

## LESSON

# News Judges



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### Summary

Students use four key criteria to explore how journalists determine which events and issues to cover, and feature as top stories, in a news cycle. Then they apply these criteria to both hypothetical and actual news events to make their own news judgments.

### Learning Objective

I can explain what newsworthiness is and name the four major factors that determine it. I have developed my own sense of news judgment by evaluating the newsworthiness of a series of examples.

### Background

Newsworthiness is a key news literacy concept. It helps students understand that what appears as “the news” on any given day is the result of a series of judgments and conversations in newsrooms across the country and around the world. Helping students understand the major factors that drive news judgment — how important, interesting, unique and timely an event or issue is — is vital to helping them understand and think critically about the news they encounter in their daily lives. Requiring them to make news judgments of their own can help them to appreciate how difficult such decisions can be and to learn how to evaluate and respond to the judgment of professional journalists.

News judgment frequently plays a role in criticism of news media; politicians, activists and the general public often complain about the placement of a story or issue in print or on a news organization’s website (or even whether the story or issue appears at all). Thus, the acquisition of “newsworthiness” as a concept and news judgment as a skill allows students to do more than just criticize; it enables them to enter the conversation about so-called agenda-setting and to engage with such criticisms when and where they encounter them. You should make a point of noting to students that while many people make assertions about what news media do or do not cover, it’s always important to verify whether those assertions are true by surveying and reviewing actual coverage.

## PREPARATION

### What You’ll Need:

- LCD projector connected to a computer with internet
- Copies of [Crack the Big Four](#) and [What’s Your News Judgment?](#) graphic organizers

### Directions

1. Review the Word Wall entries for the terms listed above.
2. Prepare to display the digital assets listed below and make sure that you have enough copies of all associated graphic organizers.

### CCSS Primary Alignment

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.8:

Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8:

Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author’s claims.

### Word Wall Terms

- News judgment
- Newsworthiness
- News value
- Lead story

### Essential Questions

- What does it mean for something to be “newsworthy”?
- What makes an issue or event “news,” and who decides?
- What factors should be used to determine which issues and events get covered by journalists?
- How should news outlets decide which stories to feature? In other words, which stories to put first in a television newscast, or on the front page of a newspaper?
- How might the level of diversity in a newsroom influence news judgments?

# NEWS JUDGES LESSON PLAN

This lesson has three parts, outlined below:

## Part One: Crack the Big Four

1. Use your favorite method (verbal count-off, slips of paper, other symbols) to assign students to one of four (or, if you have a large class, eight) groups.
2. Explain to students that they will be learning about something called “newsworthiness.” Ask if anyone knows what the word “newsworthy” means, or if anyone can figure out the meaning by using structural analysis to break the word down into its component parts.
  - After a few minutes, even if no student has been able to explain the term, move on in the lesson. When you get to the first pair of examples (below), elicit the meaning from there. For example, you might say, “OK, now, I know you don’t think you know what newsworthiness is, but I’m sure you do. One of these two examples is much more newsworthy than the other. Now do any of you think you know what it means?”
3. Once you have a working definition, explain to students that there are four main factors that determine “newsworthiness” and that you are going to refer to these factors as the Big Four. But you’re not just going to tell them what these factors are; they have to figure them out for themselves by completing a short exercise in their groups.
4. The exercise requires students to analyze a series of four pairs of hypothetical events ([found here](#)). In each pair, one event is significantly more newsworthy than the other. Using their **Crack the Big Four** graphic organizers, student groups must first figure out which of each pair of events is more newsworthy, then determine why. What makes one noticeably more newsworthy than the other? What primarily accounts for the difference in newsworthiness between the two? This reason, you can share with students, will be one of what we call the “Big Four.” Students should enter their attempted deduction of this factor as a single word on their graphic organizers, which helps them do so by prompting them to complete the sentence “This event is more newsworthy because it is more \_\_\_\_\_.” Once all groups have an answer to this sentence, hold a brief discussion and reveal the correct answer.
  - **Make it a game!:** You could make this exercise a timed competitive challenge. Circulate among the groups and note which teams have the correct factor written down, then announce which teams were correct before holding a brief discussion that reveals the answer. Award one point to each team that correctly names a Big Four factor of newsworthiness in any given round.
  - **Note:** The Big Four factors that determine newsworthiness are how **important, unusual, timely** and **interesting** a given event is when compared to others. We recommend that you use your judgment and, when appropriate, accept variations of these words (for example, you might accept “impact” for “important,” “unique” for “unusual,” “recent” for “timely” and “engaging” for “interesting”). Then give students the correct common term to use so all of them are using the same factors to make judgments in the next portion of the lesson.

## Part Two: Big Four Panels

In this portion of the lesson, student groups are assigned to be expert judges of just one of the Big Four factors of newsworthiness. You will display a series of four examples and have each group of judges give each one a score on a scale of 1 to 10 for their assigned factor.

1. Tell students that they will now be assigned just one of the Big Four factors of newsworthiness to focus on for the next exercise. Make sure that each group has a factor and that all four factors (**important, unusual, interesting** and **timely**) are assigned to at least one group. Explain that their job is to review a series of examples and rate each one on a scale from 1 to 10 for their given factor. For example, the **important** group’s job is to focus on that one factor and determine what score to assign an example’s importance.
2. Display the first item in [this collection](#) of four examples of actual news reports and give each panel of judges a set amount of time to rate it (we suggest 1-2 minutes). If an example generates disagreement on a panel, take note; this could fuel a discussion for later in the lesson or another time.
3. After your groups have worked through all four items, you might lead a short discussion about any issues that came up, or about which of the four is clearly (considering all factors) the overall top story in the set? Is there consensus among groups and individual students?

# NEWS JUDGES LESSON PLAN

## Part Three: What's Your News Judgment?

The final portion of the lesson moves away from group work and asks students to become news judges for all four factors on their own.

1. Explain to students that news judgment determines not just what counts as news — in other words, which events get covered — but also which news reports are most worthy of being featured prominently (as a lead story in a broadcast, as the top story on a home page, or on the front page of a newspaper or pushed to users of mobile news apps, etc.).
2. In this exercise, students will each be responsible for evaluating the newsworthiness of a series of examples of news reports by giving each one a score for each of the Big Four factors. In other words, students will need to rank each example by first giving it four scores on a scale of 1 to 10 — one for how **important** it is, one for how **unusual** it is, one for how **interesting** it is and one for how **timely** it is — and then giving it an overall score. At the end, the examples with the top five scores will be considered their top stories.
  - **Note:** The timeliness of each example has been set to make this an evergreen exercise. Students should base their **timely** scores on the timeliness parameter that is given in the title of each example.
3. Display [this collection](#) of examples of actual news reports, and have students use the **What's Your News Judgment?** graphic organizer to record their scores and notes for each one.
4. At the end of this exercise, ask students to share which news story got the most points in their overall rating of newsworthiness. Discuss the differences and similarities between students' judgments, and noting that news judgment is a necessarily subjective determination — which is one reason that it's typically made by a group of editors rather than a single journalist.

# NEWS JUDGES LESSON PLAN



## Discussion Matchbox

- When an event has extremely high interest for the audience but very low importance, is it news? Why or why not?
- If five people are injured in a local accident and 500 people are injured in an accident on the other side of the world, which is more important? Why?
- Should journalists consider problematic stereotypes when they make news judgments? For example, if an event could be seen as reinforcing a stereotype about a particular group of people, should its newsworthiness be downgraded? Why or why not?
- Are there any other factors besides the Big Four that journalists should use to determine newsworthiness?
- Should journalists consider how positive or negative a story is when evaluating its newsworthiness? Should positive events be given an advantage when making decisions about what to cover or feature? Why or why not?

## Extended Learning

- Use the examples that generate the most disagreement and differences in judgment among students to fuel an extended discussion that helps identify the underlying issues. What is causing the differences in judgment, and how could the class resolve those differences as a group?
- Ask students to review news coverage from the last several days and find the most newsworthy story from each, then create a gallery walk in which students vote for the most newsworthy example.
- In the week following the lesson, begin one or more class periods with a “page one meeting” in which students arrive ready to argue for one top story from the last 24 hours. They should use their news judgment skills to make a case that their chosen story is the most newsworthy of the day and should be the lead story in the local news media.
- Challenge your students to use their new understanding of the four factors that drive news judgment to come up with a newsworthy story idea, then pitch the idea to a local journalist or news organization.
- Challenge your students to evaluate the news judgment of a local news organization and respond accordingly. Consider dividing students into small groups or teams and assign each one a news organization (local television news program(s), newspaper(s), local news radio station(s), etc.) to monitor. Standardizing their documentation of story topics is helpful — for instance, document only the first five stories in a television newscast and the front page stories in print, check websites at the same time each day and take a screenshot of the entire home page, etc. After the week is finished, aggregate the data and produce a report about the week’s coverage. Which stories were covered by everyone? Which were featured or reported by only one? What differences were there in terms of when the story was reported?

To wrap up, ask students to make an argument for which local news organization(s) had the best news judgment that week, using the aggregated data for support.

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What is News?, Be the Editor

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

# Crack the Big Four



**EXAMPLE 1**

Which event is more **newsworthy**?

**Why?**

Because it is:

**EXAMPLE 2**

Which event is more **newsworthy**?

**Why?**

Because it is:

**EXAMPLE 3**

Which event is more **newsworthy**?

**Why?**

Because it is:

**EXAMPLE 4**

Which event is more **newsworthy**?

**Why?**

Because it is:

The big four factors that determine **newsworthiness** are:

1. _____	3. _____
2. _____	4. _____

# GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

# What's Your News Judgment?

Important  
(1-10)

Unusual  
(1-10)

Interesting  
(1-10)

Timely  
(1-10)

Overall  
(1-10)

	Important (1-10)	Unusual (1-10)	Interesting (1-10)	Timely (1-10)	Overall (1-10)
<b>EXAMPLE 1</b>					
NOTES					
<b>EXAMPLE 2</b>					
NOTES					
<b>EXAMPLE 3</b>					
NOTES					
<b>EXAMPLE 4</b>					
NOTES					
<b>EXAMPLE 5</b>					
NOTES					
<b>EXAMPLE 6</b>					
NOTES					
<b>EXAMPLE 7</b>					
NOTES					
<b>EXAMPLE 8</b>					
NOTES					
<b>EXAMPLE 9</b>					
NOTES					
<b>EXAMPLE 10</b>					
NOTES					