**Ethical Decision Making in Journalism**

**Age:** 9th – 12th

**Duration:** 60 minutes

**Standards:**

CC.8.5.6-8.A. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CC.8.5.6-8.B. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CC.8.5.6-8.D. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

CC.8.6.6-8.H. Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis reflection, and research.

CC.8.5.9-10.A. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CC.8.5.9-10.B. 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.

CC.8.5.9-10.D. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

CC.8.6.9-10.H. Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CC.8.5.11-12.A. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CC.8.5.11-12.B. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CC.8.5.11-12.D. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

CC.8.6.11-12.H. Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

**Objectives:**

Students will be able to:

* Identify ethical principles for journalists and explain their importance
* Apply ethical principles in journalism to analyzing various ethical dilemmas

**Lesson Overview:**

In this lesson, students will:

1. Brainstorm to define ethics, values, and why these are important **(15 min)**
2. Read and analyze SPJ’s Code of Ethics **(20 min)**
3. Apply SPJ’s Code of Ethics to analyzing ethical dilemmas in journalism **(20 min)**
4. Identify the ethical principles violated, within examples of journalistic misconduct *(Exit Ticket)* **(<10 min)**

**Student Handouts:**

1. Analyzing the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics
2. Ethical Dilemmas in Journalism
3. Reasoning About Ethical Dilemmas in Journalism
4. Which Ethical Principles Are Violated?

**Opening Brainstorm + Introduction to Ethics and Values**

1. Ask students: How do we define the word **ethics**?

*Facilitator Information:* Write students’ responses on the board (e.g., as a concept web). It is also possible to prompt students for examples of ethical principles that they hold.

*Facilitator Information:* Oxford Languages: Ethics can be defined as, “moral principles that govern a person’s behavior or the conducting of an activity.” Discuss how ethics often involve values, or literally what we *value* or consider to be important.

*Prompt:* What is the importance of ethics? Why do we need ethical principles? When do we think about ethics?

*Explain:* Ethics crop up when we’re deciding what to do or choosing between alternatives. Ethical issues refer to difficult choices, where is it unclear what the “right,” answer may be and different people may end up being helped or harmed.

*Prompt:* What are the goals of acting ethically? Why do we act ethically?

Write students’ answers on the board.

*Explain:* Ethical principles are how we determine how to behave in accordance with our values, or what we think is important. For example, if I **value** your right to privacy and your trust, it would be **unethical** for me to share something you told me in confidence with someone else, unless I had a good reason to do so. The ethical thing for me to do would be to keep what you told me private.

*Explain:* Values are what we consider to be important; ethics are behavioral guidelines that we follow to make sure that we are acting in accordance with our ethical principles.

*Prompt:* If I value friendship – I think that’s important. What is an example of ethical guidelines that I might follow?

Write students’ responses on the board.

*Explain:* Today we’re specifically going to be talking about journalistic ethics, or the behavioral guidelines that journalists should follow. But, before we can talk about ethics, we have to take about **values.**

*Prompt:* What are **values** that we want journalists to hold?

*Prompt:* If you were writing for a story for a school newspaper, what would you value or consider to be important in writing your story?

*Explain:* The Society for Professional Journalists is an organization for journalists that has come together to decide what are journalistic values and journalistic ethics. How should journalists behave? We’re going to be talking about journalistic ethics today, but before we can talk about ethics, we need to talk about values.

*Explain:* SPJ identifies journalistic values as journalists striving for the “free exchange of information that is accurate, fair, and thorough.”

*Prompt:* What does the free exchange of information mean? What does accurate mean? What does fair mean? What does thorough mean?

*Prompt:* What are ethical ways for journalists to behave to uphold these values, of being accurate, fair, and thorough?

Write students’ responses on the board, so that there is a class list of journalistic ethics.

*Prompt:* Why is it important for journalists to have a set of values and a code of ethics?

*Explain:* Journalists have a lot of power, because many people read and watch and are persuaded by the information that they report. Often, we cannot be at important events or access important people ourselves (e.g., if there’s a war or if we want to ask the president some questions). So journalists are responsible for informing people about the world and doing so ethically. Because we’re putting our trust in journalists to tell us how things really are, we want them to be accurate, fair, and thorough in their reporting.

**Analyze SPJ’s Code of Ethics**

1. Ask students to read SPJ’s Code of Ethics.

*Facilitator Information:* There are multiple journalistic codes of ethics. The code of ethics analyzed here is from the Society of Professional Journalists: Code of Ethics. Distribute and project this code of ethics.

<https://www.spj.org/pdf/spj-code-of-ethics.pdf>

*Facilitator Information:* Students can read this individually, with partners/in small groups, or as a whole class.

*Variation:* Depending on reading level, it may be helpful to begin by asking students to highlight key terms or unfamiliar vocabulary or to front-load key terms. Terms that may need to be defined include: (a) anonymous sources; (b) advocacy; (c) public/private figures, (d) conflicts of interest, (e) disclosures.

1. Ask students to complete the *Analyzing the Society for Professional Journalists Code of Ethics Handout*

*Variations:* Students can complete this individually, in groups, or as a whole class. If completing individually or in groups, then review responses as a whole class.

**Apply SPJ’s Code of Ethics to Reasoning About Ethical Dilemmas in Journalism**

1. Students use SPJ’s Code of Ethics to reason about journalists’ ethical dilemmas. Ethical dilemmas are presented on the *Ethical Dilemmas in Journalism Handout.*
2. Ethical dilemmas can be analyzed using the *Reasoning About Ethical Dilemmas Handout*.

*Facilitator Information:* Students can reason about these ethical dilemmas individually, in partners or small groups, or a whole class. I recommend completing one dilemma as a class, and then asking students to work in small groups to reason about two additional dilemmas of their choice. After individual/small group work, ask students to share their deliberations with the whole class.

*Facilitator Information:* If students need help with reasoning, read one dilemma as a class.

*Prompt:* What is the decision the journalist has to make? Why is this a difficult decision? Do we have questions about this scenario?

*Prompt:* What are the values involved? What are the ethical principles at stake?

*Prompt:* Who are the important people or groups in this scenario? Who may be helped or harmed?

*Variation:* Depending on time and students’ engagement, it’s possible to reason about 1-4 of the dilemmas introduced.

*Facilitator Information:* When reviewing as a whole class, have students do a show of hands for what they would in each situation. Then, ask students on different sides to explain their reasoning. Prompt students to use SPJ’s four journalistic ethical principles in their reasoning.

*Prompt:* What did you talk about in your groups? Which dilemmas did you have the most disagreement about? Why?

**Exit Ticket**

1. Ask students to complete the *Which Ethical Principles are Violated Handout* as an Exit Ticket.