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FACT SHEET JOURNALISTIC SOURCES

OBJECTIVES OF THE CURRICULUM

DISCIPLINES AND LEVEL CONCERNED

English (Elementary – Cycle 3)

- Writing a variety of texts;

Literary and common texts (oral and written forms) to be discovered and used

- Explanatory texts: reporting, journalistic news.

ERC (Cycle 3)

Theme: Members of society

- The role of the media.

TARGETED DIMENSIONS OF THE DIGITAL COMPETENCY

- Collaborate by using digital tools;
- Create content with digital tools;
- Develop and engage information literacy;
- Communicate by using digital technology.

SUGGESTED DIGITAL TOOLS

- Quiz on the "doubtit.ca" platform;
- Quiz creation tools, such as Google Forms or Microsoft Forms;
- Collaborative word processing tool, such as Google Doc or Microsoft Word.

EDUCATIONAL INTENTION OF THE GUIDE

By the end of these activities, the students will understand the importance and role of reliable sources in journalism.

OBJECTIVES OF THE ACTIVITIES

- Participate in a quiz to test their abilities in distinguishing reliable sources from unreliable sources (bonus: create their own quiz).
- Collaborate on creating a journalistic report involving reliable sources.

BEFORE STARTING: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE STUDENTS

- Ask the students why they think journalists speak to several people before publishing an article,
- Then ask the students if they believe everyone can give sound advice on health. Can everyone give a scientific opinion? Who can do this? Are other subjects reserved for experts?

WHAT IS A JOURNALISTIC SOURCE?

Journalistic sources are simply people or organizations that provide information to journalists.

They may testify about a situation they experienced, share their expertise on a complicated subject, explain an important issue, or denounce an injustice, for example. Without journalistic information, there would be no information... and therefore no reporting!

Example:

The student newspaper writes an article about the new vegetarian menu in the cafeteria. The journalist assigned to the subject will speak to the school's head cook, who is behind the initiative. She also decides to ask the first five students who will taste the new meals for their opinion.

- In this article, the journalistic sources will be the cook and the students interviewed.

Some types of journalistic sources

- The witness to an incident;
- A crime victim;
- A whistleblower/A person who discloses hidden information;
- An expert;
- A participant in an event;
- A person representing an association or a company;
- A person who works for the government.

RECOGNIZING RELIABLE JOURNALISTIC SOURCES: BEWARE OF SUSPICIOUS SOURCES!

An enormous amount of false information circulates on the Internet. Creators of fake news know how to fool people. One of their most frequent tricks is to pretend they're backed up by credible journalistic sources. Why? Because anything seems more important when an "expert" says it! So be careful and know how to recognize trickery!

Here are some questions to help you avoid the fake news trap:

Who is the source?

In serious reporting, a reliable source will be clearly identified. This person's name, status and/or occupation are essential information, which is normally provided by journalists.

Attention: if the author of a news item doesn't name his sources, be suspicious.

Beware of generalities!

Creators of fake news love generalities. To support their misleading information, they often will say that experts support them... without naming them! In a publication, these statements may look like this: "Experts say that...", "According to Google...", "All doctors say that..."

Here are two fictitious examples:

- According to Dr. Jill Watson, a general practitioner at Toronto General Hospital, the cold and flu season is approaching. She recommends that people wash their hands very often and stay home if they have symptoms.
 - Source: Dr. Jill Watson
 - Status/occupation: General practitioner at Toronto General Hospital;
 - What she says: People must wash their hands and stay home if they have symptoms.
 - Does she have the necessary expertise to express an opinion on the subject? Yes, because she is a general practitioner.
- A school bus accident in a Halifax suburb caused a scare Tuesday evening but left 23 schoolchildren from Joseph Howe School unharmed. “We had to wait an hour before help arrived,” said the bus driver, Martin Carpenter. “Fortunately it was warm enough and nobody was injured.”

Frank Jones, one of the ambulance attendants present at the scene of the incident, was glad about the positive outcome. “The road was very slippery because of the rain. It could have been more serious, but apart from one minor scrap, no passenger needed medical attention,” he declared.

- Sources:
 - Martin Carpenter;
 - Frank Jones.
- Status/occupation:
 - Bus driver involved in the accident;
 - Ambulance attendant.

Is the source relevant?

The reader must understand why the journalist spoke to the source. It's important to understand the source's relevance to the information provided and the subject of the report. Does the source provide expertise that enriches the article? Did the source experience a well-known event? Does the author clearly explain the source's role?

If the source is an expert, the journalist doesn't necessarily need to speak to several specialists to validate the comments. However, the journalist must ensure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the source has the necessary expertise to be quoted in the article.

Let's return to our two fictitious examples:

- According to Dr. Jill Watson, a general practitioner at Toronto General Hospital, the cold and flu season is approaching. She recommends that people wash their hands very often and stay home if they have symptoms.
 - Subject of the article: Arrival of the cold and flu season;
 - Key information provided by the source: People must wash their hands and stay home if they have symptoms;
 - Is the source relevant? Yes, because she is a general practitioner.
- A school bus accident in a Halifax suburb caused a scare Tuesday evening but left 23 schoolchildren from Joseph Howe School unharmed. “We had to wait an hour before help arrived,” said the bus driver, Martin Carpenter. “Fortunately it was warm enough and nobody was injured.”

Frank Jones, one of the ambulance attendants present at the scene of the incident, was glad about the positive outcome. “The road was very slippery because of the rain. It could have been more serious, but apart from one minor scrap, no passenger needed medical attention,” he declared.

- Subject of the article: Bus accident in a Halifax suburb
- Key information provided by the source: No injuries;
- Are the sources relevant? Yes:
 - Bus driver: Direct witness of the accident;
 - Ambulance attendant: Official source, expert.

Did the author take steps to confirm what the source says is true? Do other people say the same thing?

Before writing an article, the journalist must ensure the source is telling the truth. Sometimes sources lie. Sometimes they unintentionally make a mistake because they perceived a situation the wrong way. The journalist will have to validate the information with other sources, check if a participant was really present at an event, consult other articles, etc.

Anonymous source?

In a minority of cases, people may put themselves in danger when they speak to journalists. If their testimony potentially can harm their physical safety, their job or their reputation, the journalist may guarantee their anonymity. If the source is anonymous, the journalist will have to explain why he doesn't disclose the source's identity.

Let's return to our two fictitious examples:

- According to Dr. Jill Watson, a general practitioner at Toronto General Hospital, the cold and flu season is approaching. She recommends that people wash their hands very often and stay home if they have symptoms.
→ Fact-checking approach: The doctor's expertise is sufficient.
- A school bus accident in a Halifax suburb caused a scare Tuesday evening but left 23 schoolchildren from Joseph Howe School unharmed. "We had to wait an hour before help arrived," said the bus driver, Martin Carpenter. "Fortunately it was warm enough and nobody was injured."

Frank Jones, one of the ambulance attendants present at the scene of the incident, was glad about the positive outcome. "The road was very slippery because of the rain. It could have been more serious, but apart from one minor scrap, no passenger needed medical attention," he declared.

- Fact-checking approach: The two sources affirm that nobody was injured. However, if our only source had been the driver, it would have been important to obtain the ambulance attendant's testimony to confirm this assertion

EXERCISES

EXERCISE 1

In the following fictitious excerpts, the teacher asks the students to identify the sources and their relevance to the subjects discussed. The teacher then asks if the sources can be trusted and why.

1. Watch out for your candles: This year in Ontario, fifteen house fires were caused by a forgotten candle, Ottawa Fire Chief Michelle Belcher told a press conference.
2. Stop buying expensive creams. Experts have discovered that drinking mint tea three times a day can reduce wrinkles and signs of aging!
3. *The Island Journal* confirmed with four anonymous sources close to the situation, who fear for their jobs and don't want their names used, that the coach of the Major Junior Hockey team was fired on Monday.
4. I read on the Internet that Canada's population will double in two years.

Additional activity:

Go to doubtit.ca and have the students take the quiz to test their ability to distinguish true from false.

BONUS: Possibility of creating a quiz for the students (with Google Forms or Microsoft Forms, for example), where some have to insert real news and others just make it up. The quizzes created can then be shared and commented on by the group.

EXERCISE 2

The student plays the role of a journalist working on the following reports. The student must find at least two journalistic sources per subject.

1. The high school in your neighbourhood has set up a new drama program that will allow 20 students to combine their studies with theatre.
2. About a hundred children in your neighbourhood are suffering from the same ear infection. It is suspected that these infections originated in a daycare centre.

Additional activity:

The students work in small teams to create a situational exercise where the journalist needs to meet several sources to write a report.

One of the students plays the role of the journalist and the other team members are the sources. This collaborative writing exercise can be performed in a Google Doc or Microsoft Word document, where each team member seeks to make a contribution.

ANSWER KEY

1.1

Source: Michelle Belcher – You can rely on her because she is an expert on the question.

1.2

Source: Experts (unnamed) – You can't rely on them because nobody is identified. We aren't even told their area of expertise!

1.3

Sources: Anonymous – You can rely on them because the sources all say the same thing. They remain anonymous for a valid reason.

1.4

Source: Internet – You can't rely on it when no precise source is given.

2.1

School principal, drama teacher, students participating in the program, children's parents.

2.2

Doctors, children's parents, owner of the daycare.