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**Level:** Grades 9-12

**About the Author**

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**Lesson Plan**

**Bias in the News**

**Overview**

This is the third of five lessons designed to teach students to think critically about the way Aboriginal peoples and visible minorities are portrayed in the press.

"Bias in the News" begins by asking students to read the newspaper, searching for words they think imply a positive or negative judgment. After identifying these words or phrases, students will then look at their source (news story, column, editorial, review), and its significance. Students should gain an understanding of how bias can creep into even 'accurate' news stories, and improve their critical thinking skills in the process.

**Learning Outcomes**

Students will:

- recognize bias and value judgements in written work
- understand the reasons why bias might occur in news reports
- recognize the different ways in which bias can occur in news reporting
- become aware of the ways in which ethnocultural minorities are represented in newspapers

**Preparation and Materials**

- Each group will need one complete copy of a local daily newspaper.
- Photocopy student handout [How to Detect Bias in the News](#)

**Procedure**

**Introduction:**

Newspapers and reporters are supposed to provide their readers with objective, unbiased, and reliable information. To convey information fairly means letting the facts speak for themselves. Journalists know that the choice of a word or phrase can determine the context of an entire news story. However, bias does occur frequently — often unconsciously on the part of the reporter.

- Distribute and discuss the handout, [How to Detect Bias in the News](#).

### **Discussion:**

In order to give students an idea of how the choice of words and phrases can influence our perception of a news story, consider the following sentences:

**More than 900 attend protest.**

**Fewer than 1,000 show up at protest.**

Both are accurate descriptions of the attendance at a meeting. The first gives the reader the impression that the event was successful, with more people than expected attending. The second sentence implies fewer people than expected showed up. A neutral way to describe the attendance would have been: "About 950 people attended the event."

### **Activity**

- Break the class back into small groups of three to four students.
- Distribute copies of the newspapers (one per group) and have each group cut out the articles they think contain a value judgment. They should also highlight the word(s) and/or sentence(s) that they believe introduce a bias into the story, and answer the following questions:
  - Why do you think the words convey a value judgment?
  - Are these words or phrases found in a news story, a column, an editorial or a review? Why is this significant?
  - Have each group present its findings to the class, and compare and discuss each groups' conclusions.

### **Evaluation**

- Group presentations

### **Extension Activity**

For bonus marks, send students on a bias scavenger hunt. Give them one week to see if they can find current examples for each of the techniques listed in [How to Detect Bias 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 its interviewers, writers, photographers and editors.

Not all bias is deliberate. But you can become a more aware news reader or viewer by watching for the following journalistic techniques that allow bias to "creep in" to the news:



### Bias through selection and omission

An editor 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. 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 the 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. 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.

### Bias by headline

Many people read only the headlines of a news item. Most people scan nearly all the headlines in a newspaper. Headlines are the most-read part of a paper. 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 photos, captions and camera angles

Some pictures flatter a person, others make the person look unpleasant. A paper can choose photos to influence opinion about, for example, a candidate for election. On television, 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 twenty 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 worthy of reading about), numbers can be inflated. "A hundred injured in air crash" can be the same as "only minor injuries in air crash," reflecting the opinion of the person doing the counting.

### **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 puffpieces 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.

### **Word choice and tone**

Showing the same kind of bias that appears in headlines, the use of positive or negative words or words with a particular connotation can strongly influence the reader or viewer.

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