize what is new.

Currency: Take into account what is on people's minds.

Usefulness: Help people answer questions and solve problems in their daily lives.

Educational value: Help people gain knowledge rather than merely informing them.

Criteria adapted from *Writing and Reporting the News*, by Gerald Lanson and Mitchell Stephens (Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997)

What Is News? Handout 2
 “Newsworthy Evaluation Sheet”

(Elements adapted from *Writing and Reporting the News*, by Gerald Lanson and Mitchell Stephens [Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997])

Evaluate the newsworthiness of your local news. Watch news stories and determine which elements of newsworthiness they contain. Change or add elements as needed and as discussed in class.

| Element | Story 1 | Story 2 | Story 3 | Story 4 | Story 5 | Story 6 | Story 7 |
|-------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Impact | | | | | | | |
| Weight | | | | | | | |
| Controversy | | | | | | | |
| Emotion | | | | | | | |
| The Unusual | | | | | | | |
| Prominence | | | | | | | |
| Proximity | | | | | | | |
| Timeliness | | | | | | | |
| Currency | | | | | | | |
| Usefulness | | | | | | | |
| Educational Value | | | | | | | |
| Other | | | | | | | |