

Lesson 1: Journalism and Democracy

As citizens living in a democracy, we have a responsibility to stay informed about the issues that matter to us, and to society. This is true all the time, but especially during elections, when we must make a meaningful choice at the ballot box.

Journalists play a critical role in our democracy. They hold government and other sources of power to account, help inform citizens, foster debate about important issues and give people a voice.

During an election, journalists provide news and perspectives to inform citizens about the parties, candidates and issues, fact-check the statements of leaders and candidates, and place the campaign's events in context. Without journalists, citizens would miss an invaluable resource to help them decide when politicians are telling the truth or acting in the public's best interests.

Informed citizenship involves seeking out news and information from a variety of sources, comparing perspectives and keeping up with new developments. This takes effort and strategies, particularly when there is so much information available online.

Many of us now increasingly find our news or information via platforms like Facebook and Twitter, based on what has been shared by family, friends or groups/organizations that we follow. On social media, news and information is often pulled from multiple sources, including from both professional news organizations and individual citizens or bloggers.

For their part, citizens must navigate an abundance of content and increasingly assess the reliability of news and information found online. An essential first step in evaluating any information is to assess its aims by asking: *who produced this and why?*

GRADE LEVEL: Elementary/Intermediate/Secondary

GUIDING QUESTIONS

What is the role of journalism? How does journalism relate to democracy?

MINDS ON

1. Review the concept of **media literacy**. There is an abundance of information in the world today and therefore we must be critical consumers. The first step in evaluating any information is to ask *who produced this and why?*

2. Collect and share one or more examples of media with students (e.g., newscast, news article, blog post, advertisement).

Guiding questions:

- What is the message?
- Who is the writer or source? Who produced it?
- Who is the audience?
- What is the purpose? (sell, persuade, inform, entertain, other)

Exemplars:

- a. [Melissa McCarthy Kia Super Bowl Ad](#) (Advertisement/sell and entertain)
- b. [The National for May 13, 2018 - CBC](#) (Newscast/inform)
- c. [“Heritage Minutes, A Part of Canadian History Since...”, The Beaverton](#) (Satire commercial/entertain)
- d. [Recycling poster – Northumberland County](#) (Poster/inform)
- e. [Humboldt Tragedy](#) (Editorial cartoon, interpret/praise)
- f. [A Message from the Chief Electoral Officer – Elections Ontario](#) (Advertisement/inform)
- g. [3rd Annual Grains for Healthy Brains Cereal Drive Collects 1100 Boxes of Cereal](#) (Organization’s blog/inform)
- h. [How Trudeau's Liberals stay to the centre of centre: The Beaverton](#) (Satire news/entertain)
- i. [Toxic chemicals found in Canadian baby products, study finds](#)
- j. [Would you care more if I was a panda?](#) (Advertisement/persuade)
- k. [Treating depression goes further than fighting stigma](#) (Sponsored content/persuade)

ACTION

1. Ask students what they know about journalism. **Journalism** consists of the gathering, evaluating, creating, presenting of and/or commenting on news and information.

2. Watch the NewsWise video – [“What Is Journalism and Why Does it Matter?”](#) and review the role of journalism in a democratic society.

- **“Watchdog” role:** To monitor government activity, fact-check statements, question the decisions of our government officials (transparency) and make them take responsibility for their actions (accountability).
- **Empower citizens:** To give people the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, society and governments.
- **Debate and discussion:** To foster conversation about important issues facing society by sharing different perspectives and potential solutions.
- **A voice:** To give people a voice in society and help them be heard, particularly those who lack power in society. This reporting is often connected with influencing change in the community or government actions/responses.

3. Have a class discussion about fact versus opinions: What is a fact? What is an opinion? How can you tell them apart?

Afterwards, ask students to determine which of the ten fictional statements provided are fact-based or opinion-based and why (Part 1: Activity 1.1).

4. Similar to other types of media and information, journalism can take different forms and have different purposes. It is helpful to analyze the content and purpose so that we can assess credibility and potential bias.

- **Fact-based news coverage:** Focuses on reporting on events, issues or developments and is intended to inform. While it may include analysis or assessment, it is based on facts and not opinion.

- **Opinion journalism:** An opinion piece provides a viewpoint about an event, issue or development. The purposes can vary, sometimes it is meant to critique, praise, interpret or persuade. It may not be impartial or be balanced, and is usually impacted by preconceived notions or opinions. Examples include editorials, columns and commentary.

5. Using an online media website or newspaper publication, have students complete the Journalism Scavenger Hunt (Activity 1.2).

Alternatively, or in addition, have students complete the media analysis (Part 2: Activity 1.1).

CONSOLIDATION

Have a brief closing discussion about journalism and democracy, or ask students to write a reflection on one or more of the following questions.

- Why is journalism important in a democracy?
- What would be the consequences if journalism no longer existed?

Activity 1.1: Fact vs Opinion

PART 1

Read the ten statements below and determine if they are opinion or fact.

Statement	<u>F</u> act or <u>O</u> pinion?	Why?
1. Only 5 out of 10 citizens voted in the last provincial election.		
2. Providing free childcare for families will help more women work and improve gender equality.		
3. Four candidates have confirmed that they will be running for election in our electoral district.		
4. According to the research, teenagers spend five hours a day using social media.		
5. The party leader is not considered trustworthy after making false statements.		
6. For the first time in a provincial election in Ontario, voters will use electronic voting machines this June.		
7. New funding was announced from the provincial government to help schoolyard greening projects.		
8. It is not fair for wealthy people to have to pay more in taxes if everyone gets the same services.		
9. After graduating from a university program, the average Ontario student has to pay back \$25,000 in student loans.		
10. Social media is bad for our mental health.		

PART 2

In a newspaper or online media website, find one article that is opinion-based and one article that is fact-based. Highlight or underline all the facts presented in each example.

Publication		
Headline		
Author		
Brief Summary		
Is the purpose to inform or persuade? How do you know?		

Activity 1.2: Analyzing Journalism

Using a print newspaper or online media website, find articles or news pieces that fit each of the descriptions below and summarize each one.

Purpose	Headline and type of reporter	Summary
Journalists acting as a “watchdog” of government		
To describe an important event that took place		
To share opinions on a specific issue or event		
Giving a voice to someone or a group		
To persuade people to think a certain way		