

Project-based learning

Journalism 101

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- ▶ analyze USA TODAY's writing style.
- ▶ define the terms journalists use.
- ▶ conduct an interview.
- ▶ apply the basic rules of journalism as they research and write an objective newspaper article.
- ▶ edit their own writing for content, clarity and accuracy.
- ▶ create a compelling headline for their article.

STANDARDS

*This project meets the following national standards for high school:*

**NL-ENG.K-12.8 Developing Research Skills**  
*Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (NCTE)*

**NL-ENG.K-12.4 Communication Skills**  
*Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (NCTE)*

**NL-ENG.K-12.5 Communication Strategies**  
*Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes. (NCTE)*

**NL-ENG.K-12.6 Applying Knowledge**  
*Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (NCTE)*

**WEEK 1:** This month you are going to learn about the basics of journalism. Journalism is information delivered quickly. It is written and published on very tight deadlines for a wide variety of readers. USA TODAY targets readers all across the U.S. and in other countries. To meet deadlines as well as readers' expectations, USA TODAY has established a concise writing style. Spend the next week examining USA TODAY's style. Jot down at least five observations, and discuss them in class. Before the end of the week, define the following journalistic terms: angle; beat; bias; caption; cutline; deadline; editor; editorial; feature; lead (pronounced *lede*); libel; proofreading; reporter. (Use a dictionary, encyclopedia or other resources as necessary, and make sure your definitions are clear and specific.)

**WEEK 2:** Last week, you examined the style used by reporters in USA TODAY. You also defined a list of journalism terms. This week, you are going to put on your reporter hat. Begin by choosing your "beat," or the specific type of news you want to cover – football, baseball, the president, Congress, movies, music, the stock market, etc. Beats are not broad categories such as sports, entertainment or politics. Rather, they are specific branches of these. Choose a beat about a subject or field that you are already familiar with or interested in learning more about. In short, make sure your beat is one that motivates you!

You may be wondering how a newspaper article gets written. It isn't difficult to write a good news story if you start early and follow a few simple rules. 1. Choose your topic. 2. Do thorough research before you begin writing, and make sure your information is accurate. 3. Identify the fact or discovery of most important news value to your readers. Include it in the first sentence or first paragraph of your story. 4. Begin writing the article. Make sure your story presents new information to readers while keeping the facts in perspective. In other words, don't embellish or dramatize your story to make it more interesting. Keep these rules in mind as you choose your beat and research and write your article.

**WEEK 3:** Last week you chose your beat. This week you are going to cover it. The main news-gathering techniques are interviewing sources and observing situations (in sports, for example). Below are some useful interviewing tips to help get you started. (Remember, good reporters take a lot of notes. If possible, have a tape recorder with you when you do any interviewing. It will help keep the interview moving along while allowing you to be accurate.) 1. If you have only a few questions, call the person up on the phone. For longer interviews, arrange a meeting or conference call. 2. Do background research to help you compile a general list of questions to be answered. This is the information you hope to gather from your source. 3. During the actual interview, use your prepared questions to get things started and to avoid forgetting to ask a specific question. However, never limit yourself to just these questions. Often, your best material will come from follow-up questions that you won't know to ask until you receive the responses to your prepared questions. 4. Take good notes. If you use a tape recorder, be sure to get the interviewee's permission. 5. Write up the interview as soon as possible, while facts and phrasing are still fresh in your mind. When you are done, check back with the interviewee to verify any facts or quotes you are uncertain about.

**WEEK 4:** Now it's time to sit down and write the actual newspaper article. By following a few guidelines, you can avoid some common mistakes. 1. Always leave yourself, the reporter, out of the story. You should also avoid referring to the fact-finding process. For example: "When asked when he plans to travel to Europe, the president said next week." (incorrect) "The president is travelling to Europe next week." (correct) 2. Don't add opinions to you article. Opinions are only appropriate on the editorial page. 3. Use short sentences and short paragraphs. 4. The first time you refer to a person in a story, use their first and last names. In subsequent references to the same person, use his or her last name only. 5. Support your statements with direct and indirect quotes from your sources. Anytime you report a statement that is not a fact – for example, a prediction or opinion – you must attribute it to its source. Once you have drafted your article, reread and edit it for content and clarity. Finally, give your article an attention-grabbing headline to entice readers. Share your articles in class. Is being a reporter more or less difficult than your expected? How many students would consider a career in journalism?