

6

JOURNALISM



Journalism consists of gathering, evaluating, creating, presenting and/or commenting on news and information.

Journalists play a critical role in our democracy. They hold government and other sources of power to account, help inform citizens about events and developments, foster debate about issues and give people a voice.

During an election, journalists provide news and perspectives about the parties, candidates and issues, fact-check the statements of leaders and candidates, and place the campaign's events in context. Without journalists, citizens would miss an invaluable resource to help them decide when politicians are telling the truth or acting in the public's best interests.

Journalism can take different forms and have different purposes. It is helpful to analyze the purpose so that we can assess credibility and potential bias.

Fact-based journalism focuses on the reporting of events, issues or developments with the goal of informing people. While it may include analysis or assessment, it is based on facts and not opinion.

Opinion journalism provides a viewpoint about an event, issue or development. The purposes of opinion journalism can vary; sometimes it is meant to critique, praise, interpret or persuade. Examples include editorials,

columns and commentary. Columnists at professional news organizations are paid to put current events into perspective in order to help readers form their own opinions. This type of journalism is not meant to be impartial, but it is based on the values and beliefs of the individual presenting the information.

Distinguishing between fact and opinion is a fundamental skill of news and information literacy. When we mistake opinion for news reporting, it can impact how we understand issues and events.

Not all stories that look like journalism are real journalism. To determine which news we can trust, we need to look to the practice of fact-based journalism. It involves research, assessment and verification where the central goal is to produce an accurate and fair representation of the facts.

To determine if a report is journalistic and credible, you can assess it through some fundamental standards:

- **Sourcing:** Does it include multiple reliable sources?
- **Accuracy:** Have the facts been sourced and verified?
- **Research:** Are there secondary sources? Have statistics been cited, and if so, from where?
- **Context:** Does the story go beyond the news event to include history or background?
- **Fairness:** Is neutral language used to describe the people and issues?

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These standards set fact-based journalism apart from other information that may not have the same level of research and rigour.

Professional newsgathering organizations have their own standards for verification and accountability. In contrast to many online information sources, the reputations of these organizations depend on being accurate and reliable. They are transparent and have a procedure for acknowledging and correcting mistakes when they are made. These measures help them earn the public's trust.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

What is the role of journalism in a democracy? What are the different forms or purposes of journalism? How can we assess the credibility of a news report?

PURPOSE

Similar to other types of media, journalism can take different forms and have different purposes. It is helpful to analyze the purpose so that we can assess credibility and potential bias.

In this lesson, students review the role of journalism in democracy before examining the different forms and purposes of journalism. Afterwards, they apply this knowledge through the analysis of a news article.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the lesson, I can...

- Explain the role of journalism in democracy;
- Distinguish between fact-based news reporting and opinion-journalism;
- Analyze the story and purpose of a news article.

INTRODUCTION

1. Give students time to work in pairs or small groups to activate any background knowledge they have about the term "journalism" using a Frayer model (Activity Sheet 6.1). Students can also use images to communicate their thinking.

2. Have students share their thinking with another pair or group. Through a class discussion, highlight common themes that emerge.

3. Journalism consists of gathering, evaluating, creating, presenting and/or commenting on news and information. Watch the NewsWise video 'What Is Journalism and Why Does it Matter?' and review the role of journalism in a democratic society.

- **"Watchdog" role:** To monitor government activity, fact-check statements, question the decisions of our government officials (transparency) and make them take responsibility for their actions (accountability).
- **Empower citizens:** To give people the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, society and governments.
- **Debate and discussion:** To foster conversation about important issues facing society by sharing different perspectives and potential solutions.
- **A voice:** To give people a voice and help them be heard — particularly those who lack power in society. This reporting is often connected with influencing change in the community or government actions.

4. Create a class definition for the term "journalism." Students can also add to their Frayer model worksheet to include additional characteristics and examples.

ACTIVITIES

1. Initiate a class discussion about a debatable topic and invite students to share their views (e.g., cats are better than dogs, uniforms should be mandatory at school, smartphones should be banned from schools).

2. Review key terms:

- A **fact** is statement that can be proven or checked (e.g., Alberta became a province on September 1, 1905).
- An **opinion** is a statement based on individual perspectives or beliefs. It cannot be proven or checked (e.g., Drake is better than Shawn Mendes).

3. Ask students to determine which of the eight fictional statements provided are **fact-based** or **opinion-based** and why (Worksheet 6.2).

4. Similar to other types of media, journalism can take different forms and have different purposes. It is helpful to analyze the purpose so that we can assess credibility and potential bias.

- **Fact-based news journalism** focuses on reporting of events, issues or developments with the purpose of informing people. While it may include analysis or assessment, it is based on facts and not opinion. It is also referred to "news coverage" or "straight reporting."
- **Opinion journalism** provides a viewpoint about an event, issue or development. The purposes can vary, sometimes it is meant to criticize, praise, interpret or persuade. It may not be impartial or be balanced, and it is usually impacted by preconceived notions or opinions. Examples include editorials, columns and commentary.

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5. Examine a print or digital newspaper as a class to discern fact-based news reporting from opinion journalism. What signals are there to mark opinion journalism as different from fact-based news coverage? (e.g., labels, photos of columnists, different sections of the newspaper.)

6. Provide or ask students to find one article that is opinion-based and one article that is fact-based on the same subject, and to compare them by underlining all the facts in each piece.

- How many facts did you underline in the news piece vs the opinion piece?
- How were the facts in the opinion piece used? Did you find them persuasive, in thinking about the author's argument?
- For the opinion piece, if you were going to check the facts presented to you, how might you go about doing that?

CONCLUSION

Ask students to find an article of their own choosing about the 2019 Alberta election and analyze the story and purpose of the article (Activity 6.3).

EXTENSIONS

1. Reinforce the importance of analyzing the news we consume. When we form our own opinions, we want to make sure they are based on the best possible understanding of the information available. The next step in assessing news coverage is to look for the presence of journalistic standards.

2. Using Slide Deck 6, introduce the standards to students:

- Sources: How many sources are used? Are they considered experts or knowledgeable about the topic?
- Accuracy: Is there evidence that the information has been fact-checked or confirmed?
- Research: What reports have been mentioned? What statistics have been included?
- Context: Does the article include background information? Does it explain the bigger-picture of the story?
- Fairness: What kinds of words are used to describe the players/issues? Is it neutral or balanced?

3. Have students select an article of their own choosing and analyze the presence of journalistic standards (Activity 6.4).