

Be a Journalist!

Grade Levels: 5-8

Objective

- Students will interview a classmate
- Students will write a journalism-style feature story

Materials

- “Basic Journalism” handout (included)
- “Interview Questionnaire” handout (included)

Procedures

1. Discuss the structure of a basic news story using real samples from a newspaper or magazine.
2. Use the “Basic Journalism” handout to introduce basic journalism principles and discuss the news story process from beginning to end. This can be simple or complex, but should include coverage of headlines, story leads, and general tone of a news story.
3. A more involved thematic unit might include research, fact-checking, interviewing skills, rewriting, copyediting, and layout.
4. Students interview a partner using the “Interview Questionnaire” handout.
5. When students are finished writing the story, have them take a picture and lay it out in the style of a newspaper article.
6. Variation: For a more challenging activity, use a word-processing or desktop-publishing program and a scanner or digital camera to create professional-quality news stories.

Basic Journalism

Visualize journalistic writing as an inverted pyramid. The top contains one or two sentences with the most important information first; this is called the lead (pronounced *leed* and sometimes spelled “lede”). Next, a little more information is given about the story, and so on, until all of the information has been presented.

“An example of a regular pyramid story might be an old-fashioned mystery where the reader is introduced to more and more important clues as he or she reads on,” says Rich Cameron, the chair of the journalism department at Cerritos College in California. “It is only after collecting all of those clues that the reader can finally begin to solve the mystery.”

“With an inverted pyramid story we give away the solution (or in our case a summary) at the very beginning. The rest of the story contains less and less important information until we just stop,” says Cameron.

Tone: Your job as a reporter is to report facts and the opinions of others and to leave your own opinions out of the story. The term for introducing your own opinion into a story is called *editorializing* – try not to do this!

Multiple Sources: The more people you talk to, the better the article. You can use direct quotes or paraphrase what someone says, but always remember to identify who says what.

Sentence Length: Sentences should be an average of 20-28 words. This is an average, so you don’t need to spend time counting; just be aware that sentences and paragraphs are much shorter than what you’ve been taught in composition.

Terms to Know:

- **5W1H:** Always answer the *who, what, why, where, when, and how* of the news article.
- **Lead:** The opening of a story, usually a summary of the most important information. The lead usually answers the 5W1H.
- **Headline:** A title or attention grabber above the body of an article. The author of the story usually does not write the headline.
- **Angle:** A particular point of view or way of looking at a subject.
- **Fact-checking:** Checking that your facts are correct. Amy, Aimee, and Amie are all pronounced the same way and can be easily misspelled. Look up the names of specific people and places and anything else you are presenting as fact to be sure you are stating the truth.

Interview Questionnaire

Sample Feature Story Outline

Headline:

- Use humor or cleverness to engage the reader
- Ensure that the headline is a true description of the information in the story
- Avoid clichés
- Don't tell everything

Paragraph 1: Lead

- Catch the reader's attention

Paragraph 2: Background

- Birth date and place, last school attended, places they've lived, family, etc.

Paragraph 3: Personal

- Likes/dislikes, hobbies, feelings about the world

Paragraph 4: Future Goals

- Career interests, predictions, or hopes for the future

Sample Interview Outline

1. Name
2. Birthday and birthplace
3. Last school attended
4. How do you like school so far?
5. Worst habit
6. Favorite weird food combination
7. Favorite band, radio station, or type of music
8. Favorite book
9. Your idea of relaxation
10. Pet peeve (some little thing that really annoys you)

11. Describe your all-time favorite school project or homework assignment.
12. Describe either your most embarrassing moment or the hardest time in your life.
13. Discuss your best asset or the thing you like most about yourself.
14. Complete the statement “I think kids today really need to...”
15. Complete the statement “I think adults today really need to...”
16. Do you see the world in a positive or negative light? Why?
17. Pick three adjectives (words that describe a noun—nice, tall, bubbly, etc.) off the top of your head that best describe you.
18. Name one thing you would really like to do that you have never tried.
19. Do you speak another language fluently? If so, which one?
20. If your answer to the above question was “no,” what language would you like to speak fluently? Why?
21. Where else in the world would you like to live?
22. What kind of career would you like to have?
23. Describe your family.
24. Describe what you do in your spare time.