

# HOW'D THEY COVER IT?

## Exploring Journalistic Choices

### Background for Educators

Students may have heard that good journalists “stick to the facts.” But how do journalists choose which facts to include in their stories and whom to interview? Many decisions go into what journalists decide to cover and how they cover it. Understanding those decisions can help students better understand the news and develop **media literacy** skills.

This handout provides background material for teachers as part of the “How’d They Cover It” activity, including **news media attributes** students should understand whenever they read or watch a news story:



- 1 Sources
- 2 Audience
- 3 Style
- 4 Newsbeat and format (optional)\*
- 5 Point-of-view (optional)\*

\* **Optional:** The final two attributes are optional expansions of the How'd They Cover It challenge. **News formats** helps students new to journalism think about different kinds of journalism. **Point-of-view** challenges more advanced students to consider bias and perspective.

**Why focus on media literacy?**

Media literacy can help us become *smarter media consumers* by understanding:

- that reading just one news story about an event only tells part of a story.
- why reading multiple sources about a news event is so important.
- how our own values influence the way we react to a new story.
- how to figure out what coverage might be missing from a story.

# NEWS MEDIA ATTRIBUTES



## Sources

**In order to tell a story, journalists rely on sources** — these sources can be documents, eyewitnesses to an event, individuals or groups who have a stake in the event, or subject area experts. The sources together provide the **evidence** of what may or may not have happened that the journalist presents to the audience.

One of the most important questions we can ask when analyzing media is **“Whose voices have been included, and whose voices have not been included?”** Journalists can’t interview everyone impacted by an important event. But they should seek out the perspectives of multiple sources, especially if there are conflicting interests involved.

**If a news story only presents the perspective of certain witnesses or sources while leaving other witnesses out, it may be a sign that the journalist is unfairly biased.** For example, if a historic news story covers a conflict between settlers in the West and a Native American tribe, and the only sources for the story are the settlers, the story might not have been covered fairly.

### **Remember to ask:**

- *What are the sources of evidence for this story?*
- *Are there potential witnesses or sources who were not included that might have an important perspective?*
- *Did the journalist provide background on their sources, such as details about witnesses or the credentials of an expert?*

**Journalists might also include expert sources,** critical data, or other information that may seem more or less credible, or believable, to readers. If a journalist doesn’t explain their reasons for trusting experts such as credentials, or explain where readers can find out more about sources of data, a piece of media might not be reliable.

## ★ Audience

News professionals, including journalists, editors, and publishers, must first decide what stories are most important to their **audience**. They have a particular viewership in mind that shapes how they present a story.

### Remember to ask:

- *Who do you think is the readership or viewership for this media? Does the name of the media source (name of paper, magazine, or program) offer clues?*
- *How might that audience affect reporting choices made by journalists and editors?*

**Readers for a local newspaper might care about different issues than readers of national news.** A

newspaper published for bankers and investors might cover different topics and have a different style than a newspaper published for students.

**News outlets must also think about what stories will attract the most attention from their readers.** After all, most news organizations need to make money to stay in operation.

## ★ Style

**Even journalists reporting breaking news make stylistic choices that influence how we understand the news.** One important choice every journalist makes is how they start their story, called the **lead**.

Journalists often include details they think are **most important higher up in the story**.

Journalists make a number of other stylistic choices. **How they describe events can evoke emotions in readers.** For instance, a news journalist might use descriptions of important details to cast certain subjects as heroic or suspicious, sympathetic or worthy of shame.

### Remember to ask:

- *What does the structure of the story reveal about what the journalist thinks is important?*
- *Are there clues such as descriptive language as to what the journalist wants the reader to think or feel after reading the story?*



## Newsbeat and format (optional)

### Remember to ask:

- *What beat or section of the news is the journalist covering and how does that beat influence the way the journalist presents the story?*
- *What type of news format is used and how does that affect how the journalist covered the story?*

**Journalists cover different newsbeats** such as national affairs reporting, entertainment, or opinion. These "beats" influence style content choices for journalists.

**Journalism also takes on a variety of formats**, including timely daily news stories; feature pieces that are more human interest-based; and long-form investigative reports. News can come through photojournalism, editorial cartoons, podcasts, and more! Each format influences the way stories are told.



## Point-of-view (optional)

You may have heard that the news media can be *biased*. This suggests journalists' reporting is unfair or untrue. **But bias exists even when journalists are trying to be fair and accurate.** Everyone brings their own **values** to a story, which can shape their point-of-view.

Values might include curiosity, patriotism, desire for justice, compassion, a desire for security or countless other aspirations.

**A journalist might also have a different perspective on a story based on their gender, religious or ethnic background, as well as their own life experiences** that help them understand the subjects of their stories. All of these values and perspectives can influence how a journalist tells a story, even if every detail included in a story is factually correct.

### Remember to ask:

- *What point-of-view do you think the journalist brought to making this media?*
- *What values do you think shaped the journalism?*
- *Who is covered sympathetically and who is not in this story?*