
MY WORLD LESSON #6

What's the Source?

Overview

Students investigate the differences between primary and secondary sources, comparing the characteristics of information obtained from each type. Students learn about the preparation journalists must undertake to ask effective interview questions, penetrate a subject's complexities, and verify the accuracy of a source's account. Students also learn about the ground rules between journalists and their sources. They come to realize that good journalists must check their sources to be sure that the information they provide is reliable.

Target audience: English and Language Arts, Social Studies, Media Studies. Ages 11–14.

Class time: 45-60 minutes

Student handouts: "What's the Source?" Informational article, Guided practice, Check Your Media Literacy Assessment.

Materials: Computer or tablet with internet connection.

Class structure and pacing

1. 5 minutes Class warm-up activity
2. 15 minutes Informational article: "What's the Source?"
3. 10 minutes *My World* video "Who's Your Source?"
4. 5 minutes Whole-class discussion of focus questions
5. 10 minutes Guided Practice
6. 10 minutes Media Literacy Assessment

Procedure

1. Begin class with a brief warm-up activity.
 - **Have students work in pairs. Partners should ask each other questions about events that occurred the day before, switching the interviewer role so each can explore her/his partner's responses. Have each student attempt to summarize their partner's responses in a single sentence. You might want to jot down and display example questions. Questions might include:**
 - What was the most interesting event that occurred yesterday?
 - Why did you find it interesting?
 - Who was involved? What happened? Where did it happen? When?
 - How can you find out more about the event?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using people as sources.

Examine the purposes of different types of interview styles and questions.

Assess the effectiveness of different interviews seen in a weekly broadcast.

LESSON VOCABULARY

attribution *n.* the act of crediting a source by name

corroboration *n.* evidence that supports a statement or finding

credibility *n.* the quality of being trustworthy or believable

off the record *adv.* a way of providing information that cannot be attributed to the interviewee or used in a news story

on the record *adv.* a way of providing information that can be attributed to the interviewee by name

primary source *n.* first-hand accounts of an event provided by a person directly connected to it

reprisal *n.* retaliation, revenge

secondary source *n.* an account or interpretation of an event by someone who was not there

whistle-blower *n.* a person, generally within an organization, who informs on another or publicly reveals wrongdoing, usually within the organization

- **Explain that by the end of this lesson, students will be able to:**
 - Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using people as sources.
 - Examine the purposes of different types of interview styles and questions.
 - Assess the effectiveness of different interviews seen in a weekly broadcast.

2. Introduce key interview skills and explore how journalists analyze and evaluate information from primary sources by having students read the informational article, “What’s the Source?” Instructional options include.

- **Read as a class. Stop after each section to discuss key concepts, such as:**

- Widely accepted journalistic practices for interviewing primary sources.
- Steps to take to verifying information provided by primary sources.
- Purposes of different interview techniques and styles.

- **Read the article in groups and discuss the question, “What makes a good primary source?”**

3. Present the *My World* video segment, “Who’s Your Source?” to introduce students to a journalist’s use of primary sources.

- **Before screening, write these questions on the board. Ask students to take notes that answer them.**

- What are two types of sources a journalist might use for a news story?
- In what ways might an eyewitness account be valuable to a journalist?
- What secondary sources might be more reliable than a primary source?
- How can a journalist verify details provided by a primary source?

- **Ask students to share their observations.**

4. Guide students’ analysis of the topics and concepts in the video and article through whole-class or small-group discussion of focus questions.

- **Ask students:**

- Why are interviews with primary sources valuable to a journalist?
- What can a journalist do to verify information from a primary source?
- Why is the use of multiple sources important to building a factually reliable story?
- Why might it be important for a journalist or news organization to protect a primary source’s identity?

 **TIPS FROM**

 **Microsoft Education**

Create engaging learning experiences tied to this Lesson with the following free Microsoft Education tools:

Utilize Flipgrid with this Lesson

Guide students’ analysis of new sources shared in the video and article by posting focus questions in Flipgrid for students to share individually or in small groups. Continue the conversation on [Flipgrid!](#)

Facilitate collaborative learning

Copy the guided practice into OneNote Class Notebook where students can apply their learning while collaborating in teams to identify and evaluate sources. Students can copy articles, videos, links etc. directly into OneNote alongside their Lesson handout. Free education collaboration tools are at your fingertips with [Office 365](#).

5. Provide an opportunity for students to apply what they have learned in Guided Practice by identifying and evaluating sources.

- **Have students work individually to list three reliable secondary sources.**

- **In groups or pairs, ask students to discuss the importance of primary sources to good journalism.**

- **Direct students to complete the Guided Practice handout using what they have learned from the lesson.**

6. Assess what students have learned and provide a chance to express their views about the process of interviewing primary sources and evaluating the information they provide.

- **Direct students to complete the assessment handout.**

- **Allow students to consult their notes if needed for short answers.**

Extend and connect

ELEMENTARY/PRIMARY

(ages 6–10)

Present a situation in which witnesses have different views of an event. For example, if two students get into an argument on the playground, each may think the other caused the argument. Witnesses may not agree who is to blame. Discuss questions such as: Why would each student blame the other? How do you decide who is to blame? Why would witnesses have different views of what happened? (*Prompt: Some witnesses may not have seen the entire interaction; some may not have been close or had a clear view; some might be friends with one of the students.*) Take a class opinion poll about the accuracy of witnesses: *Are the reports of eyewitnesses usually accurate?*

HIGH SCHOOL/SECONDARY

(ages 15–18)

Present a local television eyewitness news report, or have students download one from the internet. Discuss the reporter's use of primary sources. Ask students: What was the story about? Where did the journalist go to find primary sources? What kinds of sources were interviewed? What questions were asked? Have students provide examples of other primary sources they have seen in television news reports. Discuss factors that might affect the reliability of the primary sources identified.

EDUCATION STANDARDS

Media Literacy

ISTE 2c Students demonstrate an understanding of and respect for the rights and obligations of using and sharing intellectual property.

ISTE 3b Students evaluate the accuracy, perspective, credibility and relevance of information, media, data or other resources.

ISTE 3d Students build knowledge by actively exploring real-world issues and problems, developing ideas and theories and pursuing answers and solutions.

CCSS English and Language Arts Reading Informational Texts

RI.6.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RI.7.3 Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events).

RI.8.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to supporting ideas; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS Social Studies

RH.6-8.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

RH.6-8.9 Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

RH.9-10.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

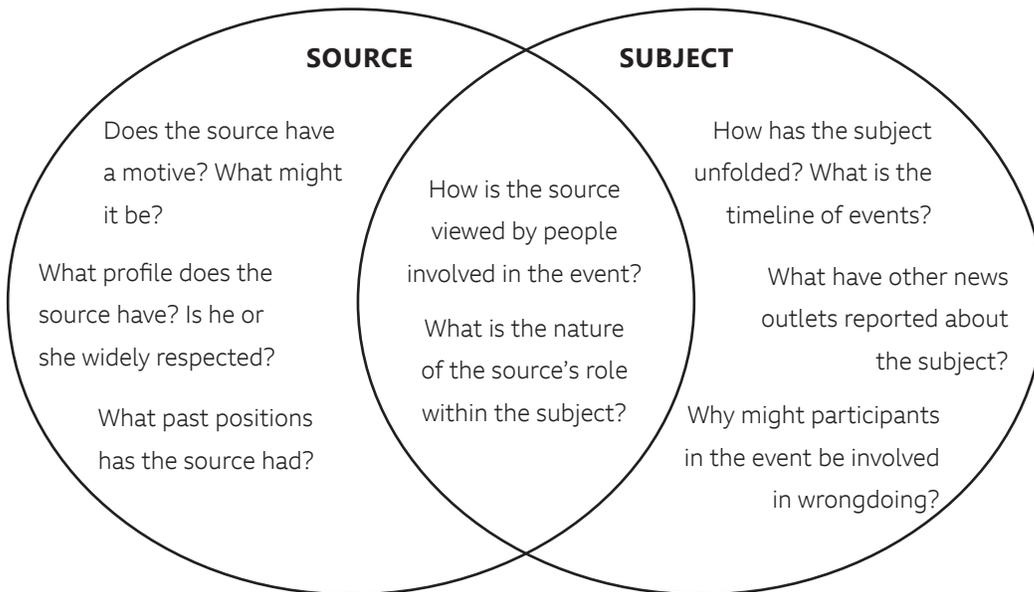
What's the Source?

News writers need sources as people need food. In well-known news outlets, editors assign stories to writers based on the writer's experience in a subject, like politics, crime, or science. Once a story idea has been identified, the writer researches it through sources. In journalism, a source is a person, publication, document, or record that provides information about a news item. A journalist uses information from **sources** to lay the foundation of a story.

What Sources Do Journalists Use? There are two categories of sources: primary and secondary. **Primary sources** are participants in or eyewitnesses to an event. Sometimes they agree to be interviewed. Other times, journalists may uncover their words from email or other communications. In either case, primary sources have the force of immediacy or proximity to the events. **Secondary sources**—like informational records, studies, press releases, and experts—can carry authority and insight. They may offer second-hand knowledge, supporting facts, or analysis. The citation or identification of sources gives a story authority.

<p>Sources give journalists the foundation of their news stories: facts, insights, and informed opinions. Sources also supply stories with key elements of the genre: direct quotations and clear citations.</p>			
COMMON PRIMARY SOURCES		COMMON SECONDARY SOURCES	
Source Type	Example Use in a News Story	Source Type	Example Use in a News Story
participant interview	According to Ms. Steppe, "Most of us were stunned the CFO would make such a bigoted statement."	person: expert (insight, analysis, informed opinion)	Irv Beame, a structural engineer at BLD, noted that the bolts were "off-market" and "way below" standard.
participant email	In an email to Senator Salazar on November 6, Mr. Carter wrote, "The committee is open to input from your company on this bill."	published study (scientific theory based on facts)	A United Nations study predicts that even with a dramatic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, ocean levels will rise 2–3-feet (30–60 cm) by the year 2100.
eyewitness account	May Black, a manager at Fed Ex, was on her way to work. "I heard a cracking sound," she said, "Then the bridge crashed to the road below."	public records (facts)	Birth records from the Jamaican Registrar General's Department (RGD) reveal that Mr. Tosh was born in 1949 in Kingston.

How Do Journalists Use Human Sources? Good journalists ask relevant questions that draw out honest responses. They do their homework in advance. Before interviewing, they must research their source and the subjects of their story. Some of their driving questions will overlap, as this Venn diagram shows.



As the diagram shows, journalists should know a good deal about their subjects. In most larger news outlets, journalists have “beats,” a subject area in which they have deep background knowledge. A political reporter on the UK’s Parliament beat, for example, will know its members and conflicts. He/she also will have gathered reliable human sources, both open and secret.

But how do journalists know their human sources are honest and not driven purely by personal advancement or bias? Well-regarded news outlets usually do not run a high-profile story without getting **corroboration**. Finding another source that verifies the information, whether by research or from another well-placed person, helps journalists avoid distributing misinformation.

Are There Rules for Interviewing Sources? The use of human sources—especially in investigative journalism—rests on basic ground rules. Most importantly, journalists should represent the source’s words and views accurately and fairly. Another ground rule is protecting the source. Human sources for investigative stories help journalists uncover misdeeds of powerful people in government, corporations, and other organizations. In coming forward, these **whistle-blowers**

LESSON VOCABULARY

attribution *n.* the act of crediting a source by name

corroboration *n.* evidence that supports a statement or finding

credibility *n.* the quality of being trustworthy or believable

off the record *adv.* a way or providing information that cannot be attributed to the interviewee or used in a news story

on the record *adv.* a way of providing information that can be attributed to the interviewee by name

primary source *n.* first-hand accounts of an event provided by a person directly connected to it

reprisal *n.* retaliation, revenge

secondary source *n.* an account or interpretation of an event by someone who was not there

whistle-blower *n.* a person, generally within an organization, who informs on another or publicly reveals wrongdoing, usually within the organization

often risk **reprisal**. If exposed, they can lose their jobs, end up in expensive lawsuits, and face threats of physical harm. In such cases, by arrangement with their sources, journalists cite them anonymously.

Whenever possible, journalists and their news outlets use named sources—**on the record**. Providing an **attribution** by citing a source’s name boosts the **credibility** of the information. But in matters of corruption by powerful people, naming sources opens them up to danger. In fact, in some cases, sources will not only keep their name hidden, but also, will choose to speak **off the record**. Meanwhile, the laws of democratic countries prevent authorities from forcing journalists to reveal the identity of their unnamed sources.

Use of Source	Meaning in Journalism
on the record	The reporter can quote the information and name the source.
anonymous	The reporter can use the information but not the name of the source.
off the record	The reporter cannot use the information and cannot name the source.

What is the Big Idea About Sources? Not all journalism involves whistle-blowers and dramatic investigations. Think, for instance, of hard news stories on climate change, political protests, or natural disasters. Also, consider soft human-interest pieces or stories about celebrities, digital products, or movies.

All stories, hard or soft, may use facts and opinions from secondary sources. Even investigative pieces, with their key primary sources, may leverage secondary sources, too. One type is not necessarily better than the other. Both kinds of sources underpin good journalism—as long as they are informative and credible.

Directions: Identify an idea for a news story that you would like to explore. What would you like to find out? Who is a primary source that you might consider interviewing for your story? Why do you think this person might be a good source of information? What are some key questions you would ask this source? (The first row provides sample answers.)

My News Story Idea:

WHO is a possible primary source?	WHY might this person be a good source?	WHAT do I want to find out from this person?	WHAT key questions can I begin the interview with?
<i>Local city council member</i>	<i>He/she knows about funding for community centers.</i>	<i>How the recent decision about funding a new community center came about.</i>	<i>How many members of the city council voted for funding a new community center? How did you vote? What were the main reasons for your vote?</i>

1. What distinguishes a primary news source from a secondary news source?
 - a. a primary news source works for the news outlet that first reports the event
 - b. a primary news source participated in or witnessed the news event
 - c. a primary news source is an expert in the type of event that occurred
 - d. a primary news source is a family member of someone who witnessed something

2. Which of the following choices list **only** secondary sources about a high-profile burglary story?
 - a. information from the Bureau of Crime Statistics; an account from the burglary victim
 - b. analysis from a detective investigating the case; insight from a retired FBI burglary specialist
 - c. insights from a reformed ex-burglar; a list provided by police of similar crimes in the area
 - d. an account from an eyewitness; a map of the area where the crime occurred

3. If a journalist's source says that he cannot reveal his name or any of the information being provided, the source's comments are considered—
 - a. anonymous
 - b. unreliable
 - c. on the record
 - d. off the record

4. What do journalists do before they formulate questions and interview a source?

5. Why is it important for a journalist to discuss with a human source how the journalist can cite that source in a news story?

6. **REFLECT** How does investigative journalism differ from journalism based on press releases or information research?

Answer key

1. What distinguishes a primary news source from a secondary news source?
 - a. a primary news source works for the news outlet that first reports the event
 - b. a primary news source participated in or witnessed the news event**
 - c. a primary news source is an expert in the type of event that occurred
 - d. a primary news source is a family member of someone who witnessed something

2. Which of the following choices list **only** secondary sources about a high-profile burglary story?
 - a. information from the Bureau of Crime Statistics; an account from the burglary victim
 - b. analysis from a detective investigating the case; insight from a retired FBI burglary specialist
 - c. insights from a reformed ex-burglar; a list provided by police of similar crimes in the area**
 - d. an account from an eyewitness; a map of the area where the crime occurred

3. If a journalist's source says that he cannot reveal his name or any of the information being provided, the source's comments are considered—
 - a. anonymous
 - b. unreliable
 - c. on the record
 - d. off the record**

4. What do journalists do before they formulate questions and interview a source?

Answers will vary. Sample answer: They fully research their topic and get as much background information on their source as possible.

5. Why is it important for a journalist to discuss with a human source how the journalist can cite that source in a news story?

Answers will vary. Sample answer: Naming a source gives credibility to a news report and enables other journalists and news organizations to reach out to the source. However, sources may have legitimate reasons for not wanting their names associated with a news item. To reveal the identity of sources without their permission leaves them open to potentially negative effects.

6. REFLECT How does investigative journalism differ from journalism based on press releases or information research?

Answers will vary. Sample answer: Reporters involved in investigative journalism take much more time to research and prepare their reports than do reporters relying on press releases or general research.