



Setting the Scene

When Tragedy Hits – A True Story

You will play the roles of news media, the public and officials during coverage of tragedy at a large university in Blacksburg, Va. One spring day, a student shoots and kills two students in a dormitory — an incident police and officials initially treat as personal and isolated. Two and a half hours later, the student, heavily armed, enters an academic building and begins systematically shooting students and teachers in classrooms. The killer chained the doors to prevent escape. Police are called and eventually break into the building. The killer commits suicide after wounding 17 and killing 33 in the two shootings.

You will form small groups of four or five students each, making six groups total. Your teacher will distribute role cards. Read the description on the card and discuss with your group how that person might behave.

Your assignment is to play the assigned role and make decisions that best reflect the needs and interests of the person you are representing.

You will be given information about the case in installments. You must make decisions as a group, based on the information available to you at the time. Each time you receive information, you should discuss your strategies and approach and then report to the class what you've decided to do.

The purpose of this exercise is to help you understand the role the news media play in our society and to evaluate the successes — or failures — of news organizations in transmitting important information in times of crisis. Through role-playing and discussion, the challenges that journalists, law enforcement, other officials and the public face in gathering, distributing and even receiving accurate information during a breaking news story should become clear.

Even with a narrower focus on the news media's role, it's not possible to include every detail of an event of this magnitude. You may have other information, but you and your group should react only to the information presented here.