

Unit: Media Ethics

This unit introduces students to the principles that guide journalists as they report stories. It includes pre- and post-visit activities designed to bracket the Media Ethics NewseumED class, plus a class-specific gallery guide. Through these experiences, students will become more critical consumers of information as they come to understand why ethical journalism is important; how journalists attempt to be accurate, fair and clear; and what happens when they fail to live up to these standards.

Note: You can also find additional activities, worksheets and handouts related to Media Ethics by searching EDTools on NewseumED.

OBJECTIVE: Students understand why ethical journalism is important and can apply the guiding principles of the journalists' code of ethics.

TARGET AUDIENCE: Middle and high school

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What are ethics?
- What principles guide journalists as they work?
- What do journalistic fairness, accuracy and clarity look like?
- Why do journalists sometimes fail to produce ethical work? What are the effects when this happens?

KEY TOPICS AND SKILLS

- Media literacy
- The role of the free press in our daily lives
- How the news is made, journalism ethics
- Ethical debate and decision-making

UNIT CONTENTS

1. Before Your Visit
 - **Media Ethics Scenarios:** This activity helps students apply journalism standards of accuracy, fairness and clarity in deciding how to report the news.
2. During Your Visit
 - **NewseumED Class – Media Ethics:** This lesson familiarizes students with some of the ethical issues journalists face as they strive to be accurate, fair and clear. By examining real-life case studies, students grapple with issues journalists may encounter, including privacy, anonymous sources and the pressure to be first.
 - **Media Ethics Gallery Guide:** This guide helps students navigate the Ethics Center in the Newseum and apply a journalist's code of ethics to real-life case studies.
3. After Your Visit
 - **Journalists' Code of Ethics:** Students evaluate three recent news stories for adherence to the standards expected of journalists in their daily work.

Before Your Visit: Media Ethics Scenarios

This activity helps students apply journalism standards of accuracy, fairness and clarity in deciding how to report the news.

GRADE LEVEL: Middle and high school

TIME: Under 30 minutes

MATERIALS: Media Ethics Scenarios worksheet (download). Optional: Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics (download)

PREPARE

Print copies of the worksheet – without the answer key – for each student or small group. Print copies of SPJ Code of Ethics, if desired.

DO

1. Tell students: Journalists strive to be accurate, fair and clear in their reporting. News organizations and professional groups have codes to guide ethical behavior.

- Note: If time and desired, go over the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics.

2. Individually or in small groups, have students read each scenario on the worksheet and answer the questions. How would they handle the situation if they were editors of their school newspaper?

DISCUSS

Have students or groups share their decisions and reasoning. Use the answer key to help guide the discussion.

- Are there disagreements? If so, why?
- What specific standards guided their decisions?

Before Your Visit: Media Ethics Scenarios – Teacher Key

1. **Yes.** It is a core value that journalists are accurate. And reporters should do their own reporting.
2. **Yes.** The cutline implies the picture was taken during the filming of the PSA. Clarity is important in cutlines as well as in stories.
3. **No.** Photographs should reflect the truth. Truthfulness includes accuracy of details in the setting in which the action takes place.
4. **Perhaps.** Why are you reporting this story? If only to cloud the reputation of the rival school's principal, don't publish it. Do you regularly report students who are arrested on DWI charges? Is the daughter 18 or older? Be fair, and treat this story as you would any other story.
5. **No.** You need facts. Rumors and mistaken identification have no place in a newspaper. By the way, what's this information doing in a concert review?

During Your Visit: Gallery Guide

This guide helps students navigate the Ethics Center in the Newseum and apply a journalist's code of ethics to real-life case studies.

GRADE LEVEL: Middle and high school

TIME: Under 30 minutes

MATERIALS: Media Ethics Gallery Guide (download)

After Your Visit: Journalists' Code of Ethics

Students evaluate three recent news stories for adherence to the standards expected of journalists in their daily work.

GRADE LEVEL: Middle and high school

TIME: 30 minutes

MATERIALS: Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics (download); newspapers, magazines or online access to news websites; paper and pencil

PREPARE

Print copies of the code of ethics for each student.

DO

1. Individually, or as a class, read the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics.
2. Have each student pick three recent stories with photographs from newspapers, magazines or online news sites. (If the assignment is done outside of class, students could include television news.)
3. Read and analyze each story for whether it complies with ethical standards in the SPJ Code of Ethics.
4. Write a paragraph about each story explaining how it shows standards being implemented or shows a lack of standards. Be specific. Make sure to attach the news stories or story sources to the evaluations.

DISCUSS

Have students share their findings and look for similarities. Then ask:

- Did most stories and photographs follow the code of ethics?
- Was it difficult to find examples that violated the standards?
- Which standards, if any, were violated most often? Why do you think that is?
- Why is it important for journalists to maintain standards?