



LESSON 4:

Franklin's Fair Hand American Journalism

OVERVIEW

Arriving in Philadelphia in 1723, Franklin worked to establish himself as a printer. In printing, Franklin found a way to “do well by doing good;” he used his publications to communicate his ideas and to promote open and spirited dialogue on the pressing issues of the day. As an early pioneer of the newspaper industry, Franklin held that publishers were ethically bound to avoid injury to others by publishing “scurrilous and defamatory” material. He also believed that the public good was better served if the newspaper allowed for both sides of the story to be aired: “When Truth and Error have fair play,” he wrote, “the former is always an overmatch for the latter.”

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Learn about principles of journalism that Franklin developed and practiced as a printer and publisher.
- Weigh hypothetical editorial decisions in the context of Franklin’s journalistic principles and the First Amendment.
- Investigate contemporary editorial decisions.

TIME

This lesson and activity require approximately two classes. Additional time as needed for class presentations.

MATERIALS

- Selected Franklin quotes (attached)

McREL STANDARDS

Language Arts

Standard 1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Standard 6. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

History Understanding

Standard 2. Understands historical perspective

United States History

Standard 8. Understands government institutions created by the Revolution and altered by the Constitution

LESSON AND ACTIVITY

1. Reading and Discussion

Introduce the First Amendment to the Constitution:

“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.”

2. Lead a brief discussion on the role of free press in a democratic society by asking students:
 - What is a free press?
 - Why is it important?
 - Should there be limits on freedom of the press? Why or why not?
 - What type of responsibilities do rights like free speech and free press come with?
3. Guide the discussion to the responsibilities of a newspaper or other media in a society that supports political freedoms like free press.
 - How much responsibility do newspapers have to report fairly and truthfully?
 - How much of an obligation do newspapers have to cover all sides of a story?
 - Should newspapers check their information and sources? Why or why not?
 - How could publishing false information, rumors, and hearsay affect a democratic society?

4. Group Work

Establish groups of three to five students and distribute one of the attached Franklin quotes to each group. The quotes address issues of responsible journalism and a free press. The groups are asked to read, discuss, and interpret their assigned quote. Their end product is a one-sentence interpretation of the quote on which all the group members agree.

In preparation for the next class, the teacher lists all the one-sentence interpretations of the Franklin quotes on a single sheet and adds the text of the First Amendment. The handout is titled: "Editorial Guidelines."

5. Students return to their groups and teacher distributes the "Editorial Guidelines" handout. With this material in hand, the teacher explains that each group now constitutes an editorial board for a newspaper publication. Teacher gives each group an envelope with the same contents: a list of potential stories for their papers to print. Each group must discuss whether or not to print the story using the "Editorial Guidelines" handout as their reference point.

Sample stories for group review:

- A reporter, citing an anonymous source, writes a story stating that the Vice President of the United States was expelled from school at age 16 for cheating on an exam.
- A student reporter overhears members of the school football team talking about a hazing ritual that all new team members must undergo before the first game of the season. When questioned by the reporter, both the coach and the team members deny its existence.
- A white supremacist group is beginning its tour of the Midwest and is planning to march on Main Street in your town this Saturday afternoon.
- The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has drafted plans, not yet made public, to reroute its nuclear waste shipments. The plan calls for NRC trucks to begin trucking nuclear waste through your city between 2 and 4 a.m. every Tuesday.
- The manager of a local supermarket alleges that his competitor is selling non-organic produce as organic.
- The President of the United States announced a new energy policy concerning drilling for oil in Alaska.
- The governor of your state has issued a press release detailing her accomplishments as governor. She is running for re-election.

- The district attorney is building a case against a jailed immigrant accused of a terrorist plot in your city. The trial is set for next month.

The groups report back to the class on which stories they will pursue for publication and explain their reasons. Is the story hearsay, gossip, and rumor? Could it destroy a person's career or family? Could a story affect the outcome of a trial? The class discusses the decisions of various editorial boards.

6. Activity/Presentations

Ask students to select an article from a local or national publication and argue whether or not the publication of the article adheres to Franklin's standards. Students should share their selections and present their positions to the class. Encourage the students to use quotes from the articles to support their positions. This activity may be performed in their groups as well.

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed on the quality of their class participation, quality of their group work, and the presentations of arguments to the class. An established rubric may be used to evaluate the presentations.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Students research and write a brief summary of one of the earliest cases on free press: the 1735 trial of John Peter Zenger, a printer imprisoned for publishing a story criticizing the royal governor of New York.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- Adler, David A. *B. Franklin, Printer*. (New York: Holiday House, 2001).
- Flink, Stanley E. *Sentinel Under Siege: The Triumphs and Troubles of America's Free Press*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).
- Humphrey, Carol Sue. *The Press and the Young Republic*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996).

Franklin Quotes on Journalism and a Free Press

1. There would be very little printed if publishers produced only things that offended nobody...Printers are educated in the belief that when men differ in opinion, both sides ought equally to have the advantage of being heard by the public, and that when Truth and Error have fair play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter.

Source: *Apology for Printers*, printed in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 10, 1731 [*Franklin Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1987).]

2. To determine whether I should publish it or not, I went home in the evening, purchased a two-penny loaf at the bakers'. And with water from the pump made supper; I then wrapped myself up in my great-coat, and laid down on the floor and slept till morning, when, on another loaf and a mug of water, I made my breakfast. From this regimen I feel no inconvenience whatever. Finding I can live in this manner, I have formed a determination never to prostitute my press to the purposes of corruption and abuse of this kind for the sake of gaining a more comfortable subsistence.

Available at http://ftrain.com/ben_franklin_business_ethics.html

Source: according to Isaiah Thomas's history of printing in America; cited in Ronald W. Clark, *Benjamin Franklin, a Biography*. Da Capo Press, 1983.

3. I myself have constantly refused to print anything that might countenance vice or promote immorality, though...I might have got much money. I have also always refused to print such things as might do real injury to any person.

4. It is unreasonable to imagine that printers approve of everything they print. It is likewise unreasonable what some assert, that printers ought not to print anything but what they approve; since...an end would thereby be put to free writing, and the world would afterwards have nothing to read but what happened to be the opinion of printers.

5. If all people of different opinions in this province would engage to give me as much for not printing things they don't like as I could get by printing them, I should probably live a very easy life; and if all printers everywhere were so dealt by, there would be very little printed.

6. [On gossip] It is frequently the means of preventing powerful, politic, ill designing men from growing too popular. All-examining Censure, with her hundred eyes and her thousand tongues, soon discovers and as speedily divulges in all quarters every last crime or foible that is part of their true character. This clips the wings of their ambition.

Source for quotes 3 – 6: Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).