

## Bias - Am I Objective?

*This lesson was developed by Billy Montgomery, journalism professor, Roosevelt University and Columbia College Chicago, and Sue Laue, program manager, Columbia Links, Columbia College Chicago.*

### **Journalism – English Language Arts |**

#### **Overview & Purpose**

Although writers and news reporters are supposed to be objective, reporting the news without favoring any opinion or standpoint, there is no such thing as complete objectivity. At best, journalists strive for balanced reporting and writing. However, with so many different backgrounds and experiences to report on, it is difficult to keep bias from creeping into reporting. While reporters watch their sources for bias, it often can be a struggle to acknowledge their own biases. The following lesson and exercises are a safe and fun way for student reporters and writers to acknowledge their partiality, conduct self-audits and revise perceptions to become more objective.

#### **State Common Core Curriculum Standards**

**[www.isbe.net](http://www.isbe.net) or [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)**

This lesson applies the State Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Social and Emotional Learning, Grades 9-12. Teachers are aligning their teaching and curriculum with these new federal and state learning performance standards to produce a common achievement outcome for all students. *Scroll down to bottom of lesson plan for individual standards and their relevance to this lesson.*

#### **Materials/Sources for Teaching the Lesson**

How to Detect Bias in the News, Media Awareness Network, April 9, 2010. Helpful hints for uncovering racial bias in the news, Paste the link into Google browser:

[www.media-awareness.ca/english/...news/bw\\_bias\\_in\\_the\\_news.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/...news/bw_bias_in_the_news.cfm)

Media Bias: Going Beyond Fair and Balanced, Scientific American, Sept. 26, 2008.

Despite popular accounts, researchers found that Barack Obama got more negative press coverage than John McCain did in the early part of the campaign. Paste the link into Google:

[www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=media-bias-presidential-election](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=media-bias-presidential-election)

Video: “The Plight of Jobless Teens, The Summer Blues,” [www.columbialinks.org](http://www.columbialinks.org)

#### **Learning Links for the Classroom**

In this section of the lesson plan are classroom teaching options, discussion and question/answer prompts and journaling and writing assignments for assessment and evaluation of student learning and knowledge.

#### **Definition of Bias**

Bias is prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair.

#### **Teach 1**

#### **Literature & Video Review**

Have students go online and review the two articles above. Then have them review the video on teen unemployment in Chicago, [“The Plight of Jobless Teens, The Summer Blues,”](#) Columbia Links program, at [www.columbialinks.org](http://www.columbialinks.org). (Scroll down Columbia Links home page to video, click on arrow to play.)

### **Discussion**

Q - Could bias hinder these students from gaining entry into the job market and detract from the real issue, the lack of jobs for young people?

Q - What are various elements of someone’s persona that could lead to bias?

A - A person’s race, dress, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, sexual identity.

Q - Why is it desirable to keep these elements out of your writing or reporting?

A - The message that is truly the heart of the story can be blurred if these elements are allowed to take precedence or even shade the accuracy or truth of a statement. Example: In a story about a woman who was date-raped, a reference to what she was wearing, if scantily clad, could lead readers to think that the assault was her fault.

### **Teach 2**

#### **The Bias Game**

Ask your class to think of two falsehoods and one fact about themselves. Encourage them not to think of outrageous untruths like just being released from Al Qaeda or something far out that would be a tip-off to which statement is actually true or plausible. Also, depending on the maturity of the class, caution them from sharing anything too personal.

After several minutes of thought, ask for a volunteer to share his or her three statements. List the statements on the board, and then ask the class to vote for which one is the true statement. It is all right to let them vote more than once. Or, if there are time constraints, to make sure each student gets to share his or her statements, each could do so verbally, and then the class would vote.

### **Discussion**

After all the votes are tallied for each student, ask him or her to acknowledge the true statement. Then, ask the students why they voted in the manner they did, and paraphrase their responses. Many responses will be based on assumptions about the way a person may look, talk or appear physically. A productive discussion can be facilitated from specific examples or scenarios.

### **Assessments**

#### **Journaling 1**

Assign students to write a one-page reflection on an opinion they hold, and how they would keep that opinion or bias out of their reporting and writing. For instance, an opinion about the legalization of marijuana use, could impact a story on legislation to de-criminalize its use. Assuring that both sides of an issue are accurately and fully reflected can help avoid writing a “slanted” story. Sticking to the facts can also assure that news accounts are objective.

#### **Journaling 2**

Assign students to write a one-page reflection on an opinion that they held and what led them to change that opinion. Ask for volunteers from the class to share their stories to prompt discussion.

## **Writing 1**

Ask students to find a newspaper or magazine article dealing with legislation to legalize gay marriage. Have them analyze how the reporter reflected objectivity in the writing, and share insights with the class.

### **State Common Core Standards**

[www.isbe.net](http://www.isbe.net) or [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)

### **Links Lesson Plan 2, News Literacy: Bias – Am I Objective?**

This lesson applies and reinforces the following selected Common Core Curriculum Standards for English Language Arts and Social and Emotional Learning, Grades 9-12. Teachers are aligning their teaching and curriculum with these new federal and state performance standards to produce a common achievement outcome for all students. To find other common core standards that may apply to this lesson, visit [www.isbe.net](http://www.isbe.net) or [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

## **Grades 9-10**

### **English Language Arts**

#### **Speaking and Listening – Comprehension and Collaboration**

1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

1. d. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

#### **Language - Vocabulary Acquisition and Use**

5. Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

5. a. Interpret figures of speech (e.g., satire, sarcasm) in context and analyze their role in the text.

#### **Writing History**

1. d Text Types and Purposes: Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

### **Social and Emotional Learning Standards**

#### **Early High School**

#### **Goal 2 - Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.**

Standard A: Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.

A.4a. Analyze similarities and differences between one’s own and others’ perspectives.

A.4b. Use conversation skills to understand others’ feelings and perspectives.

Standard B: Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.

B.4a. Analyze the origins and negative effects of stereotyping and prejudice.

B.4b. Demonstrate respect for individuals from different social and cultural groups.

#### **Goal 3 - Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.**

Standard A: Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.

A.4a. Demonstrate personal responsibility in making ethical decisions.

A.4b. Evaluate how social norms and the expectations of authority influence personal decisions and actions.

## **Grades 11-12 English Language Arts**

### **Speaking and Listening - Comprehension and Collaboration**

1.c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

1.d. Comprehension and Collaboration: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

### **Language – Knowledge of Language**

3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

### **Reading History - Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

9. Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

### **Writing History - Text Types and Purposes**

1.d. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

## **Social and Emotional Learning Standards Late High School**

### **Goal 2 - Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.**

Standard A: Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.

Standard A.5a. Demonstrate how to express understanding of those who hold different opinions.

A.5b. Demonstrate ways to express empathy for others.

Standard B: Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.

B.5a. Evaluate strategies for being respectful of others and opposing stereotyping and prejudice.

B.5b. Evaluate how advocacy for the rights of others contributes to the common good.

### **Goal 3 - Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.**

Standard A: Consider ethical, safety and societal factors in making decisions.

A.5a. Apply ethical reasoning to evaluate societal practices.

A.5b. Examine how the norms of different societies and cultures influence their members' decisions and behaviors.

For additional Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons that relate to journalism, visit [www.lionsquest.org](http://www.lionsquest.org). Lions Clubs International, Oak Brook, IL, has developed a set of lesson plans to teach social

and emotional learning skills to teens, including listening, interviewing, questioning, communicating, researching, ethics and decision-making.