

PBS NewsHour Extra Student Reporting Labs
WORKSHEET A: Fairness Formula = Accuracy

Lesson 1.2: Lesson 1.2: Journalism Ethics, News Judgment and the ABCDEF's of Journalism

Fairness Formula Starts With Accuracy

By Charles Overby

People who talk with the Freedom Forum about news complain that the media can and should do a better job. Most news people tell us the same thing. So what's the problem? A lack of attention to basics. In meetings with small groups around the country, we encouraged people to talk about fairness in the media. The topic quickly became a broad umbrella for complaints in general about the media. Most of the complaints focused on the basics of news gathering and presentation. From those discussions, I have broken down the components of fairness into five basic categories that provide an easy-to-remember formula: **A+B+C+D+E = F (fairness)**.

Accuracy + balance + completeness + detachment + ethics = fairness. There are other ways to state it, but these five categories generally capture most of the complaints we have heard about the need for fairness and improvement in the media. Many editors and news directors may think the components are so basic that their news reports meet those standards easily. But many of the people whom we interviewed do not think so. The public expects all five categories — not two or three — to be applied to all news stories. A quick look at the five categories:

ACCURACY — This is the basic component of fairness, but it generated lots of discussion, especially in the area of corrections. Most newspapers still do a superficial job of correcting their errors. Procedures often are not reader-friendly. The better newspapers run more corrections, not fewer, every day than average newspapers. Unfortunately, it is rare to see corrections on television.

BALANCE — Many in the public think stories reflect definite points of view. Often, the other side is given scant, secondary attention, far down in the news report.

COMPLETENESS — This was the biggest complaint that we heard. Our respondents said reporters fail to tell the whole story because of inexperience, ineptitude, laziness, or lack of space or time. The lack of completeness affects context.

DETACHMENT — A frequent complaint lodged by people who deal with the media was that reporters and editors construct their stories in advance and only want news sources to confirm their preconceived notions. Once the news “hook” is established, there is not much fair and open reporting that follows.

ETHICS — This involves the way reporters and editors pursue stories, the feeling that editorial viewpoints drive news content, placement and headlines. This category also

focuses on the methodology of reporting, ranging from paparazzi photography to insensitivity to victims. These five areas need more discussion in newsrooms. If the public could see improvements and regular explanations about these basic elements, they probably would develop more trust in the mainstream media. This isn't rocket science. Every editor and news director should be capable of identifying ways to improve these deficiencies. For those news executives who think they are doing just fine in all these categories, bring in a dozen readers or viewers and ask them.

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**PBS NewsHour Extra Student Reporting Labs
WORKSHEET B: Exercising Ethics and News Judgment**

Lesson 1.2: Lesson 1.2: Journalism Ethics, News Judgment and the ABCDEF's of Journalism

Instructions: Ask students to locate or bring into class three recent news articles with photographs. They are to exercise their news judgment and find stories they are interested in reading working individually or in groups. Answer the questions below.

1. Is this a story that the public needs to know? Why or why not?
2. Does the information in the story affect a lot of people or only a few?
3. Is this a story about an event that already happened or a future event?
4. Is the photograph needed to tell the story?
5. Does the story contain more rumors than facts?
6. Does the story or photograph invade someone's privacy?
7. Is the story or photograph sensational or does it blow something out of proportion?

**PBS NewsHour Extra Student Reporting Labs
WORKSHEET C: Accuracy, Fairness or Clarity?**

Lesson 1.2: Journalism Ethics, News Judgment and the ABCDEF's of Journalism

Instructions: You are the editor of your school's newspaper. In each of the following scenarios, you are asked to consider a situation. Make a decision about who you will cover, what your angle will be and what you will publish. Will yours be an ethical decision? Include in your answer whether **accuracy**, **fairness** or **clarity** is in question.

1. A student at your school is highlighted on the local TV news. A reporter for the school newspaper uses information from the TV newscast without giving credit to the station. It turns out that several facts from the news report are wrong. **Do you admit the mistake? Do you tell how you got the incorrect information?**

2. A well-known musician is filming an anti-smoking PSA (public service announcement) at your school. The school newspaper photographer gets pictures of him smoking a cigarette during a break. Your photo editor wants to run the photograph with the cutline "Rock Star Filmed Anti-Smoking PSA on Tuesday." **Do you reword the caption?**

3. The owner of a local business has refused to buy an advertisement in your newspaper. He graduated from your school, so you are really ticked that he won't support his alma mater. Later that day, as you look at the sports spread, you notice that the photo of the cross country track event that the sports editor plans to use has a billboard in the background with the local business's name prominently displayed. It would be easy to remove the billboard with photo-editing software. **Do you alter the photograph?**

4. The daughter of the principal at your rival high school has been arrested on drunken driving charges. **Do you report it?**

5. One of your best friends says she saw the new basketball coach smoking marijuana at a rock concert. You tell the newspaper adviser that someone told you about seeing him and that you plan to report it in your concert review. The coach tells you he wasn't even at the concert. **Do you report the allegation?**

**PBS NewsHour Extra Student Reporting Labs
WORKSHEET C: Answer Key**

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1. Yes. It is a core value that journalists are accurate. And reporters should do their own reporting.
2. Yes. The cutline implies the picture was taken during the filming of the PSA. Clarity is important in cutlines as well as in stories.
3. No. Photographs should reflect the truth. Truthfulness includes accuracy of details in the setting in which the action takes place.
4. Perhaps. Why are you reporting this story? If only to cloud the reputation of the rival school's principal, don't publish it. Do you regularly report students who are arrested on DWI charges? Is the daughter 18 or older? Be fair, and treat this story as you would any other story.
5. No. You need facts. Rumors and mistaken identification have no place in a newspaper. By the way, what's this information doing in a concert review?