

# Journalism at School

## Theory and workshop proposals

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The inclusion of learning journalism skills in the classroom may have many advantages. Through practical exercises students: gain understanding of the contemporary world, appreciate diversity of opinion, learn how to use different language styles depending on the publication medium and the recipient. In addition, they experience first-hand how important it is to plan and implement the pre-established assumptions. The habit of conscious and critical use of the media is also extremely important. The advantage of journalism activities is that they can vary a curriculum not only of Polish classes, but also other subjects, for example history, and even science.

The purpose of conducting classes in journalism at school is not only to broaden knowledge but also to learn practical skills. Through exercises and workshops in journalism students learn how to formulate a clear and objective description of reality and clearly express their own views. Equally important is the experience of team work, where each member is responsible for their task.

This article presents a proposal of comprehensive journalism workshops for students who have never taken part in such classes. Modular structure

allows to run the entire course or only some parts, depending on the needs and decisions of the teacher. Duration of the training may also be adjusted. The suggested exercises are focused on press journalism, but the principles of structuring journalistic material and organization of editors' work are similar in each medium.

### Work organization

The most basic principle is the division of roles among the students. Currently the 'everyone writes the same thing' pattern is being abandoned. Much better results are achieved through group work, where students are assigned functions and everyone is responsible for completing a specific task. If one person fails, the whole project cannot be considered complete. In this way everyone has their share in the final 'product'. The failure of the project has also a didactic value because it allows to analyze the mistakes made by the group. This model is closer to the actual work of the editorial staff. It is also better when there is competition between groups and not among all the students individually. It is advisable that all the functions, including the editor-in-chief, are performed by students.

Editorial staff should consist of journalists, photographers, editors and an editor-in-chief. In the case of advanced groups, the structure may be expanded by marketing and technical divisions and it can be divided into sections: news, sports, culture, feature story, etc.

The duties of journalists include proposing topics of articles, gathering information, preparing texts, making possible corrections after editors' comments. Photojournalists should propose and take photos or prepare other graphic material suitable for the topic. Editors work on texts written by journalists, improving them not only in terms of language, but also structure and content, deciding whether to publish them or not. The editor-in-chief organizes and coordinates the actions of editorial staff, and is responsible for the

final result. The number of members of each section depends, of course, on the strength of the group. It can be assumed that there is one editor for every 3–5 journalists. There should be no more than two photojournalists. There is always one editor-in-chief. It is better to form several smaller groups, where each journalist plays an important role. A ten-person group could include, for example: six journalists, two editors, one photojournalist, and one editor-in-chief.

After the roles have been divided, the group members must decide what kind of publications will be prepared. The best way is to show students some real-life examples. Due to a wide range of article topics, the most often selected press includes: *Kurier Szczeciński*, *Głos Szczeciński* (local/regional newspaper), *Rzeczpospolita*, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (nationwide newspaper), *Polityka*, *Wprost* (weekly magazines), and specialized journals attractive for the whole group (sports, music, video games). It should be clear that the choice of the type of paper will determine the topics of prepared texts.

For older and more advanced students a good exercise is to prepare two different types of papers. The most frequent choice in this case is newspaper vs tabloid. Group members choose current topics and present them in a different way, characteristic of each of these papers. The exercise applies differentiation of language style, selection of front-page topics and spotlighting different facts of the same event.

After selecting a topic, the concept of the whole paper must be prepared: the number of pages and articles must be defined. A small group may do a project which will result in a two-page paper, with about six texts on each page. Larger teams may prepare more extensive papers. In such cases it is good to introduce topic pages.

Before the reporter sets off to work, the editors must decide on the topic of the text. Topics are proposed by the journalists. Their attractiveness for the reader is evaluated by the editors. This process takes place at a staff meeting called an editorial board which brings together either all members of the editorial staff or the management only. In teaching those meetings include all project participants.

After discussion, the editorial board accepts the topic proposed by a journalist and plans where to publish it. Group members must decide if the subject is attractive for the reader, whether it requires illustration and where in the newspaper it will be published. The school adopts a simplified distinction into: the main text (the so-called front-page material, the most important and usually the most extensive text on the page), an intermediate text (dealing with a less important topic, placed below the front-page

text), references (short, often one-paragraph information published on the side of the page). Each page should contain at least one photograph or other graphic element, whereby the more important the text, the larger the image.

#### Exercise

##### Check whether the event (your idea of a text) is the news<sup>1</sup>

Is it surprising for the reader?

Is it gaining strength?

Did it last a long time or a very short time?

Is it current?

Does it fit into the overall theme of the issue or the website?

Does it refer to well-known, famous people?

Can you point out a specific person as the perpetrator, the victim or the person who has gained something in the course of the event?

Is the event close to the reader?

Can it move the reader, arouse emotions?

Can you indicate clear examples (worthy of condemnation or praise)?

Can you illustrate the text with an especially attractive illustration?

#### Collecting material

Journalism is not just writing. Without preliminary work there will be no text. After determining and assigning the topics, those group members who play the role of journalists begin to collect information. The sources may be broadly divided into: people, institutions and documents<sup>2</sup>. It is clear that the majority of students will use primarily Internet resources. In this case it is important to pay attention to two issues: plagiarism and credibility.

Information passed by a journalist should be true and objective. For this reason, all Internet sources should be approached carefully, which does not mean they should be totally abandoned. A company or institutional website is as worth quoting as the records in the company documents. However, it must be remembered that students in their articles should clearly refer to the specific source, also in case of Internet sources. In the case of feature story writing it is acceptable to recall blog entries written by the subject of the text, and quote posts on the described events published in social media (provided that they are widely available).

Regardless of the earlier comments, in teaching journalism it is recommended that every text (regardless of its volume) contains a statement of at least one authentic speaker. This requirement sometimes brings surprising results: a student initially uninterested in the topic, instead of treat it superficially begins to explore further sources of information, which naturally results in a more attractive text and better learning outcomes.

**Exercises****Confirm your information**

Write down your sources of information for the text. Give the list to the editor. The editor should add at least one other example to each source, where the information which you obtained can be verified.

**Find the interviewee**

Suggest three interviewees to your topic who can provide you with information. They can be, for example, event participants, the witnesses or the experts.

**Writing**

Article writing begins with the decision about what genre will be used to present the topic. Basically, the researchers divide journalism genres into: news stories, feature stories and mixed form<sup>3</sup>. Journalism education should start by learning how to structure simple news reports correctly. With more advanced groups and as written home assignments you can additionally introduce, for example, an interview, a feature story, a review, or a column. At a basic level, however, it is recommended to improve skills in news report writing.

For the purposes of the proposed exercises you can establish one pattern of structuring a news report, build up on it freely, expand it or, if necessary, restrict it. This will develop in students the habit of transparent, communicative formulation of their writing. If participants of the classes master this scheme, they will be able to modify and adapt it to specific situations.

A news report consists of: title, lead, body, and, optionally, a superscription and a photo caption. The title serves an informative function, and it should also encourage the reader to read on. The lead is a one- or a few-sentence introduction to the text, which should contain basic information. The body develops the lead. The superscription may convey a specific message if the title is non-informative (e.g. when it is based on a play on words, or its main role is to attract the reader's attention). The photo caption should contain specific information and be connected with the photo.

The text should answer the following questions: who? what? where? when? how? why? with what result? how do we know that? A brief answer to the first five questions should be included in the lead. In school the most commonly made mistake is to structure journalistic texts like school essays with introduction, body and conclusion.

Another rule is the so-called inverted pyramid, symbolizing such a text structure which puts the most important information at the beginning of the article. Less important details are included further on. Very often students place the most attractive in-

formation at the end of the text, trying to surprise the reader with a closing point. Unfortunately, no matter how hard the journalist worked on the text, the readers have no obligation to read the article until the very end. The inverted pyramid is supposed to prevent such situations.

The language of news stories must be specific and clear, devoid of jargon. The student should separate the information from the comment (author's opinions can be printed next to the text, separated from the information).

**Exercises****What if the reader does not have time to read the whole text?**

Delete the second half of your text. Does the reader still get the most important information that you wanted to tell him?

**Check your lead**

Give only the lead to another member of the group and ask them the questions: who? what? where? when? how? why? Make sure they are able to answer them.

**Editing**

Editing should be done in pairs: editor/journalist. It is necessary to equally involve representatives of both divisions in creating the final effect of their work. The editor should make changes to the language, content and workshop, in accordance with the rules given in the section on article writing.

A news report should be clear and specific. It is usually helpful to remove redundant pronouns and substitute complex sentences with shorter ones. To make the text more dynamic, you can increase the number of verbs and remove redundant adjectives. It is also worth removing parts that do not contain any specific information. The editor must ensure that the text includes statements of both sides of the conflict, otherwise the text will not be objective.

It is also the duty of the editor to select appropriate graphic material previously provided by the photojournalist.

**Exercises****Delete everything that is unnecessary**

Before you start editing the article, delete the first and last paragraph of the text. Ask the journalist whether the text contains less information after these changes.

Remove all demonstrative and possessive pronouns. Check with the author if the text has become less clear. Try to do the same with other pronouns.

**Publishing**

The final element of the editorial work is to publish the effect of the entire team's work. In the era of the Internet and social media, publishing a newspaper, for example as a pdf or jpg file, or as a web page should not cause any problem, even a financial one. From the point of view of teaching, it is extremely important

to show the effect of group work to the wider audience. Students can feel that their contribution to the success of the group has been appreciated. The possibility to spread information also makes the authors feel responsible for the created material. At this point it is important to raise the issue of plagiarism. It is not only an offense but also a drastic breaking of ethical standards of a journalist profession and a violation of professionalism. Committing plagiarism sometimes excludes the author from the journalist community, regardless of their previous achievements.

#### Exercise

##### Tracking plagiarism

Draw articles. Randomly select three sentences from different parts of the text and enter them in a search engine. Have you found similar journalistic texts that had already been published, containing the same wording?

##### Recommended literature

At the book market there are many books on journalism, both handbooks and theoretical ones. Below the author discusses several most popular works, which he believes are the most useful in school teaching.

A review of useful books should start with comprehensive works. Worth recommending is *Dziennikarstwo i świat mediów (Journalism and the Media World)*, edited by Z. Bauer and E. Chudziński. The authors discuss plainly the theory and history of the media, journalistic genres and rhetoric, press, radio and television journalist workshop, as well as legal and ethical issues. The advantage of the study is accessible language and arrangement of the content, which makes individual articles worth recommending both to teachers and students.

*Słownik wiedzy o mediach (Dictionary of Media)* edited by E. Chudziński was prepared in a similar way. It is actually a manual divided into sections on the history and contemporary media, media development in Poland and in the world, journalistic genres, technology, rhetoric, economics, law and ethics of the media. The dictionary contains many illustrations, clear tables, lists, summaries and examples.

The third comprehensive study is *Biblia dziennikarstwa (The Bible of Journalism)* edited by A. Skworz and A. Niziołek. It is the most extensive work on this list (776 pages), but the articles are not overly long. The greatest advantage of the study is the fact that the authors are active journalists. They describe their own experience of editorial work and provide a lot of examples, but it will be difficult to rely on these texts in terms of the theory. The book serves as a collection of material suitable for classroom discussion.

Theory and practice are combined in *Trener. Jak czytać gazety (The Coach. How to Read Newspapers)* by M. Tomczyk-Maryon. The publication is addressed to secondary school students, as indicated by the subtitle: *Secondary school – extended level*. Apart from the theoretical introduction, the author prepared 13 tasks, all of which are based on working with different journalistic genres. The analysis concerns not the texts but the final versions of the already published journalistic materials. The student can thus see the role played by photos in the text, additional information placed in frames, captions, and even the font.

Also practical exercises, although typically associated with the Polish studies, can be found in *Warsztaty dziennikarskie (Journalist Workshops)* by S. Bortnowski. The proposed tasks are associated with the programme of teaching Polish language. Owing to this the book can be used not only in conducting journalism module, but also during the lessons on literature or linguistics.

For work with more advanced journalist groups recommendable are such books as: *Dziennikarstwo (Journalism)* by M. Chyliński and S. Russ-Mohl and *Dziennikarstwo – Teoria i praktyka (Journalism – Theory and Practice)* by T. Harcup. These are interesting books containing a lot of valuable and practical advice, but they require students' commitment and time. They may be useful in working with journalist extra classes or in implementing programmes aimed at students particularly interested in the subject.

#### References

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The suggestions come from: M. Kunczuk, A. Zipfel, *Wprowadzenie do nauki o dziennikarstwie i komunikowaniu*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 119–121; M. Chyliński, S. Russ-Mohl, *Dziennikarstwo*, Warszawa 2008, pp. 120–133; T. Harcup, *Dziennikarstwo – teoria i praktyka*, Łódź 2009, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, A. Kaliszewski, W. Furman, K. Pokorna-Ignatowicz, *Źródła informacji dla dziennikarza*, Warszawa 2008, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup>M. Wojtak, *Gatunki dziennikarskie*, Lublin 2004, pp. 29–38.