

# Lesson 8

## Journalism in Democracy



### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1 What is the role of journalism?
- 2 What is the difference between news and opinion journalism?
- 3 How can I assess the credibility of a news report?

### PURPOSE

A healthy democracy requires journalists to keep those in power accountable and to inform citizens. In identifying reliable sources of information, we can look to organizations and individuals that adopt professional standards, and are accountable for mistakes.

In this lesson, students review the role of journalism in democracy, explore the difference between news reporting and opinion journalism, and learn to assess news articles for evidence of professional standards. In the *Consolidation* activity, this knowledge is then applied to a news analysis exercise. Under *Extended Learning*, an election scrapbook activity is suggested to consolidate this learning and research for the election.

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the lesson, students can:

- explain the role of journalism in democracy;
- distinguish between fact-based news coverage and opinion-journalism;
- analyze the presence of journalistic standards in news articles.

## Starter

1. Give students time to work in pairs or small groups to activate any background knowledge they have about the term “journalism” using Activity Sheet 8.1. 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, assessing, presenting and/or commenting on news and information. Watch the video 'What Is Journalism and Why Does it Matter?' Some of the roles of journalism highlighted in the video are:
  - **“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 add additional examples and non-examples to their notes in Activity 8.1.

## Activities

1. Explain to students that journalism includes reporting on a variety of topics (such as news, sports, entertainment) but the most fundamental distinction to make is whether a story is fact-based or opinion-based.
  - a) Start by addressing the difference between fact and opinion.
    - A **fact** is a statement that can be proven or checked (e.g., Canadian Confederation took place on July 1, 1867).
    - 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).
  - b) Review fact-based news coverage compared to opinion journalism.

- **Fact-based journalism** focuses on the reporting of events, issues or developments with the purpose of informing people. While it may include some analysis, it is based on facts and not opinion. It is referred to as “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 critique, praise, interpret or persuade. This type of journalism is not meant to be impartial — it is based on the values and beliefs of the individual who is presenting the information. Examples include editorials, columns and commentary.

c) Review example articles ([studentvote.ca/journalism](http://studentvote.ca/journalism)) and have students assess whether the article is fact-based or opinion journalism. This can be completed in pairs or small groups. Ask students to share their decision and provide evidence or a reason behind their thinking.

### TEACHER NOTE

Outside of assessing the content of an article, inform students that they can look for signs to determine the purpose of the article, such as the section where the article is located (News or Opinion sections), labels used (“Opinion” or “Editorial”), the type of author (reporter vs columnist vs editorial board), or whether a photo or drawing is featured beside the name of the author (columnists typically have photos, while reporters do not).

2. Introduce 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.
  - a) Using Slide Deck 8, introduce the standards to students:
    - **Sources:** How many sources are used? Are they reliable/authoritative?
    - **Accuracy:** Is there evidence that the information has been fact-checked or verified?
    - **Research:** What reports or secondary sources have been included? Have statistics been included and sources cited?
    - **Context:** Does the article address the bigger-picture of the story, beyond the news event?
    - **Fairness:** Is the tone even? What kinds of words are used to describe the players/issues?
  - b) Take students through an example of assessing journalistic standards. See Exemplar 8.2.

## Consolidation

Ask students to find an article of their own choosing about the 2019 federal election and assess the presence of journalistic standards (Activity 8.2). Students should use the prompts and guiding questions to make notes in the right-hand column.

Alternatively, you could provide the same article and use it for assessment purposes.

## Extended Learning

The Election Scrapbook (Activity 8.3) has been created to consolidate the learning from this lesson and to help students improve news literacy skills and habits during the election campaign. Students will research the political parties, candidates and issues while also evaluating news articles and sources. To support this activity, students will need access to various newspapers and technology for online media.

This assignment can be used as a summative assignment at the end of the Student Vote program. This ongoing activity should begin once students have become familiar with the parties and the electoral process (Lesson 10).

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

**Journalism** consists of gathering, assessing, presenting and/or commenting on news and information.

Journalists play a critical role in our democracy. They hold governments 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 interest.

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 – 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?

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.