

Media Literacy: How to Read the News

Understanding and identifying facts, truth, bias,
and fabrication in the news.

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,
or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of
speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to
assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*



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HOW TO READ THE NEWS: BEFORE YOU READ

Online newspaper stories are often formatted like the following example. This worksheet will help you understand how to read all parts of this type of article.

Is the official logo on the browser tab?

Look at the web address, or URL. Is it spelled correctly? Is it the right address?

The screenshot shows a web browser displaying a news article from The New York Times. The browser tab shows the site's logo. The address bar contains the URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/22/us/health-care-bill-republicans.html?_r=0. The article title is "House Republicans, Deeply Divided, Face Painful Choice on Health Vote" by Jennifer Steinhauer, dated March 22, 2017. Below the title is a photograph of a news conference. The article text begins with "WASHINGTON — For the House Republicans who have never served under a Republican president — roughly two-thirds of them — the vote scheduled for Thursday on a measure to replace President Barack Obama's health care law is a legislative fantasia, the culmination of seven years of campaign promises impeded by Mr. Obama's veto pen." Other text includes: "But weeks of back-room machinations to bring a disparate group of lawmakers on board have left many Republicans with an excruciating choice: Pass a bill with an extremely limited constituency that could well wreak havoc with their own voters, and with Republicans' re-election prospects, or vote it down, undermining President Trump's agenda." and "Speaker Paul D. Ryan said Wednesday that he was confident the House would pass the bill. But as of late Wednesday, roughly 30 Republicans had said they either would vote against the measure or had not made up their

Who is the author? Do they have a reputation for truth and neutrality? Does the author have a bio you can read? Try looking the author up on search engines.

Read the title. How does it make you feel? Is it meant to evoke a strong emotion? If so, that is probably evidence of bias. Does it have excessive punctuation? If so, it may have low quality standards. Does it make extraordinary claims about "secrets"? If so, the author may be speculating.

TIPS:

- Before you begin reading the story, look for signs that the website is really the official site for the news source.
- Read the title for signs of bias, speculation, and quality. Learn to watch out for code words chosen to appeal to the emotions of specific groups.

HOW TO READ THE NEWS: The Body of the Article

The image shows a screenshot of a web browser displaying a New York Times article. The browser's address bar shows the URL: "House Republicans, Deeply Divided, Face Painful Choice on Health Vote - The New York Times". The article title is "House Republicans, Deeply Divided, Face Painful Choice on Health Vote". The main text of the article is as follows:

WASHINGTON — For the House Republicans who have never served under a Republican president — roughly two-thirds of them — the vote scheduled for Thursday on a measure to replace President Barack Obama's health care law is legislative fantasia, the culmination of seven years of campaign promises impeded by Mr. Obama's veto pen.

But weeks of back-room machinations to bring a disparate group of lawmakers on board have left many Republicans with an excruciating choice: Pass a bill with an extremely limited constituency that could well wreak havoc with their own voters, and with Republicans' re-election prospects, or vote it down, undermining President Trump's agenda.

Speaker Paul D. Ryan said Wednesday that he was confident the House would pass the bill. But as of late Wednesday, roughly 30 Republicans had said they either would vote against the measure or had not made up their minds. That left the bill's sponsors short of the 216 votes needed, and on Wednesday night Mr. Ryan scheduled a meeting in the Capitol to try to win over skeptics.

If House Republicans reject the measure, the working relationship between the White House and Republican leaders in Congress, still in its infancy, will suffer a powerful blow. In Washington, failure often begets more failure, as opposition forces strengthen, alliances fragment and the thin foam of bipartisanship evaporates.

Four red callout boxes with arrows pointing to specific text in the article:

- Box 1 (top left):** "What do these words tell you about the author's opinion?" (Arrows point to "legislative fantasia" and "campaign promises impeded by Mr. Obama's veto pen.")
- Box 2 (middle right):** "Identify which information is about current events and what is background information about past events." (Arrows point to "WASHINGTON —" and "the vote scheduled for Thursday")
- Box 3 (bottom right):** "Who is the article about? If you don't know who these people or groups are, look them up in encyclopedias or other trustworthy sources." (Arrows point to "Speaker Paul D. Ryan" and "roughly 30 Republicans")
- Box 4 (bottom center):** "Is this a fact or an opinion?" (Arrows point to "In Washington, failure often begets more failure, as opposition forces strengthen, alliances fragment and the thin foam of bipartisanship evaporates.")

TIPS:

- The first few paragraphs should contain the most important information in the story, read them carefully to ensure you understand.
- Use a dictionary to look up words if you are not certain of their meaning.
- Can you explain what the article is saying to someone else without adding your own opinion? If yes, this is a good sign you understand the article. Doing this will help you practice taking in all the information before forming an opinion.
- You should be able to identify within a few paragraphs whether the article is an opinion piece.

HOW TO READ THE NEWS: The Body of the Article

Does the article name its sources or refer to “unnamed” or confidential sources? If named, are the sources credible? Are they qualified to speak about the topic?

“How do we have any momentum to do anything else?” asked Representative Richard Hudson, Republican of North Carolina. “Without this bill, I don’t know how you do tax reform,” he said. If the bill fails, “it’s going to have negative repercussions for all of us.”

Mr. Trump, a man who rushes to hang his name in gold anywhere he can, has rejected the nickname that some have given the House bill: Trumpcare.

But he has begun a last-minute campaign to both sweet talk and vaguely threaten fellow Republicans into supporting the leadership’s hastily written bill, though the measure, which would replace the Affordable Care Act’s health insurance mandate and generous subsidies with tax credits to buy insurance, has been criticized by the right and the left.

Mr. Trump met with a group of the most conservative House members at the White House on Wednesday, and Republican leaders are depending on him to finish the job. Indeed, this week many Republicans have begun to acquiesce to his and the House leadership’s desires, accepting that the bill, however flawed, is the best they are going to get.

At least for now, though, too many have not.

“The bill maintains Obamacare’s overall structure and approach, an approach that cements the federal government’s role in health insurance,” said Representative Rick Crawford, Republican of Arkansas, an opponent of the bill who represents the concerns of the conservatives.

This clause is based on facts, but expresses an opinion. Is it relevant to the current events being discussed? Will readers answer the relevance question based on their own political beliefs, or something else?

How do these phrases change the meaning of this paragraph? How do they shape readers’ perceptions.

Name _____

Date _____

HOW TO READ THE NEWS: After-reading Analysis: Accuracy and Bias Worksheet

1. What is the title of the article? Does the title give you a strong feeling? Explain.

2. Do you see the word "opinion" anywhere? If so circle it or explain where.

3. What is the name of the publication?

4. What city is the publication based in? How do you know?

5. Who owns the publication? How do you know?

6. What is the date of the article? Circle it in the article or explain where it is.

7. Where was the article written? Circle or explain where you found this.

8. Verify the name of the publication is spelled correctly.

9. Is the publication's logo the correct logo? Does it match the logo on the official site?



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HOW TO READ THE NEWS: After-reading Analysis: Accuracy and Bias Worksheet

10. Is the author of the article listed? Is there a biography of the author available online? Write the author's name below and explain any biases or conflicts of interest they might have based on their bio.

11. What is the topic of the article?

12. Are there other articles online about this topic? If there are, do the other articles have similar headlines and say the same thing about the topic? If not, what does that say about the accuracy of this article?

13. Is this breaking news that was written in the last few hours?

14. Look at the article's web address, or URL. If you clicked on the link from social media, did the publication's name change? Is the publication's name spelled correctly? Is it a .com, .info, or some other kind of web address?



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HOW TO READ THE NEWS: After-reading Analysis: Vocabulary

Draw a line from each word on the left to the best definition that matches it on the right.

bias

media

article

editorial

reporter

opinion

fake news

editorial board

satire

- a type of news story that takes a position
- a hoax to deliberately spread incorrect information for financial or political gain
- the group of people who write opinion pieces for a newspaper
- a type of story that uses humor, especially sarcasm, to expose and discredit others
- a piece of writing about a particular subject or topic
- organizations that produce news
- a belief or judgment about a topic
- a person who writes news stories or appears on camera
- to favor some ideas or people over others

Choose from the following words to fill in the blanks and complete the sentences below:

advertisement

fair

reactionary

sponsored content

radical

liberal

neutral

conservative

A _____ is someone who believes in established and traditional practices in politics and society.

It is clear that this newspaper is _____ because it is always advocating for an active government role in social change.

The moderates within the party tried to distance themselves with the extreme stances of the _____ wing of their party.

My grandpa always gets fooled by _____. He thinks it's an actual news story and doesn't realize it's just another form of an _____ for a company trying to sell him something.

I like reading news from this website because they do not take a position on events, but stay _____ instead. I always feel like their coverage is _____ because they cover all sides of a story.



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HOW TO READ THE NEWS: After-reading Analysis: Does it Pass or Fail?

Analyze the article by giving it a grade on the following criteria:

1. **Use of facts.** Did the article provide objective facts? Were the facts provided without commentary by the author? (0-10 points total: 0 pts = no facts at all, 5 pts = minimal facts with some commentary, 10 pts = lots of relevant facts provided without commentary)

_____ points

2. **Sources.** Did the article use a variety of sources with different perspectives on its topic? Were the sources named? (0-10 points total: 0 pts = the article did not use any sources or only used anonymous sources, 5 pts = some use of sources, but they all were on the same side, 10 pts = the article used lots of sources from different viewpoints)

_____ points

3. **Transparency.** Was the article written in such a way that you could fact check any claims it made? Are any authors named? Can you find a biography about the author? Is there contact information for the author or the news organization? (0-10 points total: 0 pts = you cannot verify the information through other sources, 5 pts = minimal facts with some commentary, 10 pts = lots of relevant facts provided without commentary)

_____ points

4. **Neutrality.** Did the article convey the information about events with or without opinions of the author and the news organization? (0-10 points total: 0 pts = very biased, 5 pts = clear bias with some effort to show the other side, 10 pts = completely neutral)

_____ points

5. **Overall Accuracy and Quality.** Were the facts used verifiable and true? Were there misspellings or grammatical errors? Was this an article you would share with all of your friends, or only those who thought a certain way? Was it good? (0-10 points total: 0 pts = terrible, 5 pts = pretty bad, but it was not all bad, 10 pts = excellent)

_____ points

Final Grade: _____ points out of 50.

0-29 points = F 30-34 points = D 35-39 points = C 40-44 points = B 45-50 points = A

What do you think? Was this article "fake news"? Circle one: YES / NO

Whether or not this article was "fake news," was it biased? Circle one: YES / NO

Explain your answers below:



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HOW TO READ THE NEWS: After-reading Analysis: Digging Deeper

Now that you have finished reading the excerpts from this article, it is time to do some deep thinking. As you answer the following questions, refer back to the article and re-read it as much as necessary.

1. Was the article fair? Was the article neutral? Is there a difference between fair and neutral when it comes to news stories? Support your answer with examples from the article.

2. Find some examples where the author used *adjectives* or *adverbs* to change the meaning of sentences that conveyed facts so that those sentences also conveyed the author's opinions. Is this ethical? Explain.



Name _____

Date _____

**HOW TO READ THE NEWS:
After-reading Analysis: Digging Deeper**

Now that you have finished reading the excerpts from this article, it is time to do some deep thinking. As you answer the following questions, refer back to the article and re-read it as much as necessary.

- 3. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Should individuals, private enterprise, or the government assume the burden of finding the truth in the modern media environment? Is there a role in combatting misinformation and evaluating the news for all three? How should individuals, businesses, and the government do this? Use examples and explain your position.



Name _____

Date _____

HOW TO READ THE NEWS: After-reading Analysis: Digging Deeper

Now that you have finished reading the excerpts from this article, it is time to do some deep thinking. As you answer the following questions, refer back to the article and re-read it as much as necessary.

4. Is it ever okay for a story or article to be biased? If so, in what cases or circumstances is this okay? If you are reading a biased article how can you use that to help you find the truth? Explain your answers.



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HOW TO READ THE NEWS:

Take it with you: Media Analysis Cheatsheet

Anytime you read an article online, in a newspaper, or in a weekly news magazine, or even when reading books or talking about current events, keep the following questions and principles in mind.

Accuracy:

- **Who is the publisher?** Is the publisher's contact information listed? Is the article written to look like it's by one publication even though it's not? Check the spelling and the logo and make sure this is the company that it claims to be and that it produces news articles based on facts, rather than stories made up to sell advertising space.
- **Can you verify the story?** Compare it to stories in other publications, are they reporting the same basic facts? If no one else is reporting on this story it could be fabricated. Check back in a few hours or a few days to see if other organizations pick up the story.
- **Spot the facts and check them.** Don't assume everything is correct. Often you can look up things like census data, jobs reports, and statistics about unemployment, inflation, and more on government websites.

Bias:

- **Beware of sensational titles.** If the title evokes a strong emotional response, or seems like it makes the article prove that one side is right or wrong, then the article may be biased.
- **Search the publication's record for bias on search engines.** You can try searching things like "is [publication name] a conservative newspaper" or "does [publication name] have a liberal bias." Remember that the articles that you read when you search these things may also be biased for or against those publications.
- **Read widely, across the bias spectrum.** You may not be able to avoid biased sources, but you can decide to read sources with different biases. If you find yourself always agreeing with liberal viewpoints, try reading some conservative viewpoints and vice versa. Try to understand other perspectives. What are the less common viewpoints?
- **Read sources from different geographic areas.** Are the Canadian press writing the same things about an event as American sources? Has a newspaper based in Texas written about the new policy in California? Try looking at news sources from other continents, or even written in other languages, to broaden your perspective.
- **Check back in with the story later.** Sometimes the facts take time to come to light. In a rush to meet deadlines, journalists may make unintentional errors or pass along bad information that was given to them. By following a story for a few days, weeks, or months you can often see it change. Don't rush to judgment, take your time to form an opinion.



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