Lookout
SANTA CRUZ

News Detective Lesson Plan: A Media Literacy Activity

Grade Level: 9–12
Time: 15 minutes - 1 hour depending on level of engagement
Objective: Build engagement and critical media habits using real local news. Students will explore a recent news story from Lookout Santa Cruz and use a media literacy worksheet to think critically about the news they are consuming.

Prep:

Choose a timely article from Lookout Santa Cruz or another local news source. Even better, use one that connects to your current lessons.

Materials Needed:

- Printed or digital article from Lookout Santa Cruz
- Printed or digital Media Literacy Worksheets
- Whiteboard or projector (optional)
- Highlighter (optional)

Introduction

- Introduce the activity and go through the media literacy guide to prep students on the basics of media literacy.
- Have students read a local article (printed or linked).

Activity

- Distribute the worksheet (printed or linked) and have students fill out the checklist as they read the article.
- Optional: Group students into teams of 2–4 to fill it out together.
- Optional: Highlight or annotate their article for evidence of bias, relevance, or credibility.

Share Out

- Choose 2–3 students or teams to share:
  - What they trusted (or didn't)
  - Something surprising or missing
  - Who in the community is most impacted

Media Literacy Guide

What is Media Literacy?
The ability to critically analyze stories presented in the media and to determine their accuracy/credibility.

What to consider when determining trustworthiness of news you read or hear:

1. **When you read any information the first thing to ask is: Where is the article from and is the content trustworthy?**
   Look at who the author is and see if you recognize the news medium. Distinguish if the story is on a platform or a news source, and if it is on a platform, find the source of the information.
   Platform: a distributor of news (Facebook, Instagram)
   News source/news outlet: Where is news coming from, originator of the content (Lookout Santa Cruz, LA Times, CalMatters, Kaiser Health News, The Marshall Project)

2. **What type of story are you reading?**
   This will help you distinguish if it is direct information, opinion, or something else, which informs how to digest the information.

   Types of Stories:
   - ***Breaking News, briefs*:** News of the moment – really important to check sources on.
   - ***News story:*** Factual reports on any event or issue from city council meetings to environmental policy.
   - ***Profile:*** A deep dive into the background and character of a key member of the community.
   - ***Community, entertainment events/information:*** Basic information about community events (e.g. arts and entertainment calendars, community and non-profit events).
   - ***Investigative Reporting:*** Reporting that helps expose community problems, with extensive reporting and use of data mining techniques (finding patterns in large amounts of data), sometimes uncovering information that some influences might want hidden.
   - ***Opinion/Op-Ed/Community Voices*:** Pages used expressly for opinion – as contrasted with the straightforward analysis found in news coverage. Includes both a publication's own opinion (editorials) and community members' opinion as "Op-Eds."
   - ***Columns*:** A writer covering news, but using lots of personal voice.
   - **Q & A:** On the record interviews with public figures and interesting people.
   - ***Series:*** A group of stories under the same theme
   - ***Promoted Content /Advertising*:** A story presented by the advertising team and paid for commercially. Should be clearly marked so readers know that it's not news.

3. **Can you tell what beat the reporter has, or what they normally cover? You may want to look into the author and see what other articles they have written.**
   Beat: Specific subject areas of reporting, often assigned to a reporter for regular coverage, including: Environment, Education, Housing & Affordability, City Life, Civic Life, Election, Food & Drink, Arts & Culture.

4. **How many sources were cited in the article you just read? Were there direct quotes or was it paraphrased? Were there any documents cited?**
   Source: Person, record, document or event that provides the information for the story.

5. **Did you notice any sensationalizing within the story, maybe the headline?**
   Sensationalizing: In journalism and mass media, sensationalism is a type of editorial tactic where stories are edited and worded to excite the greatest number of readers and viewers. This doesn't always mean something is true or false, but is often done to get clicks or attract attention, and is not usually necessary to the story.

   A headline like "Experts baffled by mysterious virus outbreak" could be sensationalizing because it uses strong, emotional language, even if the situation is not as dire as the headline suggests.

6. **Did you notice any areas that seem to have biases?**
   Bias: A preconceived perception in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another. Although unbiased news does not exist, look to see if you find any type of blatant bias in anything you read. This could cause a reader to feel or show prejudice for or against someone or something. In some cases, this could be a distortion of information. Make up your own mind about an issue by putting aside pre-conceived notions and emotionalism and looking at it from different angles.

   Example of Bias in Media: Using words that carry negative or positive connotations (e.g. "terrorists" versus "freedom fighters") could form a biased picture for the reader.

Local News Media Literacy Worksheet

Name: _____

Article Title: _____

1. SOURCE CREDIBILITY

Things to look for in a reputable outlet: Is the article from a well-known, established news organization (like NPR, AP, BBC)? About/Contact info: A reliable site usually has a physical address, editorial team, and contact information. Be cautious with unfamiliar blogs or websites that look unprofessional or overly sensational.

- Who published this article?

- Is the source local, national, or unknown? What is the source?

- Is the author named? Who is the author?

- Is this news, opinion, or advertising? How can you tell?
    - Sometimes advertising is listed with words like "promoted", "presented by" or "paid for", etc.

- Is there any sensationalizing in the headline? If so, please explain:

What makes you trust or question this source?

2. EVIDENCE & OBJECTIVITY

Reliable news sticks to facts and uses clear language that includes facts, statistics, quotes, &/or links to sources. Watch for bias, loaded language, and emotional words to sway you (Example: "shocking," "disgusting," "heroic"). A trustworthy article won't ignore the opposing argument so make sure it shows more than one side of the issue and different viewpoints are represented fairly.

- Does the article include direct quotes from people involved? Write down one quote:

- Are there statistics, data, or other facts? If so, share one here:

- Does it include more than one perspective? If so, write down the basics of 2 perspectives:

- Can you detect bias or one-sided language? Please explain:

3. LOCAL IMPACT & RELEVANCE

Local news covers events and shares information that directly affects you and the people around you. Knowing what's going on in your community builds civic awareness and helps you become an active participant in your community promoting positive change.

- Who in our community is affected by this issue?

- How is this connected to your life or school?

- Why do you think this story was published now?

What's one way this story could lead to change?

Exit Question:

Circle one or more:

I learned something   I have questions   I want to know more