

Headlines and A/B Testing

Age: 9th – 12th

Duration: 60 minutes

Standards:

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.8.5.6-8.F. Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

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.8.5.11-12.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).

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- o Define media literacy concepts like A/B testing
- o Describe why headlines are important for news stories
- o Identify the characteristics of effective headlines
- o When presented with a headline, analyze the features that make these effective
- o Create effective headlines of their own

Lesson Overview:

In this lesson, students will:

1. Brainstorm, as a class, why news stories have headlines and what factors journalists consider in creating headlines (*Opening*) **<10 min**
2. Look at examples of headlines to decide which headlines they prefer; analyze their preferred headlines identify a list of features of effective headlines **10 min**
3. Learn the definition of A/B testing and identify the benefits and limitations of A/B testing (independently and then as a class) **15 min**
4. Read/watch an NPR training for how to write effective headlines (*a viewing guide is included*). **25 min**
5. Create headlines of their own (*Exit ticket*) **<10 min**

Student Handouts:

1. List of A/B Example Headlines
2. Benefits and Drawbacks of A/B Testing Headlines
3. NPR Training: How To Make Great Headlines: Video Viewing Guide

4. NPR Training: How To Make Great Headlines: Reading Guide
5. Exit Ticket

Opening Brainstorm

1. Show students a newspaper headline digitally, or, in print.
2. **Brainstorm:** Ask students:
Why do news stories have headlines?
What features make a headline effective? What features make you want to read a story more?

Facilitator Information: These brainstorm questions can be completed as a whole-class; or students can do a two-minute quick write and/or think-pair-share with a neighbor, before sharing with the whole class.

Prompt: If students need help brainstorming, read sample headlines from the example newspaper and ask students whether they think each headline is effective or not and why.

Facilitator Information: Generate a class list of “Features of Effective Headlines.” (You may want to use this heading and create the list on post-it paper)

Prompt: If students do not spontaneously raise these issues, prompt students to consider:

- o Headlines summarizing a story (*e.g., What do headlines tell me about what I am going to read?*)
- o Length (*e.g., are good headlines long or short?*)
- o Headlines attracting an audience (*e.g., If you read that headline, would you want to read the whole story? Would the writer want you to do that?*)

Analyzing Effective Headlines

1. Show students examples of A/B headlines and ask students to decide which headlines they prefer in each case.
2. Compare students’ A/B headline preferences to actual headline popularity

Facilitator Information: There is a Handout (*A/B Example Headlines*) included so students can circle the headline they prefer individually; however, these examples can also be put on a slide and shown to the whole class.

Facilitator Information: For each example, ask students to raise their hand if they chose Headline A; then ask students to raise their hand if they chose Headline B. Compare the popularity of headlines in the class with their popularity when they were A/B tested.

	A	B
1.	\$2 Billion Worth of Free Media for Trump	Measuring Trump’s Media Dominance

2.	Soul-Searching in Baltimore, a Year After Freddie Gray's Death	Baltimore After Freddie Gray: The 'Mind-Set Has Changed'
3.	Is Everything Wrestling?	It's Not Just Wrestling That's Fake. It's the World.
4.	Saying Her Life was Less a Fairy Tale, Meghan Markle Described the Cruel Loss of Her Freedom and Identity	Meghan Says Life with the U.K. Royals Almost Drove Her to Suicide
5.	SpaceX Mars Rocket Prototype Explodes, But it Lands First	SpaceX to Test Launch Another Prototype of Rocket to Mars
6.	Speak Softly, and Carry a Big Agenda	Biden is the Anti-Trump, and It's Working
7.	Under Siege Over Sex Harassment Claims, Cuomo Offers Apology	Cuomo Attacked Over His Plan for Review of Sex Harassment Claims

- Based on headline popularity, ask students to revisit and add to the class list of "Features of Effective Headlines."

Prompt: If students need prompting, ask them to compare headlines for stories #1 and #3. Prompt students to consider how, on the one hand, specificity seems to make the A Headline in Story 1 more popular; while the added information in Headline B in Story 3 make it more popular.

Explain: Add specificity (e.g., numbers) and enough information as features to the class list of "Features of Effective Headlines."

Prompt: Ask students to compare the headlines in stories #4 and #5. For #4, explain how including a reference to 'suicide,' in Headline B makes the headline more emotional and dramatic. This headline is also shorter. For #5, explain how the construction, "explodes, but," in Headline A, makes the headline read as more exciting, dramatic, and like it is communicating a full story. Add action (e.g., verbs) and emotionality as features to the class list of "Features of Effective Headlines."

Introduce A/B Testing

Explain: Explain to students that the A/B Headlines they previously evaluated, were real headlines that different publications tried out for the same story.

Prompt: Why would publications or editors write two (or more) different versions of headlines?

Explain: Definition from the Neiman Lab: "Headline A/B testing lets a newsroom try out different versions of a story's headline, to see which draws in more readers. When they come to a site's homepage, some readers might see one headline (e.g., "Here's how to boost your site's traffic"), while others see an alternative version ("e.g., 15 ways to get more clicks"). An

automated system tracks the click through rate of each version and eventually declares a winner of the attention contest.”

<https://www.niemanlab.org/2021/10/how-a-b-testing-can-and-cant-improve-your-headline-writing/>

Explain: Explain that A/B testing has four components:

- (i) an editor or author write two (or more) versions of a headline for the same news story, while keeping the story content the same
- (ii) readers are **randomly** shown A or B versions of a headline, while everything else stays the same
- (iii) data about how many people click on a story with each headline version is collected, to determine which headline is more popular
- (iv) finally, the more popular headline is used for the story.

Explain: During A/B testing, everything stays the same, except the two versions of the headline.

Prompt: Why it is important that everything stay the same during A/B testing?

Explain: Because publishers or editors can then know that is is **just** changing the headline, rather than anything else, that is driving more traffic to a story

Prompt: Why is content within a story not A/B tested?

Explain: Varying content is more complex, because there is a lot more information within a story than just a headline and it’s difficult to change just one part of a story without effecting everything else. More importantly there are ethical issues related to changing how the information within a story is reported, rather than just the headline. You want the information reported in a story to reflect a journalists’ observations, fact finding, and analysis, not audience popularity.

1. Ask students to identify the benefits and drawbacks of A/B testing.

Facilitator Information: There is a Handout (Benefits and Drawbacks of A/B testing headlines) to help students do this. This worksheet can be completed as a class. Students can also work on the worksheet independently/with a partner, with responses then shared with the whole class.

	Benefits	Drawbacks
Editors	Can determine which story headline is most popular Can encourage readers to “try” a story, even if it’s not one they’re specifically interested in	Time and effort needed to write multiple versions of headlines Can determine whether one or headline is <i>more</i> popular than another, but readers still may not be very interested in a particular story

	Editors always try to write stories in a way that appeals to the reader; this is a way to do so more effectively	Authors may have different (if less popular) ideas for what the headline should be.
Readers	Headlines are written in a way that appeals to readers More popular headlines may better summarize a story or otherwise be better for the reader	May be seduced into reading a story that they would not have otherwise (e.g., if it had a more informational headline) Headlines are important. Readers are introduced to quantitative/popularity-driven, not reporter-judgement-driven, headlines There is an “experiment,” being conducted on readers, that they are not aware of. However, media companies are always trying to attract more readers.

Learning to Write Effective Headlines

1. Ask students to complete the NPR Training on how to write effective headlines.

Facilitator Information: This is available as a text or as a video:

<https://training.npr.org/2015/10/25/the-checklist-for-writing-good-headlines/> The examples are the same across text and video.

Facilitator Information: If you are showing the video, recommended play time is: **4:09** and ending at **16:25** (the end of the video is all answering questions). You may also want to play the video at 1.25 speed. There is a viewing guide included.

Facilitator Information: If you are asking students to read the text, please print the text. There is also a Handout (*Reading Guide*), with examples from the text, asking students to decide why each headline is effective or not and to explain their reasoning. Students should complete this guide as they’re reading or after they read.

Variation: There are nine headlines on the worksheet. Students can also be asked to select a subset (e.g., four) headlines from the list).

2. As a class, update the class list of, “Features of Effective Headlines.”

Prompt: Based on the NPR training you just looked at and the headlines you evaluated, what are features of effective headlines?

Make a list of student responses on the board.

Prompt: Then, revisit the original, “Features of Effective Headlines,” list you created. Ask students to compare the two lists. Circle any features that are commonly included on both lists. Add any new features from the NPR training to the original list (e.g., on post-it paper).

Variation: Optional Brainstorm: Ask students, “what does it mean if a headline is ‘effective’?” Write students’ responses on the board.

Exit Ticket

Ask students to complete an exit ticket