Unit Seven – Journalism

Welcome to the Unit

Teachers who taught this unit report to us with glee the remarkably high engagement of their students, as well as their productivity and increased focus as writers. A unit on journalism could be designed with various goals in mind. This particular spin on the unit helps students learn to write quickly, to revise purposefully and swiftly, and to write from positions of thoughtful observation within their community. The unit imagines that you first teach your class first to write quick news reports. Your emphasis during this phase will be on helping students write concise, focused reports that tell the who, what, where, and when with a sense of drama. A typical news report might feature headlines such as, Spider Gets Loose from Science Lab, or Tears During Dodge Ball.

Later in the unit, you’ll decide whether to re-teach news story writing, helping children get a firm grasp on this, or whether you want to up the ante, suggesting the children can become involved in deeper journalism projects. If you decide on this route, your children will become investigative journalists. You’ll teach them to conduct interviews and collect observation notes, to ask questions, to ponder the meaning of everyday happenings, and to write to suggest significance. Investigative pieces, in contrast to new stories, may sound like, Spiders Get a Bum Rap at P.S. 4, or Dodge Ball Teaches Toughness.

Overview

**Essential Question:** How can I be a journalist that writes quickly, revises purposefully, and exposes thoughtful observations about my community?

**Bend I: Creating and Developing Stories that Bring Forth Meaning**
How can I write concise, focused news reports that give details about an event and are written with a sense of drama?

**Bend II: Drafting and Revising with an Emphasis on Bringing Out Our Intended Meaning**
How can I adopt the tone and style of an investigative journalist to write about topics and events that are important to me and my community?

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Bend I: News Reporting--Teaching Students to Write in Concise and Focused Ways

Launching the Unit

Many teachers have found that one attention-grabbing way to start the unit is to create a scene—to stage a drama—perhaps between by two teachers. The children, looking on, are (we hope) clueless. Then something enthralling happens. For example, one fourth grade teacher, Katie, was reading aloud, and her colleague came into the room and started snooping through Katie’s desk. Katie continued reading, but the children could see she was distracted by her colleague nosing through her stuff. Finally Katie said, “Do you need help?” and her colleague said, “I’m just looking for my math book. Did you borrow it and forget to return it?” Katie assured her that no, she hadn’t seen it, and tried to resume reading, but the teacher persisted in rummaging about Katie’s desk. Finally she said, “I’m pretty sure it is here somewhere,” and then helped herself to Katie’s favorite pens—her "colors”—saying, “I’m borrowing your colors because I know you have my math book somewhere.” The kids, of course, were temporarily totally in a tizzy.

This is just what one teacher invented—you can figure out your own scenario. One teacher this year, for instance, became frightened when she “saw” a mouse in the classroom. Another teacher had a colleague come in and announce that a snake had gotten loose and was last seen in this classroom. Still another had the principal come in, seize one of the book club books, and declare that it was banned. The simulation should be short and dramatic, with some kind of physical interaction as well as verbal, so that students can observe (they don’t know it isn’t real!). All of these teachers used their bodies to show their fear, and they said things that were "quotable," as in “There’s a snake loose in the room…could it be poisonous!?” and “Give me that book, these children deserve to read freely!”

Hokey, but it works because the suddenness of the altercation hooks the kids right away. Clearly, use your common sense and don’t do anything that would instill bad feelings, fear, or anxiety. You just want a small, sudden, observable drama. Of course, our school yards and lunchrooms are full of mini-dramas every day.

Today I want to teach you that journalists live wide awake lives, seeing stories in everyday moments. When things happen, they think, "I can write about this." Then, they capture the details of the event in their notebooks.
Then you tell your kids that as writers, when things happen, they think, "I can write about this." Tell kids that actually, they could write a news story on what just happened. With a sense of urgency, say, "Open up your notebooks. You have five minutes to write down what you just witnessed." This work needs to be very quick and intense.

To scaffold your more struggling writers, you might say something like, “I, for instance, am thinking my news report could start: ‘Today at 8:55 am, children in room 506 were startled to see...’” If you use journalistic tone, including third person and a sense of specificity and drama, the kids usually pick that up right away. Then have the children share with a partner. You can read aloud a bunch of stories, telling the class to listen for things other ‘journalists’ did that they liked. They'll usually notice how some were dramatic, some had good detail, and some sounded like a news report. This whole thing takes two to three minutes for the simulation, five minutes to write, ten minutes to share with partners and then whole class. This, of course, would not follow the usual minilesson template—and keep in mind that breaking stride is a good thing from time to time. It is especially important for all of us to think of ways to rally kids around the big work of a unit of study, early on in that unit.

**Revising for Precision and Clarity As You Collect**

You may want to extend this early work, teaching your children yet more about news writing. If you decide to do so, tell your children that they need to imagine that a newspaper is going to publish their report, but they may only be able to keep the first twenty-five words—and they should try to make those first twenty-five words really count. You might say: “Today I want to teach you that journalists know that every word counts! After capturing the details of an event, they return to what they've written with a critical eye, cutting and revising to make it more focused and concise.” They can then revise their entries any way they want, deleting and shortening their accounts to make them more concise. Give them five minutes to revise just the first twenty-five words, telling them that probably they want to revise to be more specific, detailed, and/or dramatic (write those on a chart under the heading "Qualities of Strong News Reports").

They'll get right to it, heads down, doing immediate revision. You will probably ask them to share again with a partner and then at their tables. You may ask them to simply read out some of the lines they've now written that they really like. It's amazing how in one period they'll learn to observe closely, write quickly, and immediately revise! Their second
versions will be better, especially since they only have to work on the first part. They may add a title, which begins to teach them angle or perspective. Typical titles included: *Girls Jump on Desks, Boys Get Under to Find Snake; Reptile Seeks Freedom*, and so on. Finish your lesson by starting a word chart of technical and academic words that relate to news reporters, such as *witness, this reporter, incident, bystander,* and *quoted.* You’ll keep adding to this list. A chart of vivid words and verbs also helps, and this could probably start with *shocked, bolted, surprised, dismayed, perplexed.*

**Collecting**

That first day is intense and fast-paced, and you can see why your writers will be so engaged. The next day, your more usual unit of study can begin, and as in most units, you will want to teach young students ways that this kind of writer—journalists—generate ideas for writing. Let your students know that news reporters pay close attention to the world around them. They note with care the dramatic events, as well as also ordinary ones, and they imagine how those events might sound if captured in news reports. Reporters notice things that are unusual, often setting these against things that are usual, the backdrop of patterns. For instance, they may notice that the suddenly a stop sign has appeared on a street that never had one, or that there are added monitors in the cafeteria. Perhaps they’ll take note of a particular event that occurs at their dinner table, at the playground, or while walking down the hallway. It is often helpful to teach students to jot ordinary places where they spend time each day, and then to watch those places carefully, looking for stories they might normally have overlooked.

You may decide to create portable writers’ notepads —ones that can later be deconstructed and taped into writers’ notebooks so that the notebooks stay alive—and invite your children to take these small pads with them as they go around the school, looking for incidents. Explain that a lot of good stories happen in unsupervised spaces, such as the yard, the cafeteria, sometimes the gym, the hallways. If you have writing workshop at a time when your students can visit these sites, take the youngsters with you, notes in hand, and have them come back and write a quick news report, not more than maybe 150 words long.

In your minilessons, you will want to teach writers that usually news writers make a point to include the "who, what, where, when" in a story. You’ll want to teach children that journalists ensure the who, what, where and when in a story is front and center, often included in the first few lines of an article. (You will probably not discuss this, but know...
that the "why" is usually reserved for investigative journalism, which you'll invite the children to do soon.) If you don't have workshop at a time when students can go looking for stories, then you may need to schedule the writing workshop just after lunch, asking students to use that time for research, or you may need to create another simulation so writers can practice capturing the who, what, where, and when with a sense of specific detail, drama, and accuracy. You can also make "journalists' passes" so students have permission to disperse to other spaces in the school to collect stories.

Expect that your children can collect and write three or four news reports over this first week. These reports will be short. You can work on quick revision by teaching them to revise for detail, drama, and accuracy. You can also revise for technical and academic language. You may collect some news reports (the inner pages of the Post, News Day, Sports Illustrated for Kids often have short readable examples) and the students can study these as touchstone texts, charting their qualities and trying some of the craft moves that they admire in their own pieces. Be careful not to give your students editorials, feature articles, or investigative pieces to study; for now, stick to short, local, current news. Meanwhile the students will be reporting on happenings in their own community—they never have to leave the building to do this work. Of course, after school they'll continue to live as journalists, seeing stories everywhere. One student overheard two teachers whispering, whipped out his pad, and started writing "Wedding dress doesn't fit, teacher upset!" They begin to truly live and think like writers during this time.

If you are looking for additional sources of ideas for minilessons, get hold of Roy Peter Clark's books. Free to Write, a Heinemann publication, discusses a Unit of Study in journalism. Clark also has a number of current books on the craft of journalism.

Keep adding to your word charts, and return to your touchstone texts for lively language and phrases. Share student work immediately, probably in mid-workshop teaching points and partner or table shares. This way your community of writers should begin to shift in its language and attitudes—they will; the kids are intuitive and mimetic. During this time, you may want to teach a minilesson in which you highlight the difference between telling a story as a personal narrative or memoir, and telling it as a news report.
For instance, as a memoir, you might write:

It was cold and icy day on Monday and the classroom seemed a little empty, and cold also as I opened the door just before homeroom for kids to come in. I was thinking about the movie I had seen last night, Jurassic Park, and how scary the giant reptiles had been in it. We all filed in together and took our seats. Then something surprising happened. Mrs. Coello opened the door and whispered urgently, “A snake has gotten loose from the science lab. We don’t know which one, and I’m afraid it could be dangerous. The custodian last saw it here in your room.” My heart seemed to stop. I was afraid of snakes. After last night’s movie, I was terrified. Kids heard, and some of them jumped on their desks...

As a news report, you might write:

Students at P.S. 4 were shocked this Monday morning to find that a snake had gotten loose in their classroom. Pandemonium erupted as they tried to find the scaly reptile. “I’m afraid it could be dangerous!” a young witness overheard her teacher say, causing almost everyone to leap onto their desks. One brave youngster crept down, claiming that he would capture this menacing creature. Like a young Indiana Jones, this child faced fears that made others weep...

The students will notice how the first is slower paced, descriptive, with full of inner thinking. They’ll notice the use of "I" and the perspective of the narrator—her point of view is fully developed. They’ll probably notice that the second text sounds more dramatic. It is written in third person (that is, there is no "I" voice) and that it seems to tell the story from the outside. Mostly, they will immediately grasp the difference in tone and be able to write another news report that sounds more "newsy." You could download a video clip if you want, anything from the famous eye-witness reporting of the Hindenburg to a NY1 clip or a sports clip from the night before. Help your students talk about the tone of the pieces, the role of the reporter, the audience, the rapidity with which information is conveyed, and any language they notice.

Your classroom should be full of news reports students have written, charts where they have analyzed these, and touchstone texts. Some teachers have structured their workshops like actual news rooms in which students are assigned to various topics or parts of the school. At the end of this document, we have provided a list of some fun, popular “beats”

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you might allow children to take on.) For instance, some students may be in charge of stories in the lunch room, others may be in charge of stories from the office.

By the end of the first part of the unit, then, students will have analyzed a variety of news reports, drafted several and published at least one, and learned to observe, write, and revise quickly. Some of you will decide to move on to part two of this blurb, which is investigative journalism. Others of you will decide to support youngsters going through the whole process again, giving children opportunities to practice these skills with growing strength and independence.

**Bend II: Investigate Journalism**

**Collecting and Developing Ideas for Articles**

Keep up the pace. This unit provides a great opportunity to increase student volume and fluency due to the immediacy of the genre. We don’t want students to spend the whole unit working on one piece.

If you decide to teach children how to engage in investigative journalism, you might start with a news story you or your children tackled during the preceding weeks, and show the students that investigative journalists would have handled that story differently.

Investigations do usually stem from news reports. In order to teach children strategies for generating this kind of writing, you will need to teach children how to consider the "why" and the "how" of their reports—as in asking, how did this happen and why does it matter? From the snake incident, for instance, you can demonstrate that an investigative piece might follow up with how snakes are cared for at P.S. 4. Or it might follow the gendered reactions of the bystanders, investigating how boys versus girls reacted, or adults versus children. Or you could investigate why people are afraid of snakes, and where those fears come from. As you show this to children, your point will be to show them that investigative journalists look at stories from one angle or another. Teach children to see that there are always a lot of different "angles" an investigative reporter could develop, depending on their particular interests and observations.

The first step, then, is to consider some of the unanswered questions that arise from any of the news reports that members of the class have written (and they may decide to appropriate from a story that a student started but didn’t choose to pursue). You may want
to chart possible subjects and to jot investigative questions that students might pursue related to those topics. Of course, you’ll want children to do similar jotting in their own notepads or notebooks. Specifically, you can teach writers to jot the basic information for a news report, and then under this, to jot unanswered questions. Next, teach them to list possible first-hand (primary) sources of information, as in sources—experts, witnesses, bystanders.

You can also teach writers that it helps to jot lists of sources you could pursue, and as you do this, to think, "What light might that person shed?" and "What would that person add to this story?" Before children actually conduct interviews, you'll want to teach them to select questions with an eye towards interest and focus, and to follow up on whatever relevant and interesting tidbits one learns. One student decided, for instance, to follow up on her observations about kids' holding hands in the lower grades, to find out when and how kids, especially boys, learned not to hold hands—which led her to a bigger investigation of boys and bullying. Another student investigated the life expectancy and care of the classroom spider. Another did a news report on kindergartners crying in the lunch room, followed by an investigation into the "atmosphere of yelling," and whom it bothered and whom it didn’t. Another observed the security guard sharing a book and did an investigative report on the secret readers in the building—which led to new adult book clubs! Reporters look closely at the overlooked—they see beauty and trouble in the world around them and they bring these to the attention of their readers. They might generate ideas by considering what seems fair in the world and what seems unfair, or by considering people, places and issues they care about. You might also teach students that they can generate ideas by noticing what seems different, unusual, or “out of place” around them.

Once students have decided on a tentative angle, they need to do some investigation through observation and/or interviews. First you’ll want to teach them how to find primary sources. You might, for instance, explain to children that journalists jot down unanswered questions about a topic or event and then ask, “Who can help me answer these questions?” Teach a simple interview protocol where you model that the reporter tries to: establish a rapport or connection; ask a few preliminary questions; listen carefully for interesting ideas; ask follow-up questions or say ‘say more about that;’ and tries to get examples. The child reporter who was following up on hand-holding, for instance, asked her source, Jack X, how he learned not to hold hands with boys. When he said he learned it in the playground, she asked for ‘examples’ of other things he learned in the playground, which led to her discovery of how boys policed other boy’s behavior through teasing, mocking, and sometimes bullying. You might want to conduct some role-playing scenarios with the investigative journalists find stories by looking closely at the overlooked. They see beauty and trouble in the world around them and they bring these to the attention of their readers. They might generate ideas by considering what seems fair in the world and what seems unfair, or by considering people, places, and issues they care about.

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children so they can practice interviews. Coach them in their body language, their note-taking, and their listening skills. They may want to bring a partner with them when they interview, to help with note-taking. Work on a system for them to take fairly quick jottings, but if they want to quote, they need to get the exact words down.

*Drafting, Revising and Preparing to Put Our Articles Out in the World*

Next, teach your students some of the craft of an investigative piece, which is longer and more substantial than a news report. First of all, it is more angled—it is suggestive, it is usually thinking about an idea or concern. Unlike a persuasive essay, though, the writer doesn't have to answer questions or have a totally clear stance, he or she can pose questions and be opening up investigations. Their narrative craft will serve them well, but here writers need to be concise and purposeful with their craft—if there is dialogue, for instance, it’s usually in the form of a quotation. If there is setting, it’s to create a vivid image. Some craft you can teach them includes: creating a vivid image that lets the reader picture a scene, through details and sparkling language; using an anecdote to get the reader to care; using repetition to hook and persuade the reader; writing with a journalistic "tone" that is powerful; and asking burning questions. Having mentor texts that students can study and emulate will be very important as they learn to write in this new genre. When teaching revision, you might teach students that journalists revise specific details about places, people, objects and actions in order to convey an angle. You might also teach them that journalists have to think about word count. They make sure that there writing is concise and that every sentence they include is for a purpose. Journalists also must revise for accuracy, checking names and information about people and places featured in their article, checking for the accuracy of quotes, and ensuring that any facts they include are correct. This often means returning to their original notes on an incident and/or doing additional research.

As with other genres, you'll want to spend a bit of time teaching students about the importance of leads and endings in investigative articles. You might have them study a few mentors, naming out the ways in which the author began and ended, before trying the same in their own pieces. Students will likely notice that journalists begin either by hooking the reader (with a question or anecdote) or by diving directly into the recounting of an incident (including the 4 W’s). When ending pieces, investigative journalists might state how this event will effect the future, tell how the event ended or was solved, or end with a question the reader should ponder. Finally, you will want to take this opportunity to explore more...
complex connectives with your writers, such as *a result, in comparison, in that case, on the other hand*. You could also do a grammar lesson on verb tense, and the use of more challenging irregular verbs as many young writers shift tenses in the middle of investigative pieces.

Where students usually write a few news reports, they'll probably only write one investigative piece. Some students may draft two and publish one, if they are conducting more than one investigation at a time. You can decide, then, where and how to publish. Some teachers have students publish a newspaper by typing in the pieces (a lot of work, but lets you focus on some editing or word-processing skills if you have the resources), others had an awards ceremony that mimicked the Pulitzer prize for journalism, where writers gather to support each other and their field as well as their extraordinary accomplishment, and some used the building as a virtual newspaper, so students published their piece in the spot in the building where they thought it would be most relevant. Regardless of the publishing method you choose, be sure to celebrate the new-found skills your young journalists have acquired, and ensure that they feel their news articles have an audience that is rapt with attention.

*A list of “beats” students might explore.*

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<tr>
<th>Possible Beats</th>
<th>What Students Might Write About</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Neighborhood</td>
<td>New neighbors, pets, communal space, apartment rents, apartment malfunctions, famous neighborhood people, popular hangouts</td>
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<tr>
<td>The School Cafeteria</td>
<td>Nutrition, working conditions, cliques, social problems, fights, injustices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recess/ The Playground</td>
<td>Cliques, injustices, fights, games, crazes and fads, equipment for play, social issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Classroom</td>
<td>Homework, work load, curriculum, different learning styles, working with others, class units or studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Bus</td>
<td>Travel conditions, behavior, social issues, commuting, bullying</td>
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Journalists learn to write well by studying other journalists. Today I want to teach you that journalists often revise after studying the ways in which published writers wrap up their articles. They often notice that the author ends an article by stating how the event will effect the future, ending with a question the reader should ponder, or telling how the event ended or was solved.
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Weather</strong></td>
<td>Sudden blizzards, storms, weather problems, delays, cancellations, effects on health</td>
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<td><strong>Entertainment News</strong></td>
<td>Award shows, just released songs, CD's, movies, books, sightings of famous people</td>
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<td><strong>Special Events</strong></td>
<td>Current holidays, special school events like dances or fundraisers, report cards, plays, concerts, art shows, writing celebrations</td>
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<td><strong>Social Issues</strong></td>
<td>A fight that just broke out in school, problems between social groups in schools, injustice about grades or current school policies, internet wars, bullying, cliques, racial tensions, religious tensions</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Crime</strong></td>
<td>Vandalism, graffiti, petty robberies, crimes that affect communities</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>People</strong></td>
<td>Important people in the community, people who do kind things, interesting people, people who do incredible things</td>
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