

Making Sense of Current International Events: 6 Activities and 1 Essay

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APSA Teaching and Learning Conference

Teaching Research, Writing, and Information Literacy: How to Handle Misinformation

February 9-11, 2023

Abstract: At my institution we teach an introductory course called World Politics, combining ideas from the fields of Comparative Politics and International Relations. This course serves both as a foundational course for majors and a course selected by students from across the university as it also fills two general education requirements with a single course. This paper describes a scaffolded set of activities, culminating in a formal writing project, designed to improve students' information literacy, reinforce their writing skills, and practice critical thinking. Six in-class activities help students develop the skills to make-sense of news articles, evaluate coverage of current international events, and contextualize these events with background information. Writing-to-learn assignments at the beginning and end of each of these six class sessions shape group conversations and reinforce the skills that are introduced during the class meeting. A culminating essay at the end of the semester, asking students to analyze a current event from the semester using an international relations theory, provides an opportunity for students to refine and showcase the skills from the semester.

Contents: This document describes the six in-class activities. These descriptions are followed by sample warm-up and wrap-up worksheets for each of the in-class activities. Then there are instructions and rubric for a sample culminating essay.

Activity #1: Introduction to current events & classmates

This activity introduces current events into the classroom and gives students the opportunity to start working on their reading comprehension skills for news articles. In the course, more broadly, it helps the students build connections, find study partners, and begin to feel comfortable and confident in the classroom.

Instructor preparation: The appendix provides examples of Warm-Up and Wrap-Up worksheets.

1. Find 4 articles on major current, international events.
2. Prepare Warm-Up worksheet to have students reflect on their preparation.
3. Prepare Wrap-Up worksheet to have students reflect on what they learned in class.
4. Print articles (enough for each student to have 1) and worksheets for students.
5. Prepare slides to guide activity.

Student preparation: Ask students to spend a little time (5-10 minutes) before class trying to answer the following questions and to bring their ideas with them to class.

1. What are the major international news stories of the past 2 weeks?
2. How do you know?
3. What challenges do you face in answering that question?

In-class activities: The following class activities fill a 75-minute class period, with a little time at the end to have an additional conversation with students. (Since I often do this activity in the first week of the semester, I typically use the last 10-15 minutes of the class period to give students a “tour” of our course in the LMS.)

The length of this activity can be increased or decreased by changing the number of different articles students read and report on to the class.

The class for Activity #1 is divided into 4 parts:

1. *Individually:*
 - a. Give each student Warm-Up worksheet, give time to work on it, then
 - b. Give 1 of articles selected by instructor to each student, give them time to read.
2. *Small group:* Divide students into groups so all in group have read the same article. Then ask each group to:
 - a. Introduce themselves and get to know one another.
 - b. Discuss the article and the Warm-Up Worksheet.
 - c. Choose one member of the group to report 3 main facts from article to class.
3. *Full class:* Bring students back together as a class.
 - a. Ask representative from each group to report on the content of their article.
 - b. Explain the structure of news articles with students.
 - i. Basic feature: title, byline, date, dateline, photo/caption
 - ii. Triangle structure
 - c. Offer techniques for keeping up with the news
4. *Individually:* Give each student a Wrap-Up worksheet and ask them to reflect on what they learned.

Activity #2: Putting current events into context

The second activity continues the work on understanding the content of news articles through additional practice with reading in the genre. Additionally, this activity introduces students to resources with background information on the people, places, and events that play a role in the current events. Finally, it asks students to start looking for connections between current events and class content.

Instructor preparation: The appendix provides examples of Warm-Up and Wrap-Up worksheets.

1. Find 4 articles on major current, international events and email one to each student.
2. Prepare Warm-Up worksheet to have students reflect on their preparation.
3. Prepare Wrap-Up worksheet to have students reflect on what they learned in class.
4. Print worksheets for students.
5. Prepare slides to guide activity.

Student preparation: Ask students to spend a little time (10-15 minutes) before class preparing by:

1. Reading the article emailed to them, and by
2. Considering what information would help them understand the article.

In-class activities: The following class activities fill a 75-minute class period. The length of this activity can be increased or decreased by changing the number of articles students read and report on.

The class for Activity #2 is divided into 6 phases:

1. *Individually:* Give each student Warm-Up worksheet and ask them to complete it.
2. *Small group:* Divide students into groups so all have read the same article. Then ask groups to:
 - a. Introduce themselves and get to know one another.
 - b. Discuss the article and the Warm-Up Worksheet.
3. *Full class:* Have students stay with their group, but briefly bring their attention back to the front.
 - a. Introduce sources for background information:
 - i. CIA World Factbook
 - ii. CNN Fast Facts
 - iii. BBC Country Profiles
 - b. Review terms or concepts from class course appear in the articles. (Typically, by this point in the semester I've introduced students to the terms states, regimes, and governments. I try to choose articles for this activity that are related to regime or government change.)
4. *Small group:* Have students return to small group conversation to:
 - a. Look up some background information using one or more of the above sources.
 - b. Connect the current event to terms/concepts from course.
 - c. Choose one group member to report 3 main facts & 1 connection to course concept
5. *Full class:* Bring students back together as a class.
 - a. Have each group to 3 main facts from article & 1 connection to course term/concept
 - b. After all articles have been summarized, ask for volunteers to discuss what they found with background sources and if/how it was helpful to understanding the article.
6. *Individually:* Give each student a Wrap-Up worksheet and ask them to reflect on what they learned.

Activity #3: Sorting through varieties of content on news websites

The third activity is when students start to look for current events on their own. It works to build their skills in sorting through and connecting the content they find on news websites. In particular, students to start working on skills in two areas: (1) assessing the type of articles/content they find on news websites and (2) synthesizing the information from different articles on the same current event.

Instructor preparation: The appendix provides examples of Warm-Up and Wrap-Up worksheets.

1. Find 4 articles on major current, international events and email one to each student.
2. Prepare Warm-Up worksheet to have students reflect on their preparation.
3. Prepare Wrap-Up worksheet to have students reflect on what they learned in class.
4. Print worksheets for students.
5. Prepare slides to guide activity.

Student preparation: Ask students to spend a little time (10-15 minutes) before class preparing by:

1. Reading the article emailed to them, and by
2. Finding and reading a second article on the same current event.

In-class activities: The following class activities fill a 75-minute class period. The length of this activity can be increased or decreased by changing the number of articles students read and report on.

The class for Activity #3 is divided into 6 phases:

1. *Individually:* Give each student Warm-Up worksheet and ask them to complete it.
2. *Small group:* Divide students into groups so all in group have read the same article. Then ask each group to:
 - a. (Re)Introduce themselves,
 - b. Discuss the common article,
 - c. Incorporate the additional information for the other articles they found, and
 - d. Connect this event to course concepts/terms.
3. *Full class:* Have students stay with their group, but briefly bring their attention back to the front.
 - a. Have them watch “Anatomy of a News Website” (3:14) from CSUDH Library¹
 - b. Extend this to talk about news reporting v. news analysis v. academic research.
 - c. Explain newswires.
4. *Small group:* Have students return to small group conversation to discuss what type of piece (news reporting, analysis, opinion, other) they found on their own about the current event.
5. *Full class:* Bring students back together as a class.
 - a. Ask representative from each group to 3 main facts about the current event.
 - b. After all current events have been summarized, ask for volunteers to discuss what they found as their second source.
6. *Individually:* Give each student a Wrap-Up worksheet and ask them to reflect on what they learned.

¹ Video available via YouTube here: <https://youtu.be/76DdkDGQ7jU>.

Activity #4: Assessing bias in news content

The fourth activity asks students to think about how they can identify biased information. The initial group setting takes advantage of social pressure to get students to reflect on indicators of bias in media. The instructor then provides tools that can be used in class and beyond to help students evaluate new information they encounter on a news website, in social media, or elsewhere, in the future.

Instructor preparation: The appendix provides examples of Warm-Up and Wrap-Up worksheets.

1. Prepare Warm-Up worksheet to have students reflect on their preparation.
2. Prepare Wrap-Up worksheet to have students reflect on what they learned in class.
3. Print worksheets & “Four Moves and a Habit” handout for students.
4. Prepare slides to guide activity.

Student preparation: Ask students to spend a little time (10-15 minutes) before class preparing by:

1. Finding 2 articles on the same current event, one they consider to be biased and one that seems to them to a “fair” treatment of the topic.

In-class activities: The following class activities fill a 75-minute class period. The length of this activity can be increased or decreased by changing the number of different articles students read and report on to the class.

The class for Activity #4 is divided into 4 phases:

1. *Individually:* Give each student Warm-Up worksheet and ask them to complete it.
2. *Small group:* Divide students into groups and ask each group to:
 - a. (Re)Introduce themselves,
 - b. Compare the topics and articles they found, and
 - c. Discuss how they identified one article as more biased than another.
3. *Full class:* Bring students back together as a class.
 - a. Introduce them to various tools:
 - i. Watch “Fairness and Balance” (2:18) from CSUDH Library²
 - ii. Pass out “Four Moves and a Habit” handout.³
 - iii. Demonstrate Interactive Media Bias Chart:
<https://adfontesmedia.com/interactive-media-bias-chart/>
 - iv. Show AllSides.com: <https://www.allsides.com/unbiased-balanced-news>
 - b. Give students 5 minutes to explore tools.
 - c. Ask for volunteers to describe what they found, if/how it changed a perspective on the articles they or a classmate found for today.
4. *Individually:* Give each student a Wrap-Up worksheet and ask them to reflect on what they learned.

² Video available via YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHc019S2yiM>.

³ From American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

Activity #5: Applying Realism to current events & making a works cited list

In the fifth activity students continue to work on synthesizing information from different sources and deepen their skills building connections between class content and current events. They are also (re)introduced to why we include works cited lists at the end of writing assignments and how to create one.

Instructor preparation: The appendix provides examples of Warm-Up and Wrap-Up worksheets.

1. Find 4 articles on current, international events that are widely covered and email one to each student.
2. Prepare Warm-Up worksheet to have students reflect on their preparation.
3. Prepare Wrap-Up worksheet to have students reflect on what they learned in class.
4. Print worksheets handout for students.
5. Prepare slides to guide activity.

Student preparation: Ask students to spend a little time (10-15 minutes) before class preparing by:

1. Reading the article emailed to them, and by
2. Finding and reading a second article on the same current event.

In-class activities: The following class activities fill a 75-minute class period. The length of this activity can be increased or decreased by changing the number of different articles students read and report on to the class.

The class for Activity #5 is divided into 6 phases:

1. *Individually:* Give each student Warm-Up worksheet and ask them to complete it.
2. *Small group:* Divide students into groups and ask each group to:
 - a. (Re)Introduce themselves,
 - b. Discuss the common article,
 - c. Incorporate the additional information for the other articles they found.
3. *Full class:* Have students stay with their group, but briefly bring their attention back to the front.
 - a. Review main points of Realism as discussed in previous class meetings.
 - b. Describe parameters of Final Essay to students
4. *Small group:* Divide students into groups and ask each group to:
 - a. Develop explanation for current event using realism.
5. *Full class:* Bring students back together as a class.
 - a. Have groups report on main facts of event and explain using realism
 - b. Talk about why we include works cited lists in academic writing
 - c. Provide examples of entries for news articles assigned that day.
6. *Individually:* Give each student a Wrap-Up worksheet and ask them to reflect on what they learned.

Activity #6: Applying Liberalism to current events & including in-text citations

In the sixth activity students continue to work on synthesizing information from different sources and deepen their skills building connections between class content and current events. They are also (re)introduced to why we include in-text citations and how to incorporate those into their writing.

Instructor preparation: The appendix provides examples of Warm-Up and Wrap-Up worksheets.

1. Find 4 articles on current, international events that are widely covered and email one to each student.
2. Prepare Warm-Up worksheet to have students reflect on their preparation.
3. Prepare Wrap-Up worksheet to have students reflect on what they learned in class.
4. Print worksheets handout for students.
5. Prepare slides to guide activity.

Student preparation: Ask students to spend a little time (10-15 minutes) before class preparing by:

1. Reading the article emailed to them, and by
2. Finding and reading a second article on the same current event.

In-class activities: The following class activities fill a 75-minute class period. The length of this activity can be increased or decreased by changing the number of different articles students read and report on to the class.

The class for Activity #6 is divided into 6 phases:

1. *Individually:* Give each student Warm-Up worksheet and ask them to complete it.
2. *Small group:* Divide students into groups and ask each group to:
 - a. (Re)Introduce themselves,
 - b. Discuss the common article,
 - c. Incorporate the additional information for the other articles they found.
3. *Full class:* Have students stay with their group, but briefly bring their attention back to the front.
 - a. Review main points of Liberalism as discussed in previous class meetings.
 - b. Review parameters of Final Essay with students.
4. *Small group:* Divide students into groups and ask each group to:
 - a. Develop explanation for current event using Liberalism.
5. *Full class:* Bring students back together as a class.
 - a. Have groups report on main facts of event and explain using Liberalism.
 - b. Talk about why we include in-text citations in academic writing.
 - c. Provide examples of in-text citations for news articles assigned that day.
6. *Individually:* Give each student a Wrap-Up worksheet and ask them to reflect on what they learned.

Name: _____

ACTIVITY #1 WARM-UP

1. Tell me about what you think is one of the most important international news stories of the past year?

2. Where did you learn the details you provided above?

3. What challenges did you face in preparing for today?

Name: _____

ACTIVITY #1 WRAP-UP

1. Summarize the key facts of the current event I asked you to read about in class today.

2. Was this story among those you read about for today? Why do you think you did/didn't include it?

Name: _____

ACTIVITY #2 WARM-UP

1. Summarize the key facts of the current event I asked you to read about in class today.

2. What facts or background information would help you make sense of what you read?

Name: _____

ACTIVITY #2 WRAP-UP

1. Provide 2 facts from the sources discussed in class connected to your article. (Be sure to note which facts go with which sources.)

2. How do these facts help make the article clearer?

3. Write 1-2 sentences describing the current event that one of the current events a *different group* described in class today.

Name: _____

ACTIVITY #3 WARM-UP

1. Summarize the 3 key facts of the current event I asked you to read about for class today.

2. Give some basic information about the 2nd article that you found on the same topic

News source: _____

Author: _____

Article Title: _____

Date published: _____

3. How was the article I assigned different from the one you found on your own? (If they are NOT different, why do you think that is the case?)

Name: _____

ACTIVITY #3 WRAP-UP

1. After our conversation about different kinds of content on news websites ('straight' news, analysis pieces, editorials, sponsored content), what kind of content did you read as your second source? How do you know?

2. How does this current event relate to our class conversations about international law and international courts?

3. What questions do you still have about the article, news websites, or international laws/courts?

Name: _____

ACTIVITY #4 WARM-UP

1. Tell me a little about your first source.

News source: _____

Article Title: _____

Author: _____

Date published: _____

Content: _____

2. Tell me a little about your second source.

News source: _____

Article Title: _____

Author: _____

Date published: _____

Content: _____

3. What makes one more biased on this topic than the other?

Name: _____

ACTIVITY #4 WRAP-UP

1. What did you learn about your sources or current event using the strategies and sources (four moves and a habit; interactive media bias chart; all sides) presented in class?

2. How does what you learn impact how you think about the bias in the two sources you found for class? (If it didn't, why do you think that is?)

3. What other tools or resources would you include to help news consumers evaluate the articles or other content they are engaging with?

Name: _____

ACTIVITY #5 WARM-UP

1. Give some basic information about the 2nd article that you found on the same topic

News source: _____

Article Title: _____

Author: _____

Date published: _____

2. Synthesize what you learned from the two articles to summarize the current event you learned about for today.

[illegible]

Name: _____

ACTIVITY #5 WRAP-UP

1. Explain the current event you read about through the lens of realism.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Works Cited List: Provide an entry for the two articles you read about this event.

Name: _____

ACTIVITY #6 WARM-UP

1. Provide the works cited entry for the 2nd article that you found.

2. Synthesize what you learned from the two articles to summarize the current event you learned about for today.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Name: _____

ACTIVITY #6 WRAP-UP

Explain the current event you read about through the lens of liberalism.

[illegible]

FINAL ESSAY

Throughout the semester you will learn a lot about news from around the world, particularly through our in-class Activities. At the end of the semester, you will combine this knowledge of world events with your new understanding of international relations theories by writing a Final Essay. In addition to demonstrating the knowledge you've acquired in our course, this essay is an opportunity to unite the critical thinking and writing skills you've been working on: skills that employers like to see in potential employees.

You'll take one of the news articles assigned an in-class Activity during the semester and find **two** additional articles about this event. Then you will analyze this event through the lens of **one** of the three theories of international relations we discussed in Unit 3 of our class: realism, liberalism, or constructivism.

1. **Choose an article about current event that we read that is about international relations.**
2. **Find two additional articles about this event.**
3. **Choose one IR theory that you think best explains this current event.**
4. **Write an accurate description of the event and explain it with one IR theory.**
 - *Use all 3 news articles you have to summarize the event and fill in key details.*
 - *Explain what happened using one IR theory, demonstrating you understand the theory.*
 - *A typical strong and focused answer will be about 2 pages, double-spaced.*
5. **Incorporate MLA citations in-text and provide a Works Cited list at the end of your essay.**
 - *In-text citations are for any idea or information you take from someone else, whether it is in your own words (paraphrased) or not (quoted). When in doubt, cite the source!*
 - *Review the rules for documentation and citing that we talked about in Activities #5 & #6.*
6. **Proofread to make sure your essay makes sense and is free from spelling and grammatical errors.**

The rubric on the next page gives you a few more details about how I will evaluate the Final Essay, which is worth 200 points toward your final grade.

FINAL ESSAY	Excellent (36-40 points)	Highly Competent (31-35 points)	Average (26-30 points)	Needs Improvement (0-25 points)
Summary of Current Event	Accurate and rich description of facts using 3 articles, and No irrelevant facts or commentary included.	Accurate description of facts using 3 articles, and No irrelevant facts or commentary included.	Mostly accurate description of facts using 3 articles, and/or Some unrelated facts or commentary.	Significant inaccuracies in description of facts, and/or Failed to include information from 3 articles, and/or Significant inclusion of unrelated facts or commentary.
Understanding of IR Theory	Writes about only 1 IR theory, and Demonstrates deep understanding of this IR theory.	Writes about only 1 IR theory, and Demonstrates correct understanding of this IR theory.	Mostly writes about 1 IR theory, and/or Demonstrates surface level understanding of IR theory, and	Writes about multiple IR theories, and/or Demonstrates incorrect understanding of IR theory.
Application of IR Theory	Applies IR theory clearly and accurately to current event.	Applies IR theory clearly and mostly accurately to current event.	Applies IR theory mostly accurately to current event.	Applies IR theory incorrectly to current event.
Clarity & mechanics	Throughout the paper, wording is precise and unambiguous, and There are no incomplete or run-on sentences with virtually no spelling or grammatical errors.	Paper is, for the most part, precisely worded and unambiguous, and Sentence structure is mostly clear with few spelling or grammatical errors.	Wording is imprecise or ambiguous fairly often, and/or There are a significant number of spelling or grammatical errors.	Throughout the paper, wording is imprecise or ambiguous, and/or Paper is unacceptably sloppy.
Citations	Information in-text is properly cited, and Bibliography entries are complete and correctly formatted.	Information in-text is attributed but always not properly cited, and/or Bibliography entries are complete with some errors in formatting.	Citation of information in-text is absent in some places, and/or Bibliography entries missing some information about sources.	Information in-text is frequently not attributed, and/or Bibliography absent or entries fail to contain key information about sources.