

LESSON: News Literacy: Understanding explanatory + solutions journalism

Description

Students will read and discuss two stories about homelessness published three days apart in the San Francisco Chronicle. On day one, students will learn about and discuss the history of San Francisco's homeless problem over the past 20 years. On day two, students will identify/analyze various responses by city officials attempting to solve the problem. Students will use both stories to discuss what explanatory journalism means, what solutions journalism means, and how to tell the difference between rigorously reported solutions journalism and "sugar-coated" or "good news" stories.

Objectives

- Students will read and discuss two stories in the area of explanatory/solutions journalism
- Students will analyze the sources and methods used in the reporting of both stories
- Students will understand and recognize the elements of solutions journalism

Common Core State Standards

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.2](#)

Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.3](#)

Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1](#)

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1](#)

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10](#)

Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Partnership for 21st Century Skills — Student Outcomes

- Critical Thinking: Reason effectively, use systems thinking; make judgments and decisions
- Communication: Communicate Clearly
- Information Literacy: Access and evaluate information; use and manage information
- Media Literacy: Analyze media

Length

Two 50-minute classes

Materials / resources:

Class set of printouts or access to internet for:

1. Day 1: "[SF homeless problem looks the same as it did 20 years ago](#)," San Francisco Chronicle, June 26, 2016
2. Day 2: "[Solution to SF's homeless problem starts with supportive housing](#)," San Francisco Chronicle, June 29, 2016
3. (optional) Day 2: "[Assessing the Impact of Explanatory Journalism](#)," MediaShift, Dec. 13, 2017

[Day 1 Assessment and key](#)

[Day 2 Assessment and key](#)

Day 1 Lesson step-by-step:

Flipped classroom option: Assign the reading noted in materials above as homework before class (#1 for Day One and #2-3 for Day Two).

1. Share backstory; explain key terms and tap prior knowledge – 15 minutes

Share backstory: One day in the Chronicle newsroom, managing editor Audrey Cooper asked a simple question: "Why do we have homelessness?" Kevin Fagan, an award-winning reporter who has spent two decades reporting on poverty, responded with "SF homeless problem looks the same as it did 20 years ago" (see resources link, above). But then Cooper asked another question: "Now, how do we fix it?" The

answer to that question was more challenging, but Fagan and his reporting team responded with a story that began, “Fixing San Francisco’s homelessness problem is possible” (see link above). Together, these stories are a good example of a growing trend — explanatory journalism that identifies not only problems but solutions that can point a way forward. More and more news organizations are using this approach to engage readers and also to improve reporting by finding, sharing and examining existing solutions that reporters and readers may not necessarily know are out there.

Explain key terms: Explanatory journalism explains a problem in depth, asking WHY a problem exists, including identifying key terms, the history of the problem and its causes, and those who are affected by the problem. Solutions journalism is a second step — an approach to news reporting that looks for the HOW, including stakeholders who are working on the problem, potential solutions and best practices that cities, organizations or citizens are using, for example, affordable supportive housing for the homeless with health-care services on site.

Tap prior knowledge: Ask students for examples of problems in their communities that could benefit from an explanatory/solutions journalism approach. Accept all examples. Press students for WHY questions they might ask if they were to do an explanatory journalism story.

1. Read – 15 minutes

Students will read the first story, “[SF homeless problem looks the same as it did 20 years ago.](#)” You may assign this as silent reading during class, or as homework before class.

2. Activity and Assessment – 15 minutes

Pass out the assessment and ask students to work individually or in pairs to find the answers to the questions.

3. Closure – 5 minutes

Ask students to share what they thought of the story and their answers to the assessment. Why does homelessness exist, why have efforts by previous mayors failed to solve it, and why are the homeless people interviewed for the story still living on the street?

Differentiation: Read or assign sections of the story only (as separated by subheds). Assign all or part of the story ahead of time for slower readers. Allow students to work individually or in pairs on the assessment.

Day 2 Lesson step-by-step:

Flipped classroom option: Assign the reading noted in materials above as homework before class.

1. Review; explain key terms and tap prior knowledge – 15 minutes

Review: Now that students understand more about homelessness from a San Francisco perspective, ask them what solutions they might propose. What solutions has San Francisco tried, for example, one-stop navigation centers, “minute clinics” for health needs? What types of solutions has it ruled out, for example, the one-night “bed and a sandwich” approach? Ask students for examples of how their own communities have tackled this problem. Accept all reasonable responses.

Explain key terms: Solutions journalism is a reporting approach that “[focuses in-depth on a response to a problem and how the response works in meaningful detail](#).” While it can be character-driven, it looks for effective responses and not just good intentions, for example, a person who really cares about child poverty but whose work has not had any impact on homelessness or other child issues in her community. Note that solutions journalism is not the same as ignoring, sugar-coating or looking only for successes or “positive” news. Examining mistakes and failures helps reporters explain what doesn’t work and helps others to avoid going down a similar path. More broadly, solutions journalists look for what works, provide evidence of results, and conduct research and reporting outside of a particular city or community to find other answers to local problems.

Tap prior knowledge: Ask students for examples of solutions in their communities that could benefit from an explanatory/solutions journalism approach. Accept all examples. Press students for HOW or WHAT questions they might ask if they were to do a solutions journalism story, for example, “how does this work?” or “what’s working/what’s not working?”

1. Read – 15 minutes

Students will read the second story, “[Solution to SF’s homeless problem starts with supportive housing](#).”

You may assign this as silent reading during class, or as homework before class.

2. Activity and Assessment – 15 minutes

Pass out the assessment and ask students to work individually or in pairs to find the answers to the questions.

3. Closure – 5 minutes

Ask students to share what they thought of the story and their answers to the assessment. Did the story answer Audrey Cooper’s “how do we fix it?” question? How could San Francisco move ahead in solving

homelessness? Are the solutions presented practical? Why or why not? Is this just a San Francisco story, or might readers in other cities also benefit by reading it?

Differentiation

As for Day 1, above.

Optional homework: Read "[Assessing the Impact of Explanatory Journalism](#)," MediaShift, Dec. 13, 2017. How did a solutions-oriented approach help The Journal News explain "the real problem" in Ramapo and help the community to avoid reaching "a breaking point"?

END