Reading Newspapers: Factual Reporting [1]

A learner's guide introduces students to the use of historical newspapers as primary sources and provides key questions for reading them.

Much of what you will likely find in a newspaper will be factual reporting or "news." Factual reporting may appear in several different sections of a newspaper -- national news, international news, local news, sports, and so on. Factual stories can be long or short and can be written about almost any topic imaginable. What makes this kind of reporting special is that it attempts to provide the facts of an event in a fair and unbiased way, allowing the reader to gain information that is untainted by the opinions of the reporter or the newspaper's editorial staff.

Some factual news stories will be brief and to the point, providing the reader with basic information without detailed background, large numbers of quotations from interested parties, or connections to other key topics. Other stories will be much longer and go into much greater depth -- often these more in-depth stories are called "features." Sometimes a reporter will focus on one topic, individual, or event through a series of features over a space of days or weeks. These feature articles will often explore a topic in tremendous detail, considering several different perspectives and including first-hand accounts and perspectives from a number of people connected to the story.

You may notice that news in historic newspapers is not as current as we would expect from today's newspapers. Many modern American newspapers are published daily, and even events that happened late at night can be printed in the next morning's edition and delivered before dawn. The online version of a newspaper is often almost instantaneous, publishing details about a breaking story as events are still unfolding.

Key questions

Here are some questions that you can consider as you read news stories (factual reporting) in a historic newspaper.

What events does this article describe?

It may be helpful to jot down a summary of the article and make note of any key dates, individuals, organizations, or events that are mentioned.

Where is this article placed in the newspaper? Does its placement reveal anything about the editor's views on its importance?

Typically, one will find reporting on the events that the editor deems most important or of greatest interest to the newspaper's readership on the front page or in the front section of a newspaper. Reporting on special topics such as international news, sports, the arts, and business will appear elsewhere, often in their own designated sections of the newspaper. Historical newspapers often lack the clearly defined sections that you might expect in a modern newspaper, and news stories may be mixed in with other kinds of content or organized in a way that you didn't anticipate. Try to figure out how the editors of the specific newspaper chose to organize the content of each edition and see if you can figure out what that tells you about the relative importance and role of the particular story that you are analyzing.

Who might be interested in this story?

Is this a story that would be of great interest to any reader, or does it have a limited appeal? Is that appeal limited by geography? Age? Personal interests? For example, an article about an event of national importance such as an upcoming presidential election might be of interest to almost any reader in the country, and a human interest story about someone doing something courageous or incredibly generous might have almost universal appeal. But a story about a local school board election is probably only going to interest people within the bounds of that school district who care about local government and the local schools.

Who wrote this story?

Often the name of the reporter who did the research and wrote the story will be listed near the title or at the end of the article. This is called the byline. Be careful, though -- sometimes you'll notice that the reporter will also credit other newspaper personnel who contributed to the article, so it may have been a collaborative effort. Similarly, the newspaper will sometimes list AP or Reuters reports as either the "author" of the article or as a major source for the article. These are news services that allow newspapers to pool their resources and have access to the same stories -- instead of hundreds of newspapers each sending its own reporter to cover an event, all of the newspapers that belong to a given news service will receive the report written by the news service's reporter, allowing each newspaper to focus its own reporters' energies on adding to that story with angles of particular interest to their own unique readership. For example, a North Carolina newspaper might receive a news service report about predicted troop deployments from a news service but add the

perspective of troops at Ft. Bragg to that news service report in order to make it more relevant to local readers.

Sometimes, you may notice that the newspaper article doesn't list any author for the story. In pre-Civil War newspapers, especially, it was common for news stories to be run without an author credit.

Where did the information in the story originate?

Be sure to ask yourself how the author of each story got his or her information. What sources of information do you see discussed in the story? Government records? Research literature? Police reports? Interviews with specific individuals? News service reports?

Do the sources of information for this story seem accurate? Unbiased? Balanced?

A factual account is only as accurate as its sources, so you will want to think critically about the sources that the newspaper reporter used to create each story. Are the sources of information reasonable ones to have chosen for this particular topic? Can you think of other potential sources of information that do not seem to have been consulted? Do you detect any bias in the sources? Do people quoted in the story use words that reveal a specific opinion or attitude about the topic? If you do detect bias, does the story provide an opportunity for people with a different point of view to voice their opinions, too, or does it mostly just tell one side of the story?

What choices did the reporter make in researching and writing this story that might have influenced the resulting article, its point of view, and its tone?

Most modern newspaper reporters strive for journalistic objectivity -- that is, they try to provide factual, fair, and unbiased reports to their readers. But no human being is completely without bias or opinion, and the choices that every researcher and writer makes are bound to affect his or her writing. Try to notice whether there are any clues to the author or editor's views in the story itself.

Would you expect to see more coverage of this topic or related topics in earlier or later editions of the newspaper?

It is often helpful to read issues of a newspaper that were printed before and after the event that you are interested in. Reading earlier newspapers can help you see precursors to an event -- for example, news stories on issues related to race and education might be useful background information to help you understand later stories about Brown v. the Board of Education, and news articles from days, weeks, months, and even years later might help you understand the impact of Brown v. the Board of Education over the long term. By pausing to think about what you might look for in earlier or later editions of the newspaper, you can get a head start on further research.

User Tags:
history [2]
newspapers [3]
North Carolina History [4]
Page [5]
primary sources [6]
reading [7]
Students [8]
Teachers [9]
Creative Commons BY-NC-SA [10]
From:
ANCHOR: A North Carolina History Online Resource [11]
Authors:
Walbert, Kathryn [12]
Copyright Date:
2008

3 January 2018 | Walbert, Kathryn

Source URL:https://ncpedia.org/anchor/reading-newspapers-factual

Links
[1] https://ncpedia.org/anchor/reading-newspapers-factual [2] https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/history [3] https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/newspapers [4] https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/north-carolina-6 [5] https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/page [6] https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/primary-sources [7] https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/reading [8] https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/students [9] https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/teachers [10] https://ncpedia.org/category/user-tags/creative-commons [11] https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/anchor-north [12] https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/walbert-kathryn-0