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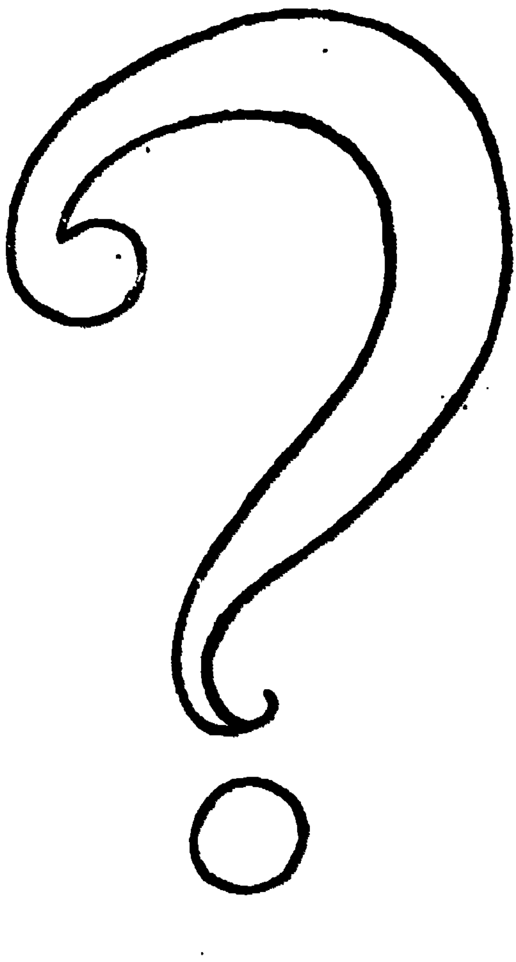
ABSTRACT

One of a series prepared by the Hawaii Newspaper Agency, this teaching guide offers ideas on using the newspaper to teach critical thinking. It includes suggestions for developing critical awareness of the facts that content differs from newspaper to newspaper, that newspapers contain both factual reporting and opinion, the objectivity in news reporting has limitations, and that journalism has earned a permanent place in American literature. The guide concludes with a list of the 12 most commonly used propaganda devices. (RB)

Newspaper in the Classroom

CRITICAL THINKING



The primary aim of a good teacher is to teach children to think -- to analyze, to make up their own minds, not to be afraid to express their opinions.

It is not enough to cover facts; it is impossible. Knowledge is increasing so fast that we cannot possibly give children all the facts about anything. If they are to be prepared for a world we cannot even envision, then they must be taught to make judgments based on knowledge.

How do we do this? Not by going through a textbook page by page -- not by having a class feed back to the teacher the facts she wants.

The newspaper is the ideal tool for the teaching of critical analysis. It does in its pages exactly what you want your students to do. It presents facts; it provides opinion; it draws conclusions; it interprets; it understands the interaction of writer and reader.

And it provides clues to the perceptive reader to help him be critical.

Here is what you should teach your students:

* Be wary of any controversial statement when no source is set forth. Whenever such a statement is made, you are entitled to ask "Who said so?"

* Understand attribution. Newspapers have various ways of attributing information. Unless you understand them, you won't be reading intelligently.

e.g. When you run into such statements as "it is said," "it is reported," "it is believed," you will have to take into account what you know about the reporter, if his name appears, or what you know about the newspaper.

The reporter uses such vague phrases for several reasons. He may have received the information from someone he trusts but still may be unsure of it himself. Or he may have been given the information on condition he does not reveal the source. If he is positive of the information but cannot reveal the source he may use such a phrase as "it is reliably understood" or "it is reported on good authority."

* Understand that the first-hand account is the most dependable of all. It is still important that the reader understand attributions of statements within the reporter's account, however.

He should not jump to the conclusion that "Jones is a forger" because the reporter has said that "Jones has been indicted for forgery."

* The reader must be just as impartial in his reading as he expects the reporter to be in his writing. A story is not wrong because the reader doesn't like what is in it; the peper is not untrustworthy because it spells a name incorrectly once in a while.

Understanding how news is gathered; who makes what decisions and the pressures under which they are made; how reporters are trained and what is expected from them; the separation of news facts

from opinion but the desirability and good sense of having interpretation of news by people who have the necessary background (the reporters) are all essential to intelligent reading.

The editorials are a superb starting-off-point for developing critical thinking. If your class is too young for the written editorial, start with the editorial cartoon. Even very young children interpret these very well with a little help. Have them express their own opinions; have them convince each other of the worth of their own arguments; have them write letters to the editor (or to a class editor) on problems at their school.

EIGHT MAJOR CONCEPTS

Here are eight major concepts presented by a secondary language arts teacher (but adaptable to the elementary level) for the study of a newspaper with the intent of developing critical thinking.

I. THE CRITICAL READER IS AWARE THAT CONTENT DIFFERS FROM PAPER TO PAPER.

A. Suggested Approach:

1. Compare coverage of one outstanding current news item in a number of national, city, and local newspapers, noting differences in reporting by the wire services and editing of these items.

2. Discuss these variations and their possible causes, and why content and coverage differ from paper to paper.

   a. locality
   b. type of paper
   c. frequency of publication
   d. time of distribution

3. Analyze the entire content of the local and national papers, noting:

   a. inclusion/exclusion of items
   b. placement
   c. treatment
   d. headlines

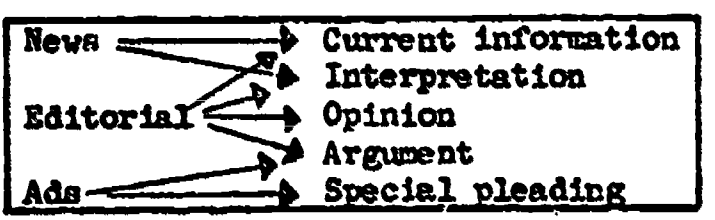
B. Suggested Assignments

1. Clip examples of a particular news event covered by several papers.
2. Write accompanying analysis in notebook.

II. THE CRITICAL READER IS AWARE THAT THE NEWSPAPER CONTAINS BOTH FACTUAL REPORTING AND OPINION.

A. Suggested Approach

1. Introduce chart of analysis of newspaper content.



2. Explain chart:

a. Current information: "More than three billion hot dogs were consumed by the American people last year." This is a statement of fact. Such statements are primarily but not exclusively found in news columns.

b. Interpretation: "The popularity of the hot dog makes it virtually an American institution." This is a legitimate deduction from facts. It could appear in news columns, on the editorial page, and in writings of commentators.

c. Opinion: "The hot dog is delicious." This is not an objective statement of fact but rather a subjective judgment. Opinions such as this are found on the editorial page and in the writings of critics and commentators.

d. Argument: "Since hot dogs are an excellent source of protein and their manufacture gives employment to thousands of persons, everybody should eat at least one hot dog a day." Such statements arguing a point or a cause lie midway between opinion and special pleading. They belong in editorials and commentators' columns, but not in news columns.

e. Special pleading: "Eat Zilch's hot dogs. Scientific tests prove that they are smoother, more firmly packed and easier on the digestive tract." Advocacy of a particular product, service, cause or institution appears in the advertising columns, and occasionally on the editorial page.

III. THE CRITICAL READER IS AWARE THAT NEWSPAPERS CAN CONTAIN "HIDDEN PERSUADERS"

A. Suggested Approach - Find examples of slanting

1. By use of emotionally-toned words. Examples: "Company Snooping/Explains Sitdown" -- "The workers WON a wage boost."
2. By playing a story down or up.
3. By selection or suppression of certain news items.

B. Suggested Assignments

1. Clip examples of each kind of slanting.
2. Clip examples of slanted headlines.
3. Give students copy of a slanted news article and ask them to distinguish between fact and opinion.
4. Have students write descriptions of an incident in a literature book from various points of view, but keeping to the facts.

IV. THE CRITICAL READER REALIZES THAT OBJECTIVITY IN NEWS REPORTING HAS LIMITATIONS.

A. Suggested Approach - Cover the following points in a discussion that precedes, follows, or is alternated with the activities listed below.

1. The very process of reporting lessens objectivity because all perception is selection.

   a. The reporter as the first selector is affected by the unconscious influence of his experience, background, attitude and associations.
   b. The reporter's presence may affect the person or the event.

2. Point of view of the news source may be slanted.
3. The very selection entailed in organizing facts implies that the reporter has already judged the relative significance of the facts.
4. Interpretive reporting depends on a writer's special knowledge, but it is that writer's special knowledge.

B. Suggested Assignments

1. News Selection: List in random order news that has broken on a single day. Have students indicate where they would place the stories - front page or inside pages.

2. Give students a list of facts from an actual news story. Compare the stories written by the students with the original stories written in the newspapers.
3. Provide a lecture, movie, or an assembly for the students. Have them write an account. Note and account for differences in the reports.
4. Have students examine the Canons of Journalism to determine how editors and reporters attempt to guard against subjectivity.

V. THE CRITICAL READER DEMANDS INCREASING DEPTH IN NEWS REPORTING.

A. Discussion

1. He knows that TV and radio have usurped the freshness of news; he, therefore, asks newspapers to present the news in depth.
2. He is an increasingly more sophisticated reader, demanding full interpretive reporting.
3. He knows that since the newspapers perform a service, they may be influenced by the interest and attitudes of the readers.

B. Suggested Assignments

1. List topics of news items discussed on radio and TV. Locate stories in newspapers.
2. Find interpretive coverage in newspapers.

VI. THE CRITICAL READER KNOWS THE VALUE OF SOUND REASONING IN ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING FOUND IN THE EDITORIALS, LETTERS TO THE EDITORS, AND COLUMNS.

A. Suggested Approach - Compare and examine editorials, letters, and columns for use of facts, expert testimony, use of analogy, valid induction and deduction, and recognition of propaganda devices.

B. Suggested Assignments

1. Clip and analyze arguments in editorials, columns, and letters dealing with the same subject matter.
2. Write a letter to the editor which analyzes and responds to the argument in an editorial, letter, or column.
3. Have a student select a controversial topic, collect articles on both sides, choose a side and support it, and prepare a written or oral assignment.

VII. THE CRITICAL READER KNOWS HOW TO EVALUATE THE NEWSPAPER HE READS.

A. Suggested Approach - Set up standards for a responsible newspaper.

B. Suggested Assignments

1. Write an analysis of the local newspaper.

2. Compare and analyze the city and Neighbor Island newspapers.
3. Present a panel on the responsibilities of newspaper readers.
4. Offer a trip to a local newspaper or host an editor or a reporter from a local newspaper.

VIII. THE CRITICAL READER REALIZES THAT JOURNALISM HAS EARNED A PERMANENT PLACE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE.

A. Considerations - The major distinction between journalism and literature is permanence. Literature has truth for readers tomorrow; journalism stresses today. When journalism presents lasting insights into the human condition, it becomes literature.

Here a teacher could examine the writings of a selected group of authors who have in some degree combined journalistic and literary careers: Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, John Hersey, H. L. Mencken, John Steinbeck, Robert Penn Warren. The basic premise here is that the same qualities are found in all good writing.

B. Suggested Sources for Study - Lillian Ross, Reporting; John Updike, Assorted Prose; James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men; Jessamyn West, To See The Dream; J. Thurber, The Years With Ross; and others, including collections of articles on the death of President Kennedy.

USE OF PROPAGANDA

No discussion of the teaching of critical analysis would be complete without mention of propaganda devices, not all of which are as sinister as they are made out to be.

Opinion-moulders court the citizen in his roles as voter and consumer. They come in all shapes and sizes - from the advertising copy-writer to the publicity or public relations man.

The art of manipulating audiences is not always bad. Take, for instance, the publicity man for a hospital drive or for raising money for needy children at Christmas time. In these instances, and many others, he is using his considerable manipulative skills for the benefit of others.

Generally speaking, propaganda is the retailing of a one-sided point of view. In its worst form, it consists of half-truths or outright misrepresentations concerning a person, cause or institution.

Here are some of the most commonly talked-about propaganda devices:

* Bandwagon - "It's common knowledge that our candidate is the best."

* Testimonial - "Johnny Athlete uses only Sharpedge razor blades."

* Just plain folks - "You people remind me of the friendly honest people in my home town."

* Snob appeal - "By appointment to her Majesty."

* Name-calling - "Red", "hippie". "John Bircher", "rebel".

* Glittering generalities - "Absolutely honest", "The American way of life".

* Transfer - Using a picture of the flag to lend patriotism to whatever is being advertised.

* High-sounding claims - "Scientifically proved in our laboratories to be the best on the market."

* Card-staking - Use of half-truths which cannot be denied or whole truths not pertinent to the discussion. Deliberate omissions or incomplete quotations.

* Misuse of statistics - Twisting figures to prove one's point.

* Oversimplication - "There's no money for cancer research as long we're fighting the war."

* Stereotypes - "A typical American family"; "He saves all his money because he's Chinese."

Advertising writers are masters of persuasion. This is their job. However, an advertisement will only keep selling the product or service if each lives up to the claim of the advertising.

Advertisments are a tremendously effective vehicle for the study of persuasion because they are designed and written with that specific aim in mind.