Is It Fair?

A video and graphic help students tune up their "fairness meters" to detect three key factors that can determine how objective or biased a news story is; then they analyze real-life examples.

GRADES: 7-12

DURATION: 30-60 minutes

MATERIALS
- Handouts: Reporting the Story of Goldilocks and Is It Fair? worksheets (one per student or small group, included in this packet)
- Yellow, orange and green highlighters (one set per student or small group)
- Video: "Is It Fair?" (on lesson plan website)
- Tipsheet: Is It Fair? (included in this packet)
- Media Examples: Printed examples (to highlight) from the News or Noise? media map [newseumED.org/news-or-noise-map] or print-outs of news stories of your choice.

INSTRUCTIONS
1. Discuss what your students have heard about fairness — or bias — in the media, and reach a definition of what fairness is. (For example: Fairness is providing all the information that an audience needs to understand and evaluate an event or idea. It means giving serious consideration to all sides of an issue and sharing all the important facts.)
2. To illustrate what fairness in news coverage might look like and why it matters, distribute the Reporting the Story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears handout. Discuss which of the headlines your students think are fair, which are not, and why. Discuss how the different versions might influence their view of the events.
3. Explain that one way to weigh the fairness of a news story is to look for three things: word choice, context and counterpoints. To understand these concepts, watch the "Is It Fair?" explainer video, then review the accompanying tipsheet graphic.
4. Look back at the Goldilocks examples and highlight these things:
    - Yellow = examples of leading language
    - Orange = examples of context that deepens understanding of what happened
    - Green = examples of counterpoints showing different perspectives or responses to accusations
   Discuss students' findings as they go to ensure understanding of each concept.
5. Tell students it's time to go beyond fairy tales and apply their fairness meters to real news. Distribute the Is It Fair? worksheet and printed examples of a news story from the News or Noise? media map or your own selections. Suggested examples:
    - Black Teens Ambivalent About Walkouts, 2018 (1 and 2 of 2)
    - Children's Crusade Begins, 1963 (1 and 2 of 2)
   Depending on your students' level and confidence, either work through the worksheet as a class or have them work independently or in small groups.
6. After students have completed their worksheets, have them share their findings and discuss their process. Then use the Discussion Questions below to continue the conversation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
- Which of these three indicators of fairness do you think is the easiest to look for? The most difficult? Why?
- Why is it important to weigh the fairness of the content you come across in your daily life? Is this something you already do?
- How can you tell the difference between colorful language that helps paint a vivid scene and unfair language that shapes a reader/viewer's opinion of the story?
- What would you tell someone who says it's too much work to try to weigh whether or not news is fair?
- What would you say to someone who says all media is biased?
- If a news story is biased, does that mean you should discount all of the information in it? Why or why not? What next steps should you take if you determine something is unfair?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY
Evaluating Coverage of Current Controversies
As a class, create a list of current controversial topics. Individually or in small groups, students select an event and compare/contrast coverage of it from at least three sources (online media outlets, print newspapers, cable TV shows, etc.). Reports chosen should be from the same day, if possible. Highlight examples of word choice, context and counterpoints. Discuss their findings as a class.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

Reporting the Story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears

You probably already know the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Here's a reminder of the basic facts:

- A girl named Goldilocks went into a house belonging to the Bear family.
- Goldilocks tasted their bowls of breakfast porridge and ate all of the baby bear's portion.
- Goldilocks tested three chairs in the house and broke the baby bear's chair.
- Goldilocks tested three beds in the house and fell asleep in the baby bear's bed.
- The Bear family returned home and discovered Goldilocks in the baby bear's bed.
- Goldilocks woke up and ran out of the house.

Now imagine you are reading a news report about this story. Below are some possible headlines for the story. Discuss whether each headline is fair and why. Then discuss how these different headlines could affect readers' reactions to the story.

Spoiled Little Girl Trashes Family Home and Flees

Vulnerable Child Found Asleep in Unsecured House

Girl Enters Home, Causes Property Damage, Flees; Homeowners Left Confused

Bear Family: We 'Never Meant to Frighten' Unexpected Visitor

Local Girl Accused of Breaking and Entering Says It Was All an Honest Mistake

Bears With History of Absent-Minded Mistakes Find Child in Home

Story of Youth Home Entry Fits Pattern of Daytime Robberies

TEACHER KEY

Reporting the Story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears

==Leading language==

==Context that deepens understanding==

==Counterpoints that show multiple perspective or respond to accusations==

==Spoiled== Little Girl ==Trashes== Family Home and Flees

==Vulnerable== Child Found Asleep in ==Unsecured== House

Girl Enters Home, Causes Property Damage, Flees; Homeowners Left Confused

Bear Family: ==We 'Never Meant to Frighten' Unexpected Visitor==

Local Girl Accused of Breaking and Entering ==Says It Was All an Honest Mistake==

Bears With ==History of Absent-Minded Mistakes== Find Child in Home

Story of Youth Home Entry Fits ==Pattern of Daytime Robberies==

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

Is It Fair?

Title of selected news story:

Read your selected story and write a short (two or three sentences) summary below.

Now read your story again and highlight any examples of word choice (yellow), context (orange) or counterpoints (green) that affect how fair the story is. (You can refer back to the Is It Fair? tipsheet for reminders about how to spot these three things.) Then answer the questions below.

1. Did the author choose fair words? Give examples of leading or neutral language to support your answer.

2. Did the author provide enough context to make it fair? Give examples of details that are included or details that are missing to support your answer.

3. Did the author provide enough counterpoints to make it fair? Give examples of perspectives that are included or perspectives that are missing to support your answer.

On a scale of 1 (very biased) to 10 (very fair), rate this story.

- Rating:

- Explain your rating (two or three sentences):

Why is it important to check news stories for bias?

In your everyday life, how can you put your "fairness meter" into action to spot biased content?

WORKSHEET EXAMPLE

Is It Fair?

Title of selected news story: *Teens Here Ask, What About Us?*

Read your selected story and write a short (two or three sentences) summary below.

This article is about how teens living in urban Philadelphia feel about the national student movement to improve gun control. It explains that the gun violence that urban kids experience is often very different from something like the schools shooting in Parkland, Fla., and it often doesn't get as much attention. It says that many of these students support the national movement, but also want to make sure it includes goals that are more relevant to their lives.

Now read your story again and highlight any examples of word choice (yellow), context (orange) or counterpoints (green) that affect how fair the story is. (You can refer back to the "Is It Fair?" tipsheet for reminders about how to spot these three things.) Then answer the questions below.

4. Did the author choose fair words? Give examples of leading or neutral language to support your answer.

Yes. The author uses pretty neutral language to describe the students and other people she spoke to. She describes the Raised Woke club as "focused on social justice and youth engagement" but doesn't pass any judgment on these goals. She also says its members are "dynamic" and "bright." These feel like positive terms that paint the students in a good light, but their involvement in discussing important issues seems to support it.

5. Did the author provide enough context to make it fair? Give examples of details that are included or details that are missing to support your answer.

Probably. The author gives some details on what happened in Parkland. She also provides some background on some of the challenges urban students face (she interviewed a social worker) and what the larger Philadelphia Student Union is planning to do in connection to National Walkout Day.

6. Did the author provide enough counterpoints to make it fair? Give examples of perspectives that are included or perspectives that are missing to support your answer.

No. This article gives a lot of details about how the students interviewed feel about this subject, but it never gives the leaders of the national March for Our Lives and National Walkout Day movements a chance to respond. I still don't know how these groups feel about urban gun violence and the fact that some urban kids aren't sure if the movement cares about their needs.

On a scale of 1 (very biased) to 10 (very fair), rate this story.

- Rating: 7

- Explain your rating (two or three sentences):

On the one hand, there is a lot of information about these students, and they are portrayed fairly. They aren't made into heroes or ridiculed. On the other hand, there is no explanation of how the national movement feels about the concerns these students have voiced.

Why is it important to check news stories for bias?

Possible ideas:
- *Bias can creep into even reputable news sources, so you can't just assume something will never be biased; as well, even sources that are often biased can put out important news stories that deserve your attention, so you need to be able to judge for yourself.*
- *Biased stories don't show the whole picture/may omit something important.*
- *Biased stories may lead you to reach a wrong conclusion based on incomplete or skewed information.*

In your everyday life, how can you put your "fairness meter" into action to spot biased content?

Possible ideas:
- *Keep an eye out for language that makes me feel really good or bad about a subject when I'm scrolling through my feeds.*
- *Look for background information or other explanations when something seems unbelievable or unexpected.*
- *Make sure that I find more than one perspective on controversial topics – either within a news story or by going beyond and looking for more stories.*

IS IT FAIR?

Unfortunately, news doesn't come with labels of "FAIR" or "BIASED." But you can develop your own "fairness meter" by using three key factors to measure how straight or slanted a story is.

Insert News Here

Fairness Meter

Word Choice

Does the story simply present the facts or lead you to make judgments about them?

Example of leading language: "The superintendent's pet project failed spectacularly less than three months after she shoved it through the approval process."

Look for:
> Loaded adjectives or verbs
> Patterns of very positive or negative descriptions

Neutral Language / Leading Language

Context

Does the story provide the big picture or just a slice of what's going on?

Example of added context: "Prior to accepting the role as city transportation manager, Smith received a PhD in urban planning and ran a private limo company."

Look for:
> Historical comparisons
> Explanations about sources
> Related facts or data

Lots of Context / No Context

Counterpoints

Does the story help you understand multiple perspectives, or only one?

Example of a counterpoint: "While supporters say the new tax bill will increase education funding, critics point out that middle-class families will bear most of the burden."

Look for:
> Counterarguments to key claims or conclusions
> Responses to accusations

Lots of Counterpoints / No Counterpoints

Very Biased   **Mixed Bag**   **Very Fair**

NEWSEUM ED   Find a video tour of this tipsheet at
NewseumED.org/fact-finder