

Lesson 2: Journalistic Standards

In previous generations, news came at specific intervals from print and broadcast media. Today, news and information comes through many channels reaching us at all times of day. On social media, the source of information is not always obvious, and it can be difficult to know what is credible.

To determine which information we can trust, we need to look to the practice of fact-based journalism. It always involves research, assessment and verification where the central goal is to produce an accurate and fair representation of the facts.

To determine if a report is journalistic and credible, you can assess it through some fundamental standards:

- Sourcing: Does it include multiple reliable sources?
- Accuracy: Have the facts been sourced and verified?
- Research: Are there secondary sources? Have statistics been cited and if so, from where?
- Context: Does the story go beyond the news event to include history or background?
- Fairness: Is neutral language used to describe the people and issues?

These standards set fact-based journalism apart from other information that may not have the same level of research and rigour.

Journalism can be found in different places (online news sites, newspapers, magazines, TV, radio) and cover any topic, but when we are considering democracy and informed citizenship, we are interested in news.

Professional newsgathering organizations have their own standards for verification and accountability. In contrast to many online information sources, the reputations of these organizations depend on being always accurate and reliable. They are transparent and have a procedure for acknowledging and correcting mistakes when they are made. These measures help them earn the public's trust.

GRADE LEVEL: Secondary

GUIDING QUESTIONS

What makes information trustworthy? What ethics and standards should journalists apply to their work and why?

MINDS ON

1. Using a Turn and Talk strategy, ask students to discuss trust and information sources.

- Who in your life do you trust and why? What traits do they possess?
- Which sources of information from TV, radio, and the internet do you find trustworthy? What makes those sources reliable?

2. As a class, create a Venn diagram of the characteristics of trustworthy people and information sources with common traits in the middle.

ACTION

1. Watch the NewsWise video – “The Quest for Trust – Introducing the Standards of Journalism”
2. Using Slide Deck 2, introduce the Standards of Journalism:
 - Sources: How many are used? Are they reliable/authoritative?
 - Accuracy: Is there evidence that the information has been fact-checked or verified?
 - Research: What reports or secondary sources have been included? Have statistics been included and sources cited?
 - Context: Does the article address the bigger-picture of the story, beyond the news event?
 - Fairness: Is the tone even? What kinds of words are used to describe the players/issues?
3. Take students through an example of assessing journalistic standards. The below example has been mocked up for guidance (See Exemplar 2.1).

Government-commissioned report recommends Ontario should phase out Grade 3 EQAO test

Toronto Star, April 24, 2018 (626 words)

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-government-commissioned-report-recommends-ontario-should-phase-out/>

4. Putting it into practice: Ask students to assess the standards of journalism in selected articles (samples provided below). The activity can be completed through jigsaw method or another format of your own choosing. Provide copies of Activity 2.2 to support their analysis.
 - a) Divide the class into five groups and assign each group one standard.
 - b) Provide each student in the group with a different article. Ask students to summarize the article and assess evidence for their standard. Encourage students to discuss the task and help each other.
 - c) Have the group members share their assessment of their article and discuss any challenges.
 - d) Regroup so that students with the same article are seated together. Have them discuss each standard and their analysis of the given article.
 - e) Have students evaluate the quality of their article based on the standards.

Sample articles (10):

Ontario’s child care election promises win praise from B.C. finance minister

Toronto Star, April 11, 2018 (1105 words)

<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2018/04/11/ontarios-child-care-election-promises-win-praise-from-bc-finance-minister.html>

Actors hired to play Doug Ford supporters at rally outside debate

Toronto Star, May 8, 2018 (774 words)

<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2018/05/08/doug-ford-campaign-confirms-actors-were-hired-to-play-the-part-of-pc-supporters-at-mondays-debate-rally.html>

No longer polling third, Horwath and the NDP are fending off attacks from both sides

Toronto Star, May 13 (935 words)

<https://www.thestar.com/news/queenspark/2018/05/13/no-longer-polling-third-horwath-and-the-ndp->

[are-fending-off-attacks-from-both-sides.html](#)

People have a right to ‘as much transparency as possible’ when it comes to doctors’ pasts, health minister says

Toronto Star, May 14, 2018 (684 words)

<https://www.thestar.com/news/medical-disorder/2018/05/03/people-have-a-right-to-as-much-transparency-as-possible-when-it-comes-to-doctors-pasts-health-minster-says.html>

Elections Canada prepares to fight fake news, foreign influence in 2019 vote

CBC, March 20, 2018 (1093 words)

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/elections-canada-fake-news-voting-1.4582291>

Is Ottawa’s honeymoon with Silicon Valley coming to an end?

Toronto Star, May 14, 2018 (1147 words)

<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2018/05/11/is-ottawas-honeymoon-with-silicon-valley-coming-to-an-end.html>

This 12-year-old leukemia survivor is fighting for equal access to medicine for all Canadians

The Globe and Mail, May 17, 2018 (746 words)

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-health-canada-urged-to-provide-funding-for-pediatric-cancer-costs/>

Elections chief says lowering voting age to 16 is an idea ‘worth considering’

CBC, May 19, 2018 (766 words)

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/chief-electoral-officer-voting-age-16-1.4579051>

MMIWG inquiry gets better grades in latest report card from Native Women's Association, but failures remain

CBC, May 8, 2018 (934 words)

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/mmiwg-inquiry-third-report-card-1.4652656>

Sunny spring day turns to unforgettable tragedy as van driver kills 10 and injures 14

Toronto Star, April 23, 2018 (1,475 words)

<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2018/04/23/van-strikes-as-many-as-10-pedestrians-at-yonge-and-finch.html>

5. In small groups of five, have students consider the principles of journalism proposed by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel and decipher what each one means (Activity 2.3). Assign each student two principles and have them write down their thoughts and share them with their group. Allow time for discussion by all group members for each principle.

CONSOLIDATION

In breaking news situations, misinformation can often spread quickly online, before the facts can be confirmed. The verification process can take time, which is why it is particularly important to seek out and rely on information from professional news organizations when there is something happening.

Read the story below about the van attack that took place in Toronto in April 2018 and how the *Toronto Star* covered it, as well as how misinformation spread from a social media post.

How the Star reported on the tragic events on Yonge St.

From a police tweet to confirmation of a suspect, Star reporters came together to report on the first day a tragedy devastated Toronto. The resulting story was a combination of fact-finding and verification by 21 reporters.

<https://www.thestar.com/trust/2018/04/27/how-the-star-reported-on-the-tragic-events-on-yonge-st.html>

How the Far Right Spun the Toronto Van Attack as Islamic Terrorism

A tweet from a CBC reporter got picked up and taken out of context.

<http://www.canadalandshow.com/far-right-spun-the-toronto-van-attack-as-islamic-terrorism/>

Reflection questions:

- Why is an obligation to the truth so important?
- What would be the consequences for citizens and society if journalism ignored or distorted the truth?

EXTENDED LEARNING

The Trouble with Two Sides

Are there always “two sides to every story”? Should they be equal? What if one side is less credible or accurate?

For a long time, journalists strived for balance in reporting, but that also brings challenges. One example of the consequences of the desire for balance is the climate-change debate. Long after there was consensus among climate scientists about the effects of climate change, news reports still included equally weighted perspectives from climate-change deniers, to get ‘both sides’ of the story.

Discussion questions:

- What effect might this have had on public perception of the dangers of climate change?
- Can you think of any other cases where balance could be a problem?
- Should balance be a journalistic standard? Should the standard reflect a different meaning?

Activity 2.2: Journalistic Standards Analysis

With your assigned article and standard, complete the following analysis. Guiding activities and questions have been included on the next page.

<p>SUMMARIZE THE ARTICLE: What is the story about? What are the core issues, tensions or conflicts?</p>	
<p>IDENTIFY THE PLAYERS: What people or organizations are involved?</p>	
<p>THE STANDARD: What is your assigned standard and what does it mean?</p>	
<p>ANALYSIS OF THE STANDARD: Using the guiding questions on the following page, analyze efforts towards achieving the standard.</p>	

GUIDING TASKS AND QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

SOURCES

- Highlight all the people who are quoted or referenced in the story.
- What is the relationship of each person to the central story?
- Are these sources considered experts or qualified to comment? (Research them if you are uncertain)
- Who else might have been interviewed for this story? Are there any gaps that you can see?

FAIRNESS

- Is there more than one side to this story? If so, are different perspectives represented?
- Highlight all the people who are quoted or referenced. What is the relationship of each person to the central story? How do they support the different perspectives?
- Highlight any adjectives, or phrases used to describe people or issues. Are the descriptions neutral? Is any judgement implied?

RESEARCH

- Highlight any reports quoted or referenced, and/or any statistics included in the story.
- Who produced the report? Is it a reliable or expert source? (Research it if you are uncertain.)
- Where did the statistics come from? Are they appropriate and reliable? Do they help make sense of the story?
- What other facts are presented?

CONTEXT

- What is the central news event of this story? What is the ‘hook’ or reason it was published?
- What background information is included in the article to help explain the significance of the news event? Highlight the relevant passages.
- Does the added information help you understand the news event or issues better?

ACCURACY

- Highlight or underline any facts related to the central story.
- What evidence is used to support those facts?
- Are quotes attributed to reputable sources?
- Go on the website of the source and assess the practices of the news outlet. Does the organization have a statement of journalistic ethics or standards? Does it express a commitment to verification and accuracy? What steps does the organization take to correct mistakes when they are made?

Activity 2.3: The Elements of Journalism

The Elements of Journalism, by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, is a classic guidebook about the goals and principles of the journalism profession. Review the list of principles and provide an explanation for what it means or provide an example.

Journalistic Principle	What does it mean?
Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.	
Its first loyalty is to citizens.	
Its essence is a discipline of verification (study of proof or corroboration).	
Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.	
It must serve as an independent monitor of power.	
It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.	
It must strive to keep the significant interesting and relevant.	
It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional (comparative).	
Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience (principles/morals).	
Citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news.	

Final reflection: Which elements do you think are most important and why?

Exemplar 2.1: Assessing Journalistic Standards

Government-commissioned report recommends Ontario should phase out Grade 3 EQAO test

Caroline Alphonso, Toronto Star April 24, 2018 (626 words)

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-government-commissioned-report-recommends-ontario-should-phase-out/>

Sources: Does it include multiple reliable sources?

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Context: Does the story go beyond the news event to include history or background?

Research: Is neutral language used to describe the people and issues?

Ontario should phase out its Grade 3 standardized test, according to a new government-commissioned report that makes sweeping recommendations on how students are assessed in the province.

Lead author **Carol Campbell**, an **associate professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education**

(OISE) **at the University of Toronto**, said large-scale testing should “provide a snapshot for the overall system” to guide educators and government. **She added that high-performing countries, including Singapore, do not test students until the end of elementary school.**

This source is the report's author, so we can take what she says as accurate

This is not directly related to the news event, but is extra information to help the reader understand it better

Ontario tests its students on reading, writing and math in Grades 3 and 6. **The report, released Tuesday, said that the Grade 6 assessment should be enhanced to incorporate “transferable skills,” meaning problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity skills needed for a changing economy.**

Education Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris said in an e-mail statement on Tuesday that the government will “further consult this fall” on the recommendations related to standardized testing before developing next steps. **But with Premier Kathleen Wynne’s Liberals fighting to gain support ahead of the June 7 provincial election, it is unclear what changes, if any, could be made.**

The tests conducted by Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) have been the subject of intense debate. Supporters argue that they measure how students are learning the curriculum and keep the education system accountable. But critics say that they are used by some as a way to rank schools and also provide real-estate agents with a valuable sales tool.

Prof. Campbell was asked last fall to consult and review classroom and large-scale assessments as part of a wider provincial “curriculum refresh.”

The contents of the report are research

The Education Minister is a directly relevant source for this story

Adds extra information to support the story

Addressing what people on both sides of the issue think using neutral language is a sign of fairness

Among the recommendations was to phase out the Grade 9 math test, as well as the Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, which is one of the requirements to earn a high-school diploma. Instead, the report recommended implementing a new Grade 10 assessment that is not a graduation requirement and tests literacy, numeracy and other skills.

The president of the teacher's federation is source close to this issue

Sam Hammond, president of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, said the recommendation to scrap the Grade 3 test was a "good step." But he said he was disappointed that the report did not recommend eliminating EQAO testing altogether. Teachers have argued the tests take up too much time that could otherwise be spent on classroom work.

The language used is fair to his perspective

"The whole testing culture is a problem," Mr. Hammond said. "We think that the tens of millions of dollars that are put into EQAO could be put into front-line education programs."

Meanwhile, Charles Pascal, a former Ontario deputy education minister and a professor at OISE, said it was difficult to understand why the government commissioned a report on how students should be tested "before determining major changes to what is to be learned and, therefore, assessed."

"It's a confusing cart-before-the-horse approach," he said.

Prof. Pascal said **he disagreed with the recommendation** to get rid of the Grade 3 test, arguing that it assesses how the system is faring and how children are learning after two years of play-based full-day kindergarten.

Dave Cooke, chair of EQAO's board of directors, cautioned that the removal of the Grade 3 test would result in the loss of “an important source of data on early learning – data that is used not only to improve programs in elementary schools, but also to monitor the effectiveness of public expenditures on education.”

Prof. Campbell said she expected push-back to the panel's recommendations.

“There are very strong-held views to abolish EQAO. There are very strong views not to change EQAO.

And then there was a need to work through a middle ground to see what are the best assessments for all of our students and their learning and development,” she said. “And that's where we focused our decisions, on what we thought was the best for our students.”

The Globe and Mail has **editorial standards** available on its website

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/about/editorial-code/>