

# Think like a reporter

## Educator Instructions

### Summary

A big part of what differentiates standards-based journalism from much of the other information we encounter every day is the process of verification. At news outlets that adhere to these standards, all verifiable details of a news report need to be checked and confirmed before publication. This may sound like a straightforward, easy thing to do, but it's not: Trying to meet a deadline while ensuring the accuracy of the spelling of a person's name, the exact name of an organization, the words being quoted, the description of a source's job, or any other detail that can be checked is extremely challenging.

In this activity, students will identify details of a news report that were verified by at least one journalist prior to publication. This fact-checking, or **verification**, is a key component of quality journalism and an essential part of a journalist's work. In this activity, we have provided an example from Suzannah Gonzales, a former Reuters correspondent and a current member of the News Literacy Project's education team. She explains her process for highlighting details that need to be fact-checked and check-marking each one that she confirms. We have also provided a news report from USA Today as practice for students (along with a highlighted copy as a guide for educators), but feel free to select another article. This activity can be done with printed copies and highlighters, or online using a word processing program.

### Takeaway

Journalists at standards-based news organizations take steps to verify each checkable detail of news reports.

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### Activity

Depending on the context of the lesson, this activity can be done individually or in small groups. Using the USA Today article, or one you have chosen specifically for this lesson, is recommended the first time you do this activity with students.

Educators can select an article from any standards-based news organization, but be sure to choose a straight news piece for this activity. (Note: If your students do not understand the difference between straight news and opinion journalism, it's a good idea to establish that before using this activity.) To continue reinforcing this skill, students can pick their own articles and practice identifying the details that should be checked.

1. First, students will study the example – a partial draft of an article written by Suzannah. Discuss the types of information she highlighted for verification.
2. Choose a news article (or even a paragraph or two) and provide students with a copy, either printed or digital.
  - Students will need highlighters for a printed article. For a digital article, copy and paste it into a word processing program.
3. Students will begin by identifying and highlighting the details of the article that a journalist would need to verify. Consider creating a checklist of the most common types of details, such as names (including spelling), dates, locations, quotes, etc.
4. After all details have been highlighted, begin a discussion about the ways that each could be verified. Ask your students:
  - Which details would be easiest to verify? Hardest?
  - What details can be verified using the internet?

**Tip:** Look for original source material, such as a study, as well as videos of press conferences or news releases from government offices, businesses or nonprofits; these will help to verify details (and are the types of information used by journalists in their reporting, writing and fact-checking).

- What would you search for?
  - How would you determine that the information was reliable?
  - How would you verify information offline? What types of sources would be necessary to verify such details?
  - What should a journalist do if a detail cannot be verified?
5. If your students find an error (no matter how small) in a published report, have them double- and triple-check the error using the steps described above. They can also look at other articles on the same topic to see if similar information is there. If they can't confirm the accuracy of what they believe is wrong, see if the outlet published a correction; if it didn't, they can contact a journalist involved with the story to report the error (or see if the outlet has a corrections policy, including an email address where errors can be sent).

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## Student Exercise

**Verification is proof or confirmation of factual accuracy.** In journalism, verification is among a set of practices — such as getting details of an event confirmed by multiple sources — designed to help ensure accuracy.

How do reporters work to make sure that all verifiable details in a news report have been checked and confirmed? In this activity, you will review a news article and identifying everything that should have been — and likely was — checked by a journalist prior to publication, and then verify the details for yourself. Below is an example of a partial draft of a Feb. 14, 2019, article by Suzannah Gonzales, a former Reuters correspondent in Chicago and a current member of the News Literacy Project's education team.

Here is how she explains her verification process:

“As a reporter, I routinely took the following steps to fact-check that every detail of a story was accurate:

“First, after writing a draft, I'd print a copy and highlight people's names, other proper nouns, dates, ages, quotes and other details.

“Then, using sources — such as official documents like court records, previous coverage Reuters had done, websites of agencies and organizations, and my notes from interviews — I fact-checked each highlighted piece of information.

“Finally, after confirming that a detail was correct, I marked it with a check mark. If I caught an error before the story ran, I would fix it myself or report it to an editor reviewing the story so the error could be corrected before publication. If a possible error was discovered after publication, I would discuss it with an editor and we would publish a correction if warranted.

“In addition, my reporting was also reviewed by at least two editors in an effort to ensure that each detail of the story was accurate and to help prevent corrections.”

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## Student Exercise

### After ex-policeman's murder sentence, divisions in Chicago persist

By Suzannah Gonzales

✓ CHICAGO, Feb 14 (Reuters) - **The sentencing of white former Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke last month for the 2014 killing of black teen Laquan McDonald spurred a call by top officials for the third-largest U.S. city to pull together to close a painful chapter in its history.**

But the nearly seven-year prison sentence has accentuated the divisions and mistrust that have gripped Chicago since a video showing the shooting of the 17-year-old who carried a knife was made public in 2015 and prompted days of protests, community activists and police said. [nL1N1ZG1PI]

Activists who had praised Van Dyke's second-degree murder conviction, a rare verdict for a U.S. police officer, found the sentence far too lenient for an officer who prosecutors said shot McDonald 16 times. The newly sworn-in Illinois attorney general and special prosecutor in the case asked the state's Supreme Court on Monday to review it. [nL1N2060UC][nL2N1WLoWo]

The head of the Chicago police union told Reuters that officers had grown more cautious since Van Dyke's prosecution. They wait to be called to a scene rather than responding proactively, and stop fewer suspects on the street, said Kevin Graham, president of Fraternal Order of Police, Chicago Lodge 7.

✓ "It's a very sad situation that we're in today," Graham said in an interview at union headquarters.

Activists said, however, that policing in communities of color remained aggressive, militarized and without trust. Candidates in this month's mayoral election have prioritized policing in their campaigns, an issue that has extended to national politics.

✓ "There's just this great divide and overwhelming imbalance. It's oppressive," said Arewa Winters, a Chicago activist whose 16-year-old nephew, Pierre Loury, was fatally shot by police in 2016.

✓ "I hope there is eventually a meeting of the hearts and the minds when it comes to police and the community," Winters said. "We need each other."

On the next page is an article published in USA Today. **Highlight all relevant details** you think the journalist needed to verify; **then use a check mark** for each highlighted piece of information that you can confirm to be correct.

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## Student Exercise



### First water detected on potentially 'habitable' planet

Doyle Rice, USA TODAY Published 1:25 p.m. ET Sept. 11, 2019 | Updated 3:39 p.m. ET Sept. 11, 2019

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For the first time, water vapor has been detected in the atmosphere of another planet with temperatures that could support life, a new study says.

The planet, known as K2-18b, is eight times the mass of Earth, and is now the only planet orbiting a star outside the solar system, or "exoplanet," known to have both water and habitable temperatures.

The discovery, published Wednesday in the peer-reviewed British journal *Nature Astronomy*, is the first successful detection of an exoplanet orbiting in its star's "habitable zone," at a distance where water can exist in liquid form.

"Finding water in a potentially habitable world other than Earth is incredibly exciting, said study lead author Angelos Tsaras of University College, London. "It brings us closer to answering the fundamental question: Is the Earth unique?"

K2-18b was discovered in 2015 and is one of hundreds of super-Earths — planets with a mass between Earth and Neptune. With a temperature that's similar to that of the Earth, "this planet is the best candidate for habitability that we know of right now," he said.

The detection of water vapor — which is water in its gaseous phase — was made possible with data obtained by the Hubble Space Telescope, Tsaras said.

The planet orbits the cool dwarf star K2-18, which is about 110 light-years from Earth in the constellation Leo. Given the high level of activity of its red dwarf star, the planet may be more hostile than Earth and is likely to be exposed to more radiation, according to the study. The radiation would be harsh enough to quickly inflict any human visitors with cancer, the study authors said.

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## Answer Key



### First water detected on potentially 'habitable' planet

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