

# NEWSEUM POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES

## From the Headlines to the History Books: News as the ‘First Rough Draft of History’

**Rationale/Main Concept:** In this activity, students brainstorm all the examples they saw at the Newseum of news coverage of events that are now written up in history books. They then compare and contrast front-page news coverage of a major event in their lifetime to the way history books present those stories. After gaining a hands-on understanding of how news becomes history, students project what changes in information and coverage might occur over time for a current news event.

**Time:** 10-minute class discussion plus 45-minute worksheet

### **Materials:**

- Newseum archived front pages Web site:  
<http://www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/archive.asp>
- “From the Headlines to the History Books” handout included in this packet.

### **Procedure:**

- Tell your class they’re going to explore why news has been called the “first rough draft of history” and the differences between that rough-draft stage and the information that appears in our history books.
- Begin the discussion by brainstorming as a group all of the examples they can remember from the Newseum of news coverage of an event that you can now read about in history books. (Examples: newsreel footage from the civil rights movement, the front page from man’s first walk on the moon. Answers will vary depending on where students spent their time at the museum.)
- Ask the students how they think our understanding of those events may have changed from when the first news coverage appeared. (We may know more background information; some initial details in the news story might be wrong because of the rush to get the news out before deadlines; we know what happened after the big event, etc.)

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- Tell your students they're going to study one specific event in recent history and compare the front-page coverage of that event to the information that we now have about that event. Students should pick one of the following major news stories, for which front pages have been archived on the Newseum Web site listed in the materials section:
  - Columbia space shuttle explosion, 2003
  - Terrorist bombings in Madrid, 2004
  - Tsunami in Asia, 2004
  - Terrorist bombings in London, 2005
  - Hurricane Katrina, 2005
  - Discovery lifts off, 2007
  - Beijing Olympics, 2008
- Distribute the "From the Headlines to the History Books" handout. Ask your students to look up the front pages for their chosen event on the Newseum Web site, then research more recent accounts of what happened and complete the worksheet.
- When students have completed the assignment, have a class discussion about what they found. Were there major changes in our understanding of what happened between the news coverage and information that emerged later? Were there bigger changes for some events than for others? Ask the students to share the current news stories for which they made their predictions and how they think our understanding of these events will change over time.

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Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## From the Headlines to the History Books

**Instructions:** Washington Post publisher Philip Graham famously described news as the “first rough draft of history.” Your task will be to evaluate how this description plays out in real life by comparing breaking news coverage of a major event to the coverage that emerged over time, years after the initial event.

To complete this worksheet, choose one of the following events for which the Newseum has archived front pages on its Web site at <http://www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/archive.asp>:

- Columbia space shuttle explosion, 2003
- Terrorist bombings in Madrid, 2004
- Tsunami in Asia, 2004
- Terrorist bombings in London, 2005
- Hurricane Katrina, 2005
- Discovery lifts off, 2007
- Beijing Olympics, 2008

For your chosen event, first explore the front pages online, and then find more recent articles, books or online sources about these events. Use all of the sources you gathered to answer the questions below.

Name of story/event: \_\_\_\_\_

Does the front-page coverage of this event feel complete? What questions do you still have?

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List three pieces of information about this event that did not emerge until after the front-page coverage.

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Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

What facts/pieces of information are treated as the most important in the front-page article? What facts/pieces of information are treated as the most important in historical coverage of the event? Explain why you think the information treated as the most important stayed the same or why it changed.

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From a historical perspective, how would you rate the information in the front-page article? Are there any facts it got wrong, major angles it missed, etc.?

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From a journalist's perspective, how would you rate the information in the historical coverage of your event? Does it answer all of the "reporter's questions"? (Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?) Is it accurate, fair and clear? Does it grab your attention?

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Choose a major news story from today's newspaper that you think will someday make it into the history books.

Name of story: \_\_\_\_\_

How do you think coverage of this event will change over time? What new information are we going to find out? What will prove to be the most important aspect of the story?

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