

# Unit Plan: Teaching Journalistic Interviewing

By Lisa Beth Miller

Journalism Teacher, Liberty High School

## ***Day 1: What is “source-based writing”?***

**Objective:** Students who are new to journalism require an introduction to source-based writing. Many are accustomed to only writing essays based on their own opinions. The goal of this lesson is to demonstrate how and why journalistic writing is different and relies upon well-selected sources.

**Activity:** Students will be given five current newspaper and magazine articles (select high-interest topics) to examine. During the class period, they will work with a partner to determine what sources were utilized for each article. They will discuss why each source was valuable to the journalist’s research process. Could any additional sources have been utilized? Why? Could any sources have been eliminated? Why or why not? Did the choice of sources provide balance and a variety of viewpoints within the article?

**Evaluation:** Students will be assessed based on participation in a class discussion. Were they able to identify sources? Were they able to recognize what each source had to offer? Were they able to recognize whether the story was told fairly and accurately based on information from the sources?

## ***Day 2: Deconstructing an interview-based article***

**Objective:** Now that students have a basic understanding of utilizing sources to tell a story, they will need to examine the art of conducting a journalistic interview. This activity is designed to help them understand how to construct and ask meaningful interview questions.

**Activity:** Working with a partner, students will once again examine the five articles from Lesson 1. This time, students will focus upon the information provided by each source in direct or indirect quotes. Once students ascertain all included information from each source, they will attempt to create the interview questions and follow up questions that were asked to glean this information from each source. They will be asked to recreate the actual dialogue between the journalist and the source. Creativity will be encouraged as they craft these conversations.

**Evaluation:** Each pair of students will select one interview conversation to share through reenactment. Students will be evaluated on accuracy; would the interview question actually glean the information or quote included in the article? The evaluation process will, of course, allow for creativity and originality.

### ***Day 3: Selecting the right sources***

**Objective:** Now that students understand the value of good sources, they need practice in selecting sources for the articles they will actually be writing.

**Activity:** A selection of real article topics will be written on index cards and placed in a basket. Each student will draw three topics, then create a list of 10 possible sources for each article. The student must justify the inclusion of each source and explain what data and viewpoint they could offer.

**Evaluation:** Students will be evaluated on their ability to come up with a variety of relevant sources that would allow them to write a detailed and balanced source-based article.

### ***Day 4: Crafting impactful interview questions***

**Objective:** Building upon their knowledge of how to select sources, students will return to yesterday's assignment and actually decide what questions they would ask each selected source. Part of this lesson involves emphasizing that asking all sources the exact same questions is NOT a good interviewing technique. Strong interviewers need to customize unique questions for each source.

**Activity:** Students will select ONE of the three topics that they worked with yesterday. After examining the list of sources (and justifications) that they came up with, they will create a set of five to seven interview questions for each source. No exact sets of questions should be repeated with multiple sources; the questions should be unique and based on who the source is (consider grade level, job, sports position, etc.). Questions should be open-ended and should emphasize the hows and whys.

**Evaluation:** Students will be evaluated on their ability to create relevant, open-ended questions for their sources. Attention will be given to ability to create unique questions for each source.

### ***Day 5: Understanding how and when to ask follow-up questions***

**Objective:** When interviewing, students need to recognize when a brief and minimalistic answer is provided so that they may ask follow-up questions. Listening is the most important skill here; if the student reporter just sticks to a script, they may miss important insight and needed details.

**Activity:** Watch a current and high interest level interview. The Oprah Winfrey interview with Prince Harry and Meghan Markle is the one I used this term (at my students' request). Have students watch carefully and note when follow up questions are asked. Why were these follow up questions needed? How did the information provided in these answers add to the value of the interview? Were there any follow-up questions asked that were particularly critical to the success of the interview? Explain.

**Evaluation:** Students could be evaluated on their written responses, but I prefer to utilize a Socratic seminar-style discussion. Students may refer to their notes to respond to discussion questions about the interviewing techniques they just saw. Points are awarded based on whether students directly quote and refer to the interview in detail (5 points per answer) or whether they are simply giving an opinion or agreeing with a classmate without a precise reference or explanation (2 points per answer). For a quick discussion/seminar, students may be given a goal of earning 15-20 points. Be sure to explain the evaluation activity to students so that they know to take high quality notes during the interview!

### ***Day 6: Accurately telling your story utilizing quotes***

**Objective:** Time to put our interviewing techniques into action! By this point, students should be assigned to write an actual story. They should complete the process of selecting sources, writing interview questions, and completing interviews. For this lesson, they will examine their actual interview notes from all sources and find their actual story based upon this data. The emphasis here is to help students understand that until they have all of their interview notes, they cannot be sure of exactly what their story will be. For example, if the topic assigned is football, the interviews with athletes could go in many different directions. The reporter could find out that the team is very tightknit and focused, or she could find out that the changes in coaching styles are impacting the team, or that injuries are plaguing the team this year. The reporter's basic topic is football, but she will not know exactly what to focus upon until her research is complete.

**Activity:** After reading through all interview notes, reporters will note and highlight the strongest quotes from each source. They will be encouraged to be picky. Every word of every interview should NOT be included in an article. Reporters should also avoid redundant quotes that are phrased similarly. Once the reporter has selected what quotes will best tell the story, have inexperienced reporters write each quote on an index card. They are not required to use every source, but should try to include at least six distinctly different sources in the final article (for example, maybe players in different grade levels and positions, plus a coach or two). Reporters should then examine the quote cards and figure out how they will piece together their story. It is only at this point that they may begin writing the lead and the article itself.

**Evaluation:** For this activity, I evaluate reporters based on a detailed conversation with them. We talk through the selected quotes and where/how they will be included in the story. We review the basic topic (for example, football) and the actual story they found (for example, sickness and injuries heavily impacting the season so far). The purpose here is to push reporters to really research the topic and talk to the sources to find a story. Just reporting on scores or easily found facts is not good journalism.

## ***Day 7: Attribution – The Rules***

**Objective:** As students work through their first articles, I like to include a mini grammar lesson regarding proper attribution. It is important that students learn AP style and master how to frame quotes within an article.

**Activity:** For this quick activity, I use the grammar and punctuation section of the AP Style Manual. The section on quotation marks has good, clear information and examples on how to punctuate direct quotes. Students are asked to practice correct punctuation and attribution with the quotes (on index cards) from the last activity. We pay particular attention on verbiage and structure to ensure that everyone understands and complies with AP style in the final drafts of their articles.

**Evaluation:** This activity is truly just for practice and to introduce students to the importance of the AP Style Manual. When their actual articles are submitted for grading and publication, they will be graded on using correct AP style in their overall writing and in quote attribution.

### ***Standards (based on Common Core State Standards)***

#### *Arts and Communication*

1. Understands the principles, processes, and products associated with arts and communication media.
2. Knows and applies appropriate criteria to arts and communication products.
3. Uses critical and creative thinking in various arts and communication settings.
4. Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication.

#### *Language Arts*

1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
2. Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.
3. Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions.
5. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.
7. Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts.
8. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.
10. Understands the characteristics and components of the media.

*Life Skills: Life Work*

6. Makes effective use of basic life skills.

Life Skills: Working with Others

4. Displays effective interpersonal communication skills.