

Setting up and feeding Your Class news blog

A Journalism Lesson Plan

*Produced by Andi Mulshine
for the The Garden State Scholastic Press Association*

This unit introduces students to the treatment of news on the Internet and provides the tools and techniques they will need to operate a successful online news source for their class, grade or school.

Students will be able to:

- identify and access the most popular online news websites;
- assess the quality of news websites and identify the features of successful news websites;
- identify and demonstrate the unique features of online news writing;
- write news stories for publication on an internet news site;
- set up and maintaining an online news publication that carries news and features of interest to teen readers.

Day 1 – Features of an Online News Source

1. Write the following prompt on the board for students to answer for discussion:

What would your favorite news website look like? What news would it have that could prompt you come back every day?

(Some items to discuss: physical appearance; types of stories; types of visual content; kinds of interactive features; styles/categories of writing)

2. Explain that the class will begin the process of building its own online news site for students (eg. a sophomore news site, a senior class site, whatever the teacher/class decides). But first, we should know what a successful news site contains, what keeps people coming back.

- a. Put a news site up on the projector or, if in a computer lab, ask students to visit the New York Times web site (nytimes.com). Allow time to examine different areas of the site. Notice the written news, the photo slideshows, the video content.
- b. Ask the students to discuss what they like and don't like: both visually and in writing content.
- c. Introduce the website eBiz/MBA, with the address of <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/news-websites>. This site contains the top 15 websites for every category of news and entertainment. Direct the students to the right side of the site, to the listing of "Top 15" by type of site. Spend some time examining each listed site's statistics. Notice that Yahoo.com, for instance, gets 70 million unique monthly visitors. Do they agree with the listing of "Top 15" among news sites? Discuss other lists, like top entertainment blogs.
- d. Ask students to begin to identify the features of these sites that make them successful. Steer your discussion to the following "9 Features of a Successful Website," taken from this Creative Commons-licensed site:
Online Journalism Review, <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/wiki/Writing>

1. The shorter, the better: Readers appreciate writers who do not waste their time. Simple, direct language communicates your thoughts more efficiently than your bloated demonstration of all that stuff the rest of us slept through in English class.

2. Active voice: "Do it," don't "will have been done" it. Reserve passive voice for situations where you don't know the subject, such as crime and court reports. But even then, try to cast as much of the action in the active voice as you can.

3. Strong verbs: The best verbs demonstrate action. If you're writing a string of weak linking verbs, think about the action that's happening in your post, then rewrite a new draft using nothing but nouns and verbs in an attempt to better engage your vocabulary.

4. Attribute sources: If you don't tell your readers where you got your information, many of them will assume that you are just making it up. You aren't, are you? Attribution brings you credibility, because readers know that you've got nothing to hide if they want to check you out. **Also, use quotes to build credibility.**

5. Contextual hyperlinking: Online narratives should allow readers to "branch off" and click through to other, more detailed, supporting content, depending upon a reader's level of interest. Almost all journalism refers to other sources, but online, a writer has the ability to link readers directly to those supporting sources. Note the URLs of those sources when reporting, and work those into your piece with contextual hyperlinks. Try to link those URLs to the relevant proper names, keywords and phrases, rather than to the URLs themselves written out, or worse, the over-used "click here."

6. Use formatting: Break up that boring mass of gray type by using:

- lists
- bold headers
- blockquotes
- and other handy HTML formatting tricks.

7. One topic per URL: If you are using a contextual ad system on your site, such as Google's AdSense, help the program select the most appropriate ads for your page by limiting each URL to a single topic. Don't write "catch-all" blog entries or discussions covering a wide range of subjects. Build those out on their own, separate URLs and you'll get better targeted ads, and better ad click-through rates.

8. Easy to read: No block of text more than five lines on the screen.

9. Spell check: With both an automatic checker and a manual re-read. *Beacause no won wants to look like an idiot. ;-)*

3. Homework: Ask students to write a short essay explaining what type of news they would like to report on, and why they are the best for the job. They should cite their experience in related endeavors, talents that would make them a right person for the job. Their options include news events, club meeting coverage, feature stories, opinion columns, reviews, editorial cartoons, comic strips, music scene, sports and photography.

Before the next class: set up a class blog or website. Give it a generic title and place one story on the site, about 200 words long. Also, be sure to place content on the "About Us" page.

Sample content for "About Us:"

Welcome to SophServCHS, the digital home of student journalism at Communications High School in Monmouth County, New Jersey.

Student journalists share their work here. They also share the work of professional journalists, who have much to teach cub reporters and photographers. The objective is to learn what it takes to be a thorough and talented communicator of true stories.

Contact Journalism teacher Andi Mulshine at andimulshine@chs.mcvsd.org with questions or suggestions. Thanks for visiting.

(The next section can be added later if you must still make beat assignments, or you could list the beats only:)

These news beats are covered by the following reporters:

Sophomore Council – Sarah Gleason, Katie Reulbach

Student Government Association – Morgan Hennessy

School Events – Sarah Dean

Freshman Feature – Jacob Pirogovsky

Student Life – Norah Gunn, Lillie Karch, Emily LaPersonne, Emily Marr, Gia Reilly

Major School Clubs:

Drama Club – Andi Leibowitz, George Zirkel

Broadcast Club – Jess DelVirginia, Jen Coulter

Cultural Communication Club – Sarah Bertekap, Christian Kelly

Feature Beats:

Surf, Travel – Mike Magovern

Local Music Scene – Micheal Smeaton

Technology – Owen Grove, Christian Kelly

Opinion

Opinion Columnists – Sarah Bertekap, Kiera Brennan, Adam Dorfman, Danielle Siminerio

Editorial Cartoonists – Kevin Erskine, Joy Lee

Comics – Jack Bramhall, Dave Miele, Claire Reyes

Entertainment Reviews – Katie Rowe, Sam Keller, Carrie Blodi

Music Reviews – Mike DeSocio, Matt Baker, Francesca Cocchi

Local Sports – Brian Principe, Stephen Turner, Blake Stimpson, Brian Perkins

Photography – Alexandra Rodriguez, Mike DeSocio

ALSO BEFORE CLASS: set up a Word doc with the above beats, in a list, that you will use on Day 2 to assign beats.

Day 2 – Starting the Class News site

1. Write the following prompt on the board for students to answer for discussion:

Can you remember the features of a successful news site, from yesterday's discussion?

List as many as you can recall.

2. Discuss answers, making sure to hit on the **“9 features of a successful news site,”** discussed on Day 1. They are: the shorter the better; active voice; strong verbs; attribute sources; contextual hyperlinks; use formatting to break up gray type; one topic per URL; make it easy to read; use spell check.
3. On the projector – Introduce the news website/blog that you set up before class. Demonstrate how students will access the back of the site (the dashboard), to upload their stories and photos. Explain that each student will be able to access the site. They will have limited privileges, depending on how the site is set up. If it is a WordPress site, you will need their e-mail addresses to set up their access, so distribute a sheet on which they will write their addresses.
4. Choose beats – put the Word doc up on the screen that lists the beats and discuss who will work each beat.
 - a. Explain that students will work each beat for two to three weeks, then switch to another beat.
 - b. Each student is responsible for submitting one story per week from their beat, such as each Wednesday, or each Thursday...
 - c. The story will be about 200 words long, and will follow the rules outlined in the **“9 Features of a successful news site.”**
 - d. The stories will conform to AP Style and the rules for writing news stories, learned earlier in the course.
 - e. All stories must have a photo or other art to accompany them on the website.
5. Visit other student websites, through the GSSPA's Student Center. Critique the sites as a class, keeping the “9 Features” in mind as you conduct your reviews.

ASSESSMENT: grading of their news stories, cartoons and photos.

“A Web site is like a diner. It has a core arsenal of dishes that justify its existence, but it also must have a regularly changing specials menu that keeps its regular customers coming back for more. The assumption ... is that a Web citizen ... visits the site on a weekly, if not daily, basis.”

*Gerald M. O'Connell, from “A New Pitch”
Internet World, May 1994 p. 56.*