

# The Fourth Estate

## Standard/Objective

- Describe the various forms institutions take and the interactions of people with institutions. (NCSS)
- Students will design and participate in a mock press conference by assuming the roles of reporters and elected officials.

## Materials

Copies of both sides of the *Role of the Free Press: Presidential Press Conference* photo card; Copies of the historical background information (page 22); Copies of the *Mock Press Conference* sheet available on the CD (presconf.pdf); Optional: Podium and/or microphone

## Discussion Questions

- What is President Ronald Reagan’s expression?
- Why was President Reagan nicknamed the “Great Communicator”?
- What is the role of the press in a free society?

## Using the Primary Source

Pass out copies of the photo card (photo side up) to pairs of students. Do not let them turn over the card. Have them guess what is happening and where the event is taking place. Ask students to share their ideas. Then ask students to turn over the card to read the brief historical background information and compare their ideas with the information on the card. Have students answer the knowledge and comprehension questions on the card.

After the students have completed the assigned card activities, use the questions listed above to conduct a class discussion of the picture. Next, pass out the historical background information (page 22), read it together, and discuss the information. Assign any of the other activities on the photo card that meet your curriculum needs.

Set up a mock press conference event which requires students to research and assume roles as either reporters, the president, or staff members. For ideas and more information, see the *Mock Press Conference* available on the CD (presconf.pdf).

**Note:** The title of this lesson comes from a term coined by political scientists. These experts call the electronic media and the written press the “Fourth Estate.” The term *Fourth Estate* refers to the press or media serving as a supporter of issues or people.

## Extension Idea

Invite a reporter who has attended a city, state, or national press conference to your classroom to share his or her experiences.

# The Fourth Estate *(cont.)*

## Historical Background Information

The founding leaders of the United States strongly believed in a free press. *Free press* means that the media is free from government control of its opinions and the content of its reporting. Journalists should be free to investigate the government, corporations and their leaders and to report corruption or mistakes.

## Responsibilities of the Press

However, there is a fine line about the use of this freedom. There are slander and libel laws. There are ethics about protecting one's sources. There are Federal Communications Commission standards. There are ethical standards on reporting stories that could give information to the country's enemies. During wartime, some television reports on major news channels may be harmful to the soldiers' safety. So, determining what stories should be reported remains an issue.

## Biased or Unbiased?

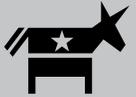
News stories should be unbiased and show all sides of an issue. However, that is not always the case. Some magazines, newspapers, and radio commentators are definitely conservative and others are obviously liberal. The electronic media and the written press sometimes serve as supporters of certain issues or people. For example, a newspaper may endorse its favorite presidential candidate in its editorial section. The press also has the subtle power to develop political issues. For example, a news magazine chooses what stories to report and how to slant the report to make it important. These actions give the press a great deal of influence, sometimes even more than the three branches of the government.

## Mass Media is Big Business

The owners of large media corporations need to make money like any other business. They must think about what sells—what stories the public wants to hear, watch, or read. At the same time, the American public expects journalists to accurately report their stories. Many reporters work very hard to do just that. However, some reporters get caught up in the “big-story” competition and press deadlines. So, they do not write accurate reports.

## Presidents and the Press

Presidents have an obligation to keep the press informed. Some have been very comfortable in that role and others have not. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan both had good rapport with the press. In fact, President Reagan was labeled the “Great Communicator” because of his entertaining style of speaking. In this photo, Reagan is obviously having a good time at the press conference. His acting skills helped him be at ease with reporters. Being able to use the press effectively can give the president a huge advantage. Other presidents find themselves at a disadvantage because they are not comfortable with the press. Then, the press might become critical of the president and the president must defend his policies.





# Role of the Free Press

## Presidential Press Conference

### Historical Background Information

In this 1987 photograph, President Ronald Reagan is giving a press conference in the East Room of the White House. Most press conferences are held in the press room of the White House, which is specially equipped for such meetings. Just like a classroom, the reporters must raise their hands to be recognized before they speak. President Reagan was known as the “Great Communicator” due to his acting skills and his clear way of presenting his ideas.



### Analyzing History

#### Knowledge

How are the reporters dressed for this conference? How many reporters would you estimate are attending this press conference?

#### Comprehension

What seems to be the mood of the press conference? What clues did you find in the picture to support your answer?

#### Application

Imagine you are a reporter attending this press conference. Write three questions for the president, one on each of these topics: taking down the Berlin Wall; the *Challenger* tragedy; the summit with Mikhail Gorbachev.

#### Analysis

Choose an affirmative or negative position and write a response to this statement: *The press is a free acting business rather than a public servant, and therefore needs to have some controls.*

#### Synthesis

Design a chart categorizing the pros and cons of today’s media and press.

#### Evaluation

Interpret President Thomas Jefferson’s reasons for supporting a free press, based on this quote.

The only security of all is in a free press. The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed. The agitation it produces must be submitted to. It is necessary, to keep the waters pure.

—Thomas Jefferson to Marquis de Lafayette, 1823

### Historical Writing

#### Fiction

You are a new reporter. This is your first time at the White House. Write your impressions of this press conference and the White House.

#### Nonfiction

Design a time line of the important events of the Reagan presidency.

### History Challenge

Find quotations from at least three different presidents since 1932 showing their views of the press.