



Language Arts Tracking the Truth

Overview

Students will:

- Represent interviewed sources with accuracy through quotes and paraphrasing.
- Determine the many sides of a story and who gets to tell it.
- Explore the concepts of bias and marginalized voices through class discussion and analyzing TV news coverage.

Terrain Articles:

- “Hot Lunch,” *Terrain*, Summer 2003, page 7.
- “Salad Days,” *Terrain*, Summer 2003, page 10.
- “Catching Drift,” *Terrain*, Summer 2003, page 18.
- “Forestry for the Future,” *Terrain*, Summer 2003, page 28.

Introduction

According to the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics, “Public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by **seeking truth** and **providing a fair and comprehensive account** of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with **thoroughness** and **honesty**.”

Thoroughness and honesty are goals worth pursuing. But how does a journalist go about seeking the truth? How does a journalist know when the story is complete, the reporting thorough? And how can a journalist accomplish these lofty goals while working within a tight deadline and assigned to a limited word count?

Truth-seeking can be a tricky business. For instance, in the field of environmental journalism, reporters often seek the truth by delving into the science behind an issue. This helps to move beyond the conflicting points of view voiced by opposing sources. But when there’s an edge of uncertainty to the science, both sides may try to use that uncertainty to support their view.

In this lesson, you will track the truth from a number of different angles. You will experiment with representing sources with accuracy through quotes and paraphrasing. You will delve into how truth can be multi-faceted – and how it takes many voices to make up a thorough account. And lastly, you will explore which voices and perspectives are rarely heard in the news and why.

What is truth? What is a point of view? What’s the difference?

What are some impediments to uncovering the truth?

Do some groups get to tell their version of the truth more than others? Why do you think this is?

In your own life, how do you go about finding out the truth?



How does a reporter go about discovering the truth?

How do you know where the truth lies when you talk to two sources who relate very different versions of the truth?

You’ve probably heard the saying, “There are two sides to every story.” Is it possible for an issue to have more than two sides?

CA LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS, GRADES 9-10: Reading Comprehension (Focus on Informational Materials) 2.3 Generate relevant questions about readings on issues that can be researched. Writing Strategies 1.6 Integrate quotations and citations into a written text while maintaining the flow of ideas. Writing Applications 2.3.c. Make distinctions between the relative value and significance of specific data, facts, and ideas. e. Anticipate and address readers’ potential misunderstandings, biases, and expectations.



Straight from the Horse's Mouth

Activity A

Students will interview each other on a certain topic within a limited time frame, then write a short news article, paraphrasing the information they learned from the interview and using direct quotes.

Purpose

The purpose of this exercise is to give students a chance to experience gathering and distilling information from a source. It is also meant to demonstrate the challenge of representing a source's truth accurately while under the pressure of a deadline.

Directions

- Class breaks into pairs. (Avoid pairing students together who already know each other extremely well.)
- In each pair, one student will be designated the **reporter** and the other will be the **source**.
- The reporter has **5 minutes** to interview the source on one of the possible topics listed at right. Although some sources may not need any prodding to talk about the topic for the full 5 minutes, the reporter may need to ask questions to get the source to elaborate on the topic. It is recommended that the reporter take notes during the interview.
- The students in each pair switch roles. (The former source has 5 minutes to interview the former reporter.)
- After the interviews, students have 10 minutes to write a news item. The article must include:
 - At least 3 direct **quotes** from the source.
 - At least 3 sentences **paraphrasing** the facts or ideas the source shared with the reporter.
- Students will read their articles aloud to the class. After each student reads, the source who was quoted must give feedback, addressing the following questions:
 - Was I quoted correctly?
 - Did the reporter paraphrase the information I shared in a fairly accurate manner?
 - Did the reporter leave anything important out?
- The reporter who read the piece will then share what was the most challenging part of the exercise and how he or she would do it differently next time to improve accuracy.
- After the activity, discuss these questions as a class:
 - What are the advantages of paraphrasing a source?
 - What are the benefits of directly quoting a source?
 - Can either technique be used to affect your readers' sympathies? In what way?

Possible Topics

- My favorite holiday and why.
- Do "Just Say No" drug programs really work?
- How and why my personal style has changed over time.
- Will I still be listening to the same music when I'm older than I listen to now?
- Should soda pop vending machines be in high schools?
- Do school uniforms help keep students from becoming too clique-ish?
- If I knew a friend was in danger, would I tell a counselor?
- What my room looks like.

Terms to Know

Quote

In a quote, you copy word for word something a source has said or written. The quoted passage is indicated by putting quotation marks (") at the beginning and end of the quote. If the quote is long, it can be set apart from the main text in an indented block. The source of the quote must be cited.

Example: "We was hanging out in the park when the streetlights cut out," said local teen Fred Vernon. "We was at the picnic table and suddenly, Whoosh! It was pitch black. The electricity went down."

Paraphrase

In a paraphrase, you restate in your own words something your source has said. One purpose of paraphrasing is to put something into words your readers will understand. For instance, environmental journalists often paraphrase the language scientists use to explain something. Putting something into your own words is an important exercise because it shows you understand, listen well, and can work with the material. A paraphrase must also be cited.

Example: Local high school student Fred Vernon and his friends were sitting in the park's picnic area when the electricity serving the park's streetlamps was disrupted.



The Truth: According to Whom?

Activity B

Students will read an article in *Terrain*, list all the sources that were quoted or paraphrased, and evaluate the degree to which the story would give a complete and truthful picture of the issue without input from that particular source.

Purpose

The purpose of this exercise is for students to evaluate how many voices and opinions are necessary to give a full, multi-dimensional portrayal of an issue.

Introduction

As a reporter, who would you need to talk to in order to get a full, multi-dimensional portrayal of the truth?

Directions

This exercise can be done as a class or individually.

1. Read one of the following stories from the Summer 2003 *Terrain* magazine:
 - “Hot Lunch” on page 7.
 - “Salad Days” on page 10.
 - “Catching Drift” on page 18.
 - “Forestry for the Future” on page 28.

2. Make a list of all the sources that the reporter quotes or paraphrases.
3. Cross out the first source on the list, then answer these questions:
 - If this source were not contacted, quoted, or paraphrased, would the story still be true?
 - What, if any, aspect of the truth would be missing from the piece if this source had not been referenced?
4. Cross out the second source on the list, then answer the questions outlined in step 3.
5. Continue down the list, crossing out the remaining sources one at a time and repeating the procedure.
6. Answer the follow-up questions below.

Follow-up Questions

- * Are there any voices that were left out that would have made the *Terrain* story more complete? If so, who do you think should have been interviewed for the story that wasn't? Why do you think they were not interviewed?
- * Who is most affected by the event/trend/decision/occurrence that the *Terrain* story covers? Were those people contacted?

Marginalized Voices

Some people get to tell their truth more often than others. This happens for various reasons that will be addressed in the following activity. To marginalize means to exclude or ignore. In news reporting, a marginalized voice is an opinion or perspective that is rarely represented. To counter this tendency, the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics states that journalists should:

- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.
- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, or social status.
- Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.





Look Who's Talking

Activity C

Students will explore the idea of marginalized voices: whose voices tend to be excluded or ignored in news media and why that may occur. Students will also examine their own biases.

A. Busting Your Bias

1. As a class, brainstorm controversial issues, events, trends, or problems at your school that could be covered in the school newspaper. List the ideas on the board.
2. For each one, brainstorm all the people who should be interviewed in order to get a complete picture.
3. Answer these questions in succession:
 - Have you left anyone out?
 - If you had to choose just two sources from the list to interview, which two would you choose?
 - Do you think their perspective carries more weight than the views of the others on the list? Why?
 - Do you think they are better equipped to represent the truth of the issue? Why?
 - Can you identify a bias of yours that leads you to see those two sources as somehow more credible or their opinion or experience more valid?

B. Who's Marginalized and Why?

1. Teacher: In this activity, you will ask the students, “Whose voice is more likely to be excluded or ignored in most news stories?” You will then read aloud the choices below and have them offer rapid-fire responses.
 - English speakers or non-English speakers?
 - Urban dwellers, small-town residents, or country folk?
 - Youth, middle-aged people, or the elderly?
 - The rich, the middle class, or the poor?
 - Prisoners, lawyers, or law-makers?
 - All-volunteer groups or well-funded groups with PR (public relations) budgets?

2. Allow students to volunteer other multiple choices that they think up. Let the class continue giving rapid-fire responses to the multiple choices they come up with.
3. Ask the class, “If these are the people whose opinions and perspectives are most represented in the news, how might that lead to the stereotyping of those groups heard from less often?”
4. Have each student choose one group of people whose voices tend to be marginalized in the news. (Note: You may encourage them to choose “youth” as a marginalized group for this activity.) Give them 15-20 minutes to write five paragraphs addressing the following:
 - Why might their voices be ignored or excluded?
 - What is the outcome or effect of their voices being excluded at the level of the individual?
 - What is the outcome or effect of their voices being ignored at the level of the community?
 - What is the outcome or effect of their voices being excluded with regards to public policy (law-making)?
 - What truths do these missing voices reveal about our society?

Note: Some examples of why voices are marginalized include reporters' deadlines; sources not having easy phone access; fear of punishment, unemployment, or deportation; suspicion and mistrust; climate of religious intolerance; lack of “authority” status; lack of financial backing; and many media outlets being owned by a large corporation with a particular agenda.

C. Homework

1. Watch the evening news. Pick out one story and write up a list of all the people the newscasters interviewed, quoted, or paraphrased.
2. The following day, report to your class whose voices were omitted from the newscast.
3. Who are the voices you hear least from on TV? Express your opinion on this topic to the class.

Terms to Know

Bias

A **bias** is a preference or an inclination, especially one that inhibits impartial judgement. Often, bias will lead reporters to give more credence to those sources who are most like them, and be more dismissive of sources who are least like them.

Marginalize

To **marginalize** means to exclude or ignore. In news reporting, a marginalized voice is an opinion or perspective coming from a sector of society that is rarely represented.