

ACTIVE LEARNING COMPONENT

Democracy's Watchdog: Watchdog Status Report



Summary

In this follow-up activity to NLP's Democracy's Watchdog lesson, student groups brainstorm issues that they believe urgently need the attention of watchdog journalists but have not received sufficient attention. Once groups have selected their issue, they complete a Watchdog Status Report using an original NLP graphic organizer.

What You'll Need

- Devices that allow students to research and collect information they find online. This could be a desktop computer, laptop computer, tablet or smartphone
- Copies of the Watchdog Status Report graphic organizer
- **Optional:** Contact information — email addresses, Twitter handles or mailing addresses — for local investigative journalists

How It Works

Use a “Do Now” or other opening technique (such as journaling, think-pair-share, etc.) to review what students know about the watchdog role that a free press can play in a democracy. (You might want to consider using or adapting one or more of the discussion questions from NLP's Democracy's Watchdog lesson for this purpose.)

Remind students that even though history offers many outstanding examples of watchdog journalism that have exposed injustice and resulted in positive change on behalf of the public, there are still many issues that need attention. Explain that their goal in today's class is to try to think of an example of injustice that needs more attention from journalists and the general public, then follow these steps:

1. Divide students into groups in whatever way you like (according to interests, complementary abilities, etc.).
2. Make sure each group has a copy of the Watchdog Status Report graphic organizer.
3. Explain to students that they, in their role as watchdogs, will be identifying a subject (an issue, event or other topic) that they believe needs more attention from the press — and that they will be doing a rapid research session to assess the amount and quality of news coverage (especially investigative reports) of their selected topic.
4. Briefly review how the graphic organizer works and what it requires, starting with the topic itself and some kind of hypothesis about what they will find in their review of coverage.
5. Next, give students a time frame in which to complete their status reports. You may want to allow time at the end of the period for each group to briefly share their topic and findings, or you may decide to let groups continue to work on their reports overnight and discuss their findings during the next class.
6. Whichever approach you take to timing and discussion, help students reflect on their findings using the following guiding questions:
 - How did your hypothesis hold up? What did you learn by testing it this way?
 - Did you discover anything in your research that surprised you?
 - Do you believe you identified an important topic that still needs to be investigated? If so, what actions could you take to help draw attention to the subject?

Be aware that this exercise might cause some students' strong feelings about news media and social or political issues to surface. If this happens, it is important to help students try to avoid the influence of their own biases on their research by reminding them that they need to search for information that disproves their hypotheses, not just information that supports their preexisting ideas and convictions.

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Adapt and Extend

- Ask a friend or family member to name an issue that he or she believes is undercovered by news media, then complete a Watchdog Status Report for or with them. Afterward, evaluate and discuss what you find, then share the report and the experience with your classmates.
- Challenge students to complete multiple Watchdog Status Reports about a variety of subjects (some local, some regional, some national, etc.), then collect and sort them in various ways to see what patterns emerge. Using this method, what can you learn about issues that are important to your students? What is the consensus on the job the news media are doing covering each issue? What patterns surprise students? Which do not? What new actions, if any, should students consider taking based on this broader comparative perspective?
- Have students create a brief memo about an issue that needs more attention from local news organizations, then send it to one or more local journalists. Invite those same journalists to connect with students via video conference to discuss the brief.

DEMOCRACY'S WATCHDOG GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

Watchdog Status Report

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

Complete each of the steps below to determine the degree to which journalists have acted as watchdogs about a subject you care about. Begin by selecting an injustice or wrongdoing (subject), then complete each of the steps to research, evaluate and reflect on the coverage (or lack of coverage) that you find.

Subject you want to test:

Enter an injustice, wrongdoing or other problem that negatively affects the public here.

Timeframe:

Enter a date range that reflects how long your selected topic has been negatively affecting people.

From:

To:

Is this a local or national issue (or both)?

LOCAL

NATIONAL

BOTH

Hypothesis:

Write a single sentence explaining what you think you'll discover when you search for news coverage about this subject.

Write out **five different sets of search terms** you think would effectively locate news coverage about this issue.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Teacher initial:

Teacher initial:

Teacher initial:

Teacher initial:

Teacher initial:

DEMOCRACY'S WATCHDOG GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

Watchdog Status Report

Tip: Consider using advanced search options including custom date ranges and specific websites or domains: [google.com/advanced_search](https://www.google.com/advanced_search). Limiting your search results to news — for example by clicking the News tab at the top of Google results — can be helpful as well.

Results:

Examine the first two pages of results for each search, then summarize your findings. How many **news reports** did you find? How many were examples of **investigative journalism**? Is the coverage you found comprehensive or is something important missing?

Did you find substantial coverage of your selected subject?

YES



Reflect:

Reflect on your initial hypothesis about this subject. Was it proven or disproven by this exercise? How has your research changed or deepened your thinking about coverage of this issue by news media?

NO



Reflect:

In a few sentences, explain why you think this issue or subject is newsworthy and how you think journalists should cover it. Also explain how you learned about it (word of mouth, personal experience, information from non-news organizations, etc.).

What, if any, action do you recommend taking as a result of this research? Should you contact a news organization or individual journalist to inquire about the coverage (or lack of coverage)? Should you write a letter to the editor, or send one or more local journalists an email? Would it be helpful to others if you posted your findings and thoughts on social media?