

Fact-Checking Activity: Fast-Fact Biographies

In this group activity, students will learn how easy it can be to make mistakes when writing copy on a tight deadline. This activity works best with a group where participants are not already familiar with each other's personal histories.

Materials:

Pen and paper for each student

Set of questions for source (print out or displayed on board)

Computer or laptop (optional for writing stage)

Timer

Time: 25+ minutes

INTERVIEW STAGE: (6 minutes)

Tell the students that they are going to roleplay being writers for a fast-paced, national magazine. For their first assignment, they will be doing quick-turnaround one-paragraph biographies of each other. Tell them this will be an exercise in writing on deadline -- as quickly and accurately as possible.

Have students group into pairs -- ideally pair people who don't know each other very well already. Designate one person in each group as the reporter, and the other person as the source.

Give the reporter a piece of paper and a pen , and the source the following set of questions:

1. What's your full name?
2. Where were you born?
3. What's your birthday?
4. What did you want to be when you grew up? Why?
5. What is/was your favorite subject in school? (for post-college, what was your major?)
6. Describe your typical day now -- what do you do? where do you go?
7. What are your current goals in life?
8. What are three surprising things about you that people might not know?

Set the timer to three minutes:

Have the source talk about his or her personal history based on the question outline they received. The reporter should take notes, including a physical description of the source.*

**TEACHER'S NOTE: The physical description, while it can make some people uncomfortable to write, is important to include because it is an oft-forgotten element of fact-checking. People will say that a person is "All-American looking" without thinking about the fact that Americans are diverse. Or they will describe a person as having brown eyes when they have hazel eyes. Almost every profile story includes a physical description piece, so it's good to get practice on how to observe accurately!*

Within the same groups, have the reporter and source switch roles. Repeat the interview process.

WRITING STAGE: (4 minutes)

The facilitator should explain to the group that they are going to be writing on deadline, and they will have exactly four minutes to write the best descriptive one-paragraph biography possible about their source. Make sure each reporter has the notes they took about their source, and either a notepad/pen or computer to type up their article.

The paragraph should include a physical description, and as much telling information and interesting details as they can. Encourage them to write as if they were doing a short article for a popular magazine.

As a facilitator, make sure the reporters stop writing as soon as the time is up.

FACT-CHECKING STAGE (2 minutes per participant)

Share back as a group: Ask a reporter/interview pair to volunteer to go first. Have each reporter read the description they wrote out loud to the group. The source should refrain from correcting or affirming any information about themselves until after the entire paragraph has been shared.

At the end of each reading, have the source (the person who the biography was about) reflect out loud with the group on the following questions:

1. Was all the information in the piece factually accurate?
2. If not, what corrections do you have?
3. Do you feel your words were taken in context? Why or why not?
4. What, if anything, would you add to the piece?

Repeat by pairs, with eventually everyone sharing back in the group.

DISCUSSION STAGE (5-10 minutes)

After everyone has shared back, ask the group to reflect on the process

1. What challenges came with writing on deadline?
2. What was it like to write about someone under time pressure? What was it like to have someone write about you?
3. What kinds of factual errors did people make?
4. What kinds of assumptions did people make?
5. How can you avoid these kinds of errors?
6. Why is it important to fact-check your stories?

TEACHER'S NOTE: These questions, while basic, are relevant to real dilemmas that journalists face when reporting stories in today's media landscape. Reporters face a lot of pressure to publish quickly, meeting their own deadlines and beating other outlets to the story. But the glory of getting the scoop doesn't mean anything if the information they publish isn't accurate.

Corrections (or even retractions) do happen -- sometimes even to veteran journalists and well-known media outlets. But young journalists in particular can't afford for editors or readers to label them as a reporting noob who can't be trusted with a big story.

This lesson plan was written by Teresa Chin at Youth Radio, the premier national source for youth media content. For more lesson plans, go to www.youthradio.org/for-teachers