



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 9 to 12
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Bias in News Sources

Overview

In this lesson students consider the meaning of the words “bias” and “prejudice” and consider how bias may be found even at the level of individual words due to connotation. Students are introduced to the key media literacy concept that media contain ideological messages and have social and political implications in considering why it is particularly important to consider possible bias in news reporting. The key concept that each medium has a distinct aesthetic form is introduced as students learn about the “inverted pyramid” structure of news reporting and consider how this may lead to bias. Students then evaluate a variety of news sources with regards to the degree of bias and then demonstrate their understanding of the concept by creating an intentionally biased news report.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- understand the concept of bias
- identify a point of view based on word choice
- understand the role of subjectivity and perception in media
- understand the reasons why bias might occur in news
- recognize the different ways in which bias can occur in news reporting
- demonstrate an understanding of how bias occurs in news reporting
- write in a given literary form

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the following documents:

- How to Detect Bias in the News
- Bias Evaluation Worksheet

Procedure

Begin by writing the word “Bias” on the board and ask students to define it. (The definition should read similar to “A positive or negative attitude towards something, often based on preconceived prejudices or viewpoints rather than evidence.”)

Discuss the relationship between bias and prejudice (a bias may be the result of prejudice, but encountering biased information may lead someone to become prejudiced). Explain that bias can be found even at the level of individual words. Write on the board:

Egotistical	Scrawny
Proud	Underweight
Confident	Slender

Point out that these are synonyms that do not really mean the same thing: the first in each list is always meant in a negative way, the second could be positive or negative, and the third is positive.

Introduce the idea that *media contain ideological messages and have social and political implications* and ask students why news is particularly significant when it comes to bias. (Because we expect news to be objective and unbiased; because we use news to learn about and understand what's going on in the world.) Ask students to brainstorm other ways in which bias might occur in news sources: what choices might writers, editors, producers, and so on, make (consciously or unconsciously) that would lead to a biased view of the subject they're covering?

Distribute the article *How to Detect Bias in the News* and either have students read it and answer questions or go through it as a class. Compare the forms of bias in the article to the list the students brainstormed in the previous activity. Which forms of bias did they miss? What about these forms of bias might be difficult for people to notice if they're not aware of them? (For example, "Bias through omission" might be difficult to detect because we don't often think about what's **not** in a story, or what news **isn't** covered.)

Now introduce the idea that each medium *has a unique aesthetic form* and discuss the "inverted pyramid" (described in *How to Detect Bias in the News*) to understand how **where** in a story something appears that might affect how a story is read. (Point out that TV and radio newscasts are written in the same way, but because time is so much more precious on TV the background and context that form the "bottom" of the pyramid is often left out.)

Select an issue in the news relating to diversity issues (consider issues relating to visible minorities, religious minorities, aboriginals, gays and lesbians and persons with disabilities, as well as bias against youth or elders).

Divide the class into 4-6 groups and assign each group a different news/information source (newspapers, TV news, alternative online news sources, etc.) with which to research the topic. (This can be done either in class on the Internet [with newspaper/TV channel Web pages], in class using print papers and recorded news programs, or as a homework assignment.) **If teachers prefer not to use a potentially sensitive topic, students can simply browse their news source (read an issue of a newspaper, watch a newscast, etc.).**

Have students evaluate the material they have found using the *Bias Evaluation Worksheet* and report their findings to the class. What forms of bias did they find? Were some news sources more or less biased than others? Were some kinds of bias more difficult to detect or recognize than others (for example, "Bias through omission" can be difficult to detect unless we know from other sources that a story is going unreported)?

Evaluation Activity

If you did not use newspapers earlier in the lesson, distribute copies of a daily newspaper to the groups previously formed. Each group selects ten stories from the newspaper. The group then creates two news products (a newspaper or filmed/acted out newscast): one where bias techniques are applied to create as positive view of the stories in that paper as possible and one where bias techniques are used to create a negative view. **Note that this bias will not relate to any identified group – it will simply be casting the provided news stories in a positive or negative light – e.g. “Sports team loses 5-4/Close game /Sports team loses game”.**

Extension Activity

Have each student select a minority group and a news source. For a period of one week, have students follow their chosen news source and make note of every story or article that involves members of their chosen minority group. At the end of the week, students should analyze what they have found using the *Bias Evaluation Worksheet* (remind students that a lack of coverage is itself a form of bias).

How to Detect Bias in the News

At one time or other we all complain about "bias in the news." The fact is, despite the journalistic ideal of "objectivity," every news story is influenced by the attitudes and background of the people involved in its creation.

You can become more aware of bias by watching for the following journalistic techniques that allow it to "creep in" to the news:

Bias through selection and omission

A journalist can express a bias by choosing to use or not to use a specific news item. Within a given story, some details can be ignored, and others included, to give readers or viewers a different opinion about the events reported. For example, if, during a speech, a few people boo, the reaction can be described as "remarks greeted by jeers" or they can be ignored as "a handful of dissidents."

Bias through omission is difficult to detect. Only by comparing news reports from a wide variety of outlets can this form of bias be observed.

Bias through placement

Readers of papers judge first page stories to be more significant than those buried in the back, while news websites place the most important stories on their home page. Television and radio newscasts run the most important stories first and leave the less significant for later. Where a story is placed, therefore, influences what a reader or viewer thinks about its importance.

How the story is organized is also significant. Most news stories are written in what is called "inverted pyramid" style, beginning with what is considered the most newsworthy facts, followed by the important details relating to those facts, and finally background information to provide context. The last part of the story contains information that readers are least likely to read and editors are most likely to cut. This can be a form of bias because context often helps you fully understand a topic: for example, if an article about the number of sufferers of mental illness in prison (the newsworthy facts) waits until the fourth paragraph to note that sufferers of mental illness are no more likely to be violent than anyone else (context), readers who only read part of the story may come away with a very inaccurate view of mental illness and violence.

Bias by headline

Many people read only the headlines of a news item. Most people scan nearly all the headlines in a newspaper or Website. They can summarize as well as present carefully hidden bias and prejudices. They can convey excitement where little exists. They can express approval or condemnation.

Bias by word choice and tone

The use of words with a positive or negative connotation can strongly influence the reader or viewer: consider how a hockey game might be seen differently if it's described as a "loss," a "close game" or a "near-win."

Bias by photos, captions and camera angles

Some pictures flatter a person, while others make the person look unpleasant. A paper can choose photos to influence opinion about, for example, a candidate for election. On television, in a magazine or on the Web the choice of which visual images to display is extremely important. The captions newspapers run below photos are also potential sources of bias.

Bias through use of names and titles

News media often use labels and titles to describe people, places and events. A person can be called an "ex-con" or be referred to as someone who "served time twenty years ago for a minor offense." Whether a person is described as a "terrorist" or a "freedom fighter" is a clear indication of editorial bias.

Bias through statistics and crowd counts

To make a disaster seem more spectacular (and therefore more newsworthy), numbers can be inflated. Compare "More than 900 people attended the event" with "Fewer than 1,000 people showed up at the event."

Bias by source control

To detect bias, always consider where the news item "comes from." Is the information supplied by a reporter, an eyewitness, police or fire officials, executives, or elected or appointed government officials? Each may have a particular bias that is introduced into the story. Companies and public relations directors supply news outlets with "fluff pieces" through news releases, photos or videos. Often news outlets depend on pseudo-events (demonstrations, sit-ins, ribbon cuttings, speeches and ceremonies) that take place mainly to gain news coverage.

Bias Evaluation Worksheet

For your news source, list all examples you can find of each form of bias, along with a quote or other evidence that shows the bias is there.

Source: _____

Bias through selection and omission:

Bias through placement:

Bias by word choice and tone:

Bias by headline:

Bias by photos, captions and camera angles:

Bias through use of names and titles:

Bias through statistics and crowd counts:

Bias by source control:
