

Exploring Stories Behind News Headlines – a Drama and English Pack

This pack shows how, using text-based stimuli, teachers can combine simple drama methods with linked English tasks to deliver lessons that are fun and instructive. The activities are suitable for a range of students and can be delivered by teachers who are both new to drama work and those who are experienced in it.

The activities and tasks, including suggested follow-ons, provide opportunities for:

- practical drama work
- role play
- improvisation
- speaking and listening
- working collaboratively
- creative writing
- evaluating, understanding and discussing.

They cover elements of the UK English curriculum and the USA English Language Arts.

This pack shows how a single stimulus – in this case a **newspaper headline** – can be used to create great drama and English work and the activities and tasks are suitable for students aged 9 upwards.

The objectives to be achieved in this unit

The aim of the lessons is to encourage students to create and develop their own stories by:

- investigating responses to the selected headline
- presenting ideas and performances to each other
- exploring the same incident from a range of perspectives
- using a range of drama methods to develop ideas.

As a result of this drama work, students should come to understand the concept of writing for a specific purpose and - ultimately - be able to devise, write and perform a television news programme based around the news story they've created.

You'll need a decent space to work in if possible – a drama studio, school hall or even a semi-cleared classroom will work well. Students will need pens or pencils plus paper or notebooks. It will be helpful if teachers have access to a white board, chalk board or a flip chart and stand for recording ideas and comments. It's advisable to have some sort of timing device, too, to ensure that discussions and 'rehearsals' don't go on for too long!

Using newspaper headlines as a stimulus – what should you look for and why?

In searching for newspaper headlines to use as a basis for drama work, make a selection that can work on different levels and can be interpreted in different ways. This will give you a stimulus that meets the varying needs of your students according to their age, ability and how much drama experience they've had.

Your choice of headline should also be determined by how you want your students to respond, for example, how comfortable do you feel about allowing the drama to take its own direction? If you'd feel happier with a more controlled, structured, lesson you should use headlines which are more direct and obvious. Similarly, if you want to explore a particular issue – for example fox hunting, gun laws, or the closure of a local service – then this will influence your choice of headline. However, if you feel happy in allowing your students to devise their own stories and dictate the direction of the drama themselves, then a headline which is open to several interpretations will work really well.

Finally, try not to choose a newspaper headline that is too familiar to your students, has very emotional connections for them, or that might create negative responses. Be very thoughtful about what you select.

The tasks in this pack develop from whole class and small group discussions, through practical drama activities and working in role, to presentations, creative writing and performances. Skills are built slowly so do allow your students the time to develop at their own pace. If your lesson time permits, try to fit two or three activities into each lesson. Similarly, do allow as much time as possible for Q&As, discussions, feedback and explorations of ideas.

In using this pack you can either modify the activities to fit your own news headline, or work through them using the headline provided.

You should be able to combine two or three activities for each lesson.

The headline used for this pack is 'Tragic End'. This was taken from a local newspaper and it has worked well for all of the drama and English activities in this pack. It allows students to create their own stories, and this pack of activities shows you how.

Activity 4. Presentation Of Freeze Frames

Each group in turn presents their freeze frame to the rest of the class and you, as teacher, should lead a discussion about each freeze presented by asking a series of direct questions, for example:

What is the story about?

What's happened?

How did it happen?

What characters are involved?

Is it clear who the characters are?

Do we know how the characters feel about the situation?

What do we like about this picture?

Teacher tip: Some groups will present exactly the same story! When this happens, reassure students that it's not a case of 'copying' but simply something that does happen in drama. As the freeze frames are being presented, insist that the 'audience' remains quiet whilst other students are 'performing' and encourage them to applaud each group. Remember to acknowledge and thank students for their positive behaviour, and their answers to your questions.

Objectives achieved:

- presenting a drama to an audience
- considering and discuss how effective a piece of viewed drama is
- considering how effective their own drama is
- using appropriate vocabulary to assess and discuss drama.

Activity 6. Diary Extracts

At this point in the lesson/unit, there's the opportunity for some creative writing. Give each student a pen or pencil and a piece of paper and tell them to find a space where they can work alone and quietly. Then ask them to write down what their character might put in a diary at the end of the day on which the story happened.

Help your students to write their imaginary diary extracts by asking them to consider some questions, for example:

Why were you there?

How were you involved in the story? (What part did you play in it?)

How did you feel when it happened?

What impact did it have on you afterwards?

These questions can be written on the board or on pieces of paper which can be displayed. Any students playing characters who have 'died' can either write about their death - particularly if it was intentional or suspicious - or can write about events leading up to the moment when they died. Those students playing the role of photographers and interviewers can write in either role, making comments about how the events made them feel and what they thought about the people involved.

Students should write a minimum of three or four lines (without worrying too much about spelling and grammar), and it needs stressing that they are to write as their character - not as themselves. Allow up to 10 minutes (or longer if possible) for students to write their diary extracts and give them regular updates on time remaining.

Teacher tip: Students must work alone and should not be distracted. Some students will prefer to lie on the floor of the drama space or classroom to write their diary extracts, which is fine as long as they remain focused.

Objectives achieved:

- writing in the first person
- developing character through language
- recounting events
- writing creatively
- writing in role.