

# Facing Public Affairs

*Second course, Third grading period, Weeks 6-7*

Public affairs, by definition, are activities and decisions that affect all of us. The term usually refers to reporting on government and elected decision-makers who are supposed to ensure the public good. Students need to know how to cover the basic functions of government in order to report on a region, local community or their school community, including the school board, school administration, student council and class officers.

*The core lesson was written and provided by Kitty Eisele, NPR producer.*



## Enduring Understanding

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The press has an obligation to provide the community with knowledge of the public actions of government officials and leaders, insight into issues and a forum for discussion.



## Essential Question

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How do journalists keep citizens informed about their government?



## Objectives and Outcomes

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- Students will come to a working definition of “public affairs” as an area of news coverage.
- Students will identify what role the Fourth Estate plays in a democracy.
- Students will become informed about their own community and its political structure.
- Students will become informed about the leadership of their school community, its leaders, political structure and responsibilities.
- Students will begin building lists of sources for civic and public information.



## Suggested Time

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Two weeks



## Resources and Materials

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- Pre-taped public affairs programs – local and national (These often air on the weekends.)
- Newspapers and Web sites for coverage of national, state and local government and issues involving the public
- Reports by political correspondents and columnists
- The News Hour with Jim Lehrer ([www.pbs.org/newshour/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/))
- Poynter Institute ([www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org)) Look for current features and search “public affairs” within the Web site.
- Taped local school board meeting
- The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect, by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, Crown Publishers, 2001

- “Discussion Programs,” Writing for Television, Radio and New Media, pages 240-246
- “Objectivity,” Radio Production, pages 54-56



## Procedure

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1. Define “community” and “public affairs.” Why is it important for both professional and student media to engage in public affairs reporting?

A responsible press informs the public and is a watchdog of government. A democracy considers this function vital to maintain the balance of powers, which is why media are sometimes called “The Fourth Estate.” To guarantee its role, freedom of the press was included in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

In 1896 Adolph Ochs bought The New York Times. On the first day of publication under his leadership, he expressed his intention to apply these concepts when he issued this statement under “Business Announcement”: “To give the news, without fear or favor, regardless of any party, sect or Interest involved.” Discuss ways in which public affairs coverage extended to the medium of radio.

2. Begin to identify places and resources important to reporters. Who are the community leaders that impact students? Have members of the class compile the following directory:

- Make a list of school board members, their e-mail addresses and phone numbers. When and where does the school board meet? Is there a student member of the school board?
- Make a list of school administrators, their areas of responsibility and office numbers.
- Compile a list of student council members and their e-mail addresses as well as dates and location of council meetings.
- Compile a list of class officers and their e-mail addresses as well as dates and location of class council meetings.

If this directory has been compiled previously, students should update and/or expand the files.

3. Ask students to role-play using the following scenarios. Each of these situations involves the public good. Each involves someone or some office responsible to the public. Ask students whom they would call immediately to get information and where they would go to find the person in charge.

- A new principal wants to require uniforms in your school. How do you determine if this is legal? What regulations are in place for policy changes in your school system? Are there specific procedures regarding changes in dress code?
- A deer gets into the school gym and tears up the blocking tackle. This is the second incident this year involving a deer. Some members of your student body hunt and others are members of PETA. How would you report this story?
- Several of your mother’s friends tell you to avoid a nearby street corner because it is a dangerous traffic intersection. Where could you go to find out if they are correct? List questions that you would ask.
- The Department of Education is making demands on your school’s administration to fulfill requirements of No Child Left Behind. How will this affect students in your school? Where do you go to get more information about the program, your school’s compliance and changes that may take place in your building?

4. Discuss why people might think “public affairs” is a dry topic. Ask which students would like to cover the next school board meeting? The next student council meeting? Is either group facing decisions that could influence student fees, field trips, club activities, travel by sports or extra-curricular teams? Why would the student media want to attend the meetings rather than learn of the presentations, debates and decisions after the fact?

Ask students to name decisions someone else has made that affect them. Responses might include driving age, drinking age, vaccination requirements, locker searches, distribution of the school’s athletic funds, and school speech and dress codes.

5. Review the list that the class compiled. Ask students to consider how they could cover these topics in a way that would interest all or most members of the student body, faculty and administration.

- How would they get a friend interested in the story?
- Which sources would add depth to the story’s coverage?
- How could they relate the story more directly to your school’s population?

6. Play tape from a local public affairs or news program. Ask students to analyze the coverage of a specific issue or problem.

- How was the story covered?
- In what ways were competing points of view conveyed?
- Who were the reporter’s sources?
- Which officials were included? Who should have been included?
- Where else could a reporter have gone for information?
- How would they advance the story?
- What seemed to be missing and what needed more elaboration?

7. Sometimes public affairs coverage features a debate between two competing viewpoints, but doesn’t include the people the issue affects. Brainstorm local examples. Using one of the examples in a role-playing exercise, ask students to list all the people they could interview to cover this story for the local radio station and then for the school radio station. Do any of the sources vary? Why? How many points of view can they include?

8. Have students work as individual reporters or in public affairs teams. First, individual students should list four public affairs topics that relate to your community or school. If teachers wish, this lesson’s suggested activity could focus on covering student government and the school board.

Give students “Public Affairs: Checklist.” They complete Step 1. Note: If teachers do not want to disclose the audio tape edits to six and five minutes, remove the second sentence of #6 and all of #7 before duplicating the activity sheet.

Arrange students in groups of three to complete Step 2. The remaining activities in this lesson will be presented for a public affairs team.

At this point, the three-person public affairs reporting team chooses the one topic of the nine possible topics that will best inform their community.

9. Inform students of the final project. For their selected topics, they will
  - Research public documents and research the current conditions/policies/facts; and
  - Produce a series of five-minute interviews.

After identifying the best sources for balanced coverage, each team will arrange appointments to interview three sources for ten minutes each.

10. Each team completes the “Public Affairs: Program Plan.” For the example given on “Public Affairs Checklist,” students could interview 1.) the school board member who proposed the dress code change, 2.) students for and against the change in dress, and 3.) a principal or guidance director of a nearby school where students wear uniforms.

Students are encouraged to tailor their 15 questions to the interviewees. Emphasize how important it is to conduct research before going into the interview. Know the interviewee’s position, articles written and speeches given on the topic. The interview should clarify each person’s position.

The three-person teams will conduct interviews together. Each student will lead one 10-minute interview. Students are advised to conduct brief pre-untaped conversational interviews with the person they will be interviewing. This should help them write stronger questions and organize them prior to the recorded interview. When they begin recording,

- One student leads the interview (All team members may ask questions, but one member of the team is clearly in charge of this interview),
- One student monitors (headphones on) sound quality, and
- One student monitors the time to ensure that the most significant questions are asked and that the team has also allowed time for any follow-up questions.

By the end of the three interviews, each member of the team should have worked all three positions — lead interview, audio monitor and timer.

11. Each team of three then logs its own 10-minute interviews. Each person in the team is given a copy of the log and the full interview on CD. The teacher is also given a copy of the log and recording.

12. For the next steps, each student works on the interview for which he or she was the lead interviewer. First students must cut their 10-minute interview to six minutes, keeping what he or she thinks are the most important points. After all three 10-minute interviews are done by the team, edited, and distributed to team members, the team reviews the three interviews. Do they agree that each tape retains the best audio and actualities, presents clarification or new information about a particular point of view/decision/action, and is true to the interviewee’s position?

13. Teachers tell students they must cut another minute from each interview. Each student edits the lead interview tape, trimming a minute more out of each interview. The team compiles the three shortened interviews (each now five minutes) on a CD and gives them to the teacher. Students also provide a typed list of the main, specific points that each segment highlights.

14. Each group should select a representative example from its three five-minute interviews to play for the class and discuss. If a group misses a major point that should have been included, teachers can go back in the logs and audio files to understand why it was omitted and talk with students about

why they made the decisions they did. (Did the decision concern focus? A more interesting response? Relation to the listener or your school?)

Teachers should also discuss and evaluate students' ability as smooth audio editors.

15. Discuss with students what covering public affairs means to their student media and a radio station, in particular. Questions might include:

- Should elected officials, including student body and class officers, be held accountable for their leadership, actions and inaction?
- Newspapers have editorials; some television stations present commentaries. Does your radio station have a parallel venue to propose solutions and express opinion on public issues?
- If a public affairs show presents many sides of the issue, should the station take a stand or present a solution? Is the station's responsibility to provide information that allows listeners/the community to take action?
- In an attempt to make a topic understandable to listeners, is it possible to oversimplify the situation? How do you keep this from happening?
- What are the benefits of covering public affairs?
- In what ways does covering public affairs create a "First Amendment School" environment?
- When should the administration know the topics that student journalists are covering for on-air public affairs reporting in a school?

16. To add a career element to this lesson, teachers might discuss the following with students at the end of the unit, if time is available. Is public affairs reporting part of a journalist's university study? Some journalism majors prepare for their future by enrolling in university public affairs programs. Some of these programs focus on covering state legislatures and run capitol news service bureaus as practicum. Others expand course content to introduce skills in covering appropriation, distribution and expenditure of public funds; therefore, all public agencies and community organizations that receive public funding would be included. Other universities design courses using a broad definition of public affairs — informing readers, listeners and viewers about ongoing events and activities that impact their daily lives. Discuss college radio stations that produce public affairs programming by students.



## Homework

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Each week students should listen to either NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, Talk of the Nation on their local NPR station or a local public affairs radio program. If their personal schedules do not allow them to listen to a current broadcast, they may listen to archived programs. Write a one-page summary and analysis of the public affairs program.

- Name the show, its subject and the approach taken by the host, reporter or interviewer.
- Summarize the content of the program and its focus.
- How many sources are included? Who are they?
- Evaluate whether the presentation was balanced and fair.

Students will have identified the stories they want to report the following week (either as individuals or as pre-selected three-person teams). The homework for their research and interviews should be based on the steps outlined in the lesson, depending on the equipment that is available for students to check-out and use outside of school.



## Assessment

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A quiz will be given on readings in the textbooks and class lectures. This should include an understanding of the First Amendment and constitutional guarantees of a free press.

Completion of “Public Affairs: Program Plan” – on time, in detail, on target.

Students are to exhibit their journalism and technical radio skills. Through this assignment, students will practice and develop their pitching, reporting, interviewing, writing and editing skills. Students will learn to work as a team.

Teachers can evaluate the full assignment — the original interview, time permitting, or only the three shortest versions. The project can be evaluated on the work of the team or each individual’s portion. The public affairs segment should meet both content and technical requirements. See the Public Affairs rubric, “Public Affairs: Informing Citizens.”



## Academic Content Standards

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Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience. (Standard 7, NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts)



## Industry Standards and Expectations

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**PUBLIC TRUST:** Professional electronic journalists should recognize that their first obligation is to the public. Professional electronic journalists should:

- Understand that any commitment other than service to the public undermines trust and credibility.
- Recognize that service in the public interest creates an obligation to reflect the diversity of the community and guard against oversimplification of issues and events.
- Provide a full range of information to enable the public to make enlightened decisions.
- Fight to ensure that the public’s business is conducted in public.  
(*RTNDA Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct*)

“Thus, although the broadcasting industry operates under restrictions not imposed upon other media, the thrust of these restrictions has generally been to secure the public’s First Amendment interest in receiving a balanced presentation of views on diverse matters of public concern. As a result, the absolute freedom to advocate one’s own positions without also presenting opposing viewpoints — a freedom enjoyed, for example, by newspaper publishers — is denied to broadcasters. Such restrictions have been upheld [468 U.S. 364, 365] by this Court only when they were narrowly tailored to further a substantial governmental interest, such as ensuring adequate and balanced coverage of public issues. (From Supreme Court majority decision, *FCC v. League of Women Voters of California*, 468 U.S. 364 (1984).)

Demonstrate how to cultivate sources for stories. (Performance Element, Pathway KS Statement: Demonstrate writing processes used for various journalism media. States' Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)

Demonstrate how to obtain information to use in writing a story. (Performance Element, Pathway KS Statement: Demonstrate writing processes used for various journalism media. States' Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)

# Public Affairs: Checklist

1. List three public affairs topics that you would be interested in covering. These should relate to our community or school. Write a short (one to three paragraphs) explanation of why each topic should be covered and will/should be of interest to our listeners. For example:

Topic: The school board has proposed that our student dress code change next school year. All students will be required to wear a uniform consisting of dress pants/skirt and jackets. No jeans will be allowed.

Follow with reasons (pro and con sides, rumors vs. reality, cost) why you should cover this issue.

2. Meet in a group of three students. Each member of the group should share his or her topics and explanations. Group members should discuss the topics, offer suggestions for development and advise which one they believe is the best one to develop. After the group meeting, complete the “Public Affairs: Program Plan” form.

3. Select three people to be interviewed per topic. Develop questions and place those questions in the order they will be used in the interview.

4. During each interview, use the following checklist:

- Guest on microphone
- Host/reporter on microphone
- No microphone handling noise
- Room quiet; no extraneous conversations or ambient sounds
- Record level is correct
- Room tone (ambience) is gathered (one minute)

*Interview is 10 minutes long*

5. Log full interviews.

6. Distribute logs and CDs of each team’s three interviews to individual team members and the teacher. Edit each interview to six minutes.

7. Distribute tapes again and cut each interview to five minutes individually. Save to a CD. Give each 15-minute final project to the teacher with a summary of its main points.



# Public Affairs: Program Plan

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. Topic \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Pitch \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Individuals who will be interviewed

## Interview 1

Name and title: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact information (*phone number, e-mail address*): \_\_\_\_\_

Relation to the topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Planned focus of the interview: \_\_\_\_\_

## Interview 2

Name and title: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact information (*phone number, e-mail address*): \_\_\_\_\_

Relation to the topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Planned focus of the interview: \_\_\_\_\_

## Interview 3

Name and title: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact information (*phone number, e-mail address*): \_\_\_\_\_

Relation to the topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Planned focus of the interview: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Interview questions

On your own paper, list 15 questions per interviewee. These need to be specific to the interviewee and that person's expertise, point of view and experience. After finalizing your questions with your teacher, arrange appointments and conduct 10-minute interviews.

# Public Affairs: Informing Citizens

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

*The following provides an evaluation of your public affairs project.*

- \_\_\_\_\_ Completion of brainstorm process
- \_\_\_\_\_ Participation in the group topic selection meeting
- \_\_\_\_\_ Completion of “Public Affairs: Program Plan”
- \_\_\_\_\_ Quality of research of the topic
- \_\_\_\_\_ Choice of three individuals to interview
- \_\_\_\_\_ Quality of your research of each interviewee’s background
- \_\_\_\_\_ Completion of 15 questions for each interviewee
- \_\_\_\_\_ Quality of the 15 questions for each interviewee
- \_\_\_\_\_ Conducting interviews in a professional manner
- \_\_\_\_\_ Inclusion of follow-up questions when clarification was needed or new topics arose (Indicates ability to listen and respond to information.)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Meeting time requirement of interviews (10 minutes each — original interview)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Meeting time requirement of first edit to six-minute interview segment
- \_\_\_\_\_ Meeting time requirement of your final five-minute interview segment
- \_\_\_\_\_ Quality of final five-minute interview
- \_\_\_\_\_ Quality of tape log
- \_\_\_\_\_ Quality of main points summary of five-minute interviews
- \_\_\_\_\_ Completion of technical aspects of the interview
  - Guest on microphone
  - Host/reporter on microphone
  - No microphone handling noise (when you were monitoring interview)
  - Room quiet; no extraneous conversations or ambient sounds
  - Record level is correct
  - Room tone is gathered (one minute)
  - All edits on cut-down versions smooth
  - Quality of CD