

Lesson Plan

Journalism history: The muckrakers

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Title: Journalism history: The muckrakers

Description of school, students and class

This unit will be taught to a 9th-through 12th-grade newspaper production class. No journalism class is currently offered, so we devote portions (about 20 to 30 minutes of each 85 minute period) to journalism training.

Our high school has approximately 970 students, and we're located in a southwestern Missouri town (15 minutes north of Joplin) with a population of approximately 7,500.

Objectives and rationale

In this unit regarding muckrakers, students will do the following:

- Learn about,
- Write about,
- Present and
- Synthesize learning through assessment.

Students will become familiar with the muckrakers of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries:

- Who they were,
- What they did,
- The times they lived in.

Students will draw parallels, if any:

- Between the times of the muckrakers and ours,
- Between the “news climate” of yellow journalism* and our news climate today—do the students think it's time for a new generation of muckrakers?

*Students will be able to explain the term “yellow journalism” and how the muckrakers rose from the public's fascination with sensationalism and grew into a movement of investigative journalists effecting social change.

Students' understanding of objective reporting is reinforced, see the assignment below.

The Assignment

This unit works early in the semester, but it must come after students have been introduced to the idea that news writing is different than composition writing and they've been introduced to the format and tone of the basic news story: front-loaded story/ inverted pyramid—they're reporting just the facts, no opinion. They will, however, be able to add a paragraph, separate from their news story, if they wish to voice their opinions.

After a lesson devoted to introducing the students to who the muckrakers were and the age from which they came, each student will report on a muckraker or someone instrumental to muckrakers from the late 19th or early 20th Centuries. **Students will turn in a “news story” and they'll make a 3 to 5 minute presentation to the class.** A list of possible subjects appears on Handout #1.

Resources

Encyclopedia Britannica online (definitions of “muckraker” and “yellow journalism”)

“Women’s history: Muckrakers dug up dirt on big-business,” by Lane Hartill, staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*; March 16, 1999 <http://www.csmonitor.com/1999/0316/p14s3.html>

Bausum, Ann. *Muckrakers: How Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, and Lincoln Steffens Helped Expose Scandal, Inspire Reform, and Invent Investigative Journalism*

Filler, Louis. *The Muckrakers*

Jensen, Carl and Hugh Downs. *Stories that Changed America: Muckrakers of the 20th Century*

Weinberg, Arthur. *The Muckrakers*

Lesson 1

Introduction to and discussion of muckrakers—teacher distributes copies of Lane Hartill’s, “Women’s history: Muckrakers dug up dirt on big-business” as a model of a “hard news” story, which also gives us some background on who the muckrakers were and specifics on a couple of women on our list (Ida Tarbell and Nellie Bly).

Begin with a discussion of muckrakers: who’s heard of them? Who’s heard of the gilded age or robber barons? After an initial discussion, we’ll refer to Encyclopedia Britannica’s definition of “muckraker” at www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/395831/muckraker

The “muckraker” definition makes reference to “yellow journalism” and refers to www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/652632/yellow-journalism

Students will read this definition and discuss the concept of yellow journalism and how it led to muckraking.

Teacher distributes Handout #1 and explains the assignment. Four students will give their reports next class period. Reports should run 3 to 5 minutes—no longer.

Lesson 2 (and several more)

Student reports begin.

Students' presentations begin (and they'll turn in their news stories). No more than 4 or 5 presentations daily so that students can digest what's been given. Teacher fills in any gaps or leads the students to do so, if a presenter hasn't hit all the high points for their subject. See Handout #1 for the list of muckrakers students draw from. More can be added, if needed. Students can also report in teams (a reporter and a writer—or divide as seen fit) if the class is large.

Lesson 3 (in reality, probably Lesson 7)

Muckraker review—beginning to synthesize learning.

One session is spent reviewing muckrakers, the gilded age, robber barons, yellow journalism and muckraking influences.

Assessment (attached)

Students must name three things they learned about three muckrakers other than their own. Students must write the most significant contribution that their muckraker made to effecting social change and tell why it's the most significant—students must put the contribution into historical context.

Handout #1. Muckraker news story assignment

Choose a person from the following list to report on. These people were either muckrakers themselves, or significant to muckrakers. We'll divide the list as a class so that we know who's reporting what:

Samuel Hopkins Adams

Ray Stannard Baker

Ambrose Bierce

Nellie Bly

Julius Chambers

Stephen Crane

Henry Lloyd Demarest

William Randolph Hearst

William Dean Howells

Helen Hunt Jackson

Samuel McClure

Gustavus Myers

Frank Norris

Jack London

J.M. Oskison (from Vinita, OK)

John Sanborn Phillips

Joseph Pulitzer

Jacob Riis (photojournalist)

Upton Sinclair

Lincoln Steffens

Ida Tarbell

Mark Twain—if you choose him, you'll focus only on his connection(s) to muckrakers

Ida B. Wells

Answer these questions (below) in your report written as a news article (remember *The Christian Science Monitor* example, which means you're writing in an inverted pyramid—front load your story—if your reader only read the first paragraph, he or she would have the gist of who your muckraker was and their importance). You are reporting—only report facts; leave your opinion out of the piece. It's okay to report others' opinions of your muckraker, but you stay out of the story: write in third person.

1. Who is your muckraker or your person who was significant to muckrakers?
2. What is he/she known for?
3. Where were they from and where did they spend most of their lives?
4. When did they live? How long did they live?
5. What was their most significant contribution to American journalism (according to others—not you)? Be sure to attribute—this means you'll tell who's saying what. For example, **According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Bly was xxx.** Or **John Smith said, xxx.** Also, you'll need to explain who the people you're quoting or paraphrasing are. THINK FROM THE

READER'S PERSPECTIVE. Your audience will be your classmates and you must assume that this is all new information for them.

If you wish to tack a paragraph on to the end of your story that has **your opinion** of your subject and their contribution, you may do so. Put a row of asterisks ***** between the end of your news story and the beginning of your opinion paragraph. **NONE OF YOUR OPINION APPEARS IN YOUR NEWS STORY.**

Handout #2. Rubric for muckraker assignment

Lead is focused and gives a clear idea of what's to follow. Hook is present. 20 pts _____

The following questions are answered:

Who is this person? 10 pts _____

What is their significance to muckraking? 10 pts _____

Where were they from and where did they spend most of their lives? 10 pts _____

When did they live? 10 pts _____

Sources are attributed 20 pts _____

The piece is pure reporting. The writer's opinion is NOT present in the news story. Opinion, if any, is attributed to someone else. 20 pts _____

Total points possible 100 _____

Assessment for muckraking unit (60 points, total)

Define the following four terms (5 points each):

1. Muckraker
2. Gilded Age
3. Robber Baron
4. Yellow Journalism
5. Name three things you learned about three people reported on other than your own (10 points).

6. Of the two questions below, answer the one that applies to your subject (10 points):
If the subject you reported on was a muckraker, write the most significant contribution s/he made to effecting social change and tell why it's the most significant—put the contribution into historical context. (Write below second question so you have plenty of room. State that your subject was a muckraker).

OR

If your subject was NOT a muckraker, tell how s/he was important to muckrakers, why, and put his/her significance into historical context. (Write your answer below and state that your subject was NOT a muckraker).

7. Tell me whether you think there are parallels to be drawn between the time of the muckrakers we studied (the late 19th and early 20th Centuries) and today. If so, what are they and why? If not, why not? (10 points)
8. Who was your favorite muckraker and why? OR Which muckraker would you most like to spend time with and why? For either question that you answer, also answer this one: If you did get to spend time with this person, how would you hope to spend your time together? I expect at least one, well-developed paragraph for your answer. (10 points)