

REPORTING AMERICA AT WAR

CLASSROOM MATERIALS

Contributing to the Story

SUBJECT:
Journalism

**ESTIMATED
TIME REQUIRED:**
One to two
class periods.

OVERVIEW:

Reporters, particularly war correspondents, walk a fine line balancing the need to be as close to the story as possible with the risk of altering the story itself by simply being present. As these veteran reporters have discussed in the documentary *Reporting America at War*, being as close to the war as possible allowed them to provide color, detail, flavor, and rich description to their readers and viewers back home. However, some of them also reflected on how their mere presence as reporters or their proximity to the battles actually meant that they, in some ways, contributed to the story that they reported. In other words, their presence may have influenced or altered the situation at hand. Explore with your students the critical role that closeness and proximity play in the success of the war reporter's writing as well as the drawbacks that this inevitably brings about and how situations like this could very well occur in their own scholastic writing.

RESOURCES FOR THIS LESSON:

Handout #1 The Washington Post Standards and Ethics

<http://www.asne.org/ideas/codes/washingtonpost.htm>

Handout #2 Code of Ethics for the National Press Photographers Association

<http://www.asne.org/ideas/codes/nppa.htm>

Handout #3 Code of Ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists

<http://www.spj.com>

STRATEGY FOR THIS LESSON:

1) Have students view Episode 1 of *Reporting America at War*. To prepare them for the upcoming discussion, write the below passage by Martha Gellhorn on the board.

"The purpose of being someplace and seeing it and writing about it is that you hope to make people see it also, understand it and feel something. But whether you do or not, how can you know?"

2) Divide students into small groups and assign each group to brainstorm the kinds of coverage, description, and detail generated by each of the following reporters featured in the documentary: Ernie Pyle, Richard Harding Davis, Martha Gellhorn, The Writing 69th and Morley Safer. When identifying the various elements, students should also review the effect each reporter's writing had on the public. After students have generated their list, have them share their observations with the class.

3) Have students view episode two of the documentary where Mal Browne reflects on the self-immolation of the Buddhist monk at the Xa Loi pagoda. After reviewing the segment, read aloud to your students the following excerpt from Mal Browne's reflections:

"I took about six or eight rolls of thirty-five millimeter film recording this whole sequence of horrible things. I couldn't have prevented this suicide. But in the years passed, I've felt this searing feeling of having, in perhaps in some way, contributing to the death of, I suppose a kind old man, who probably would not have done what he did if they had not been assured of the pres-

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ence of a newsman who could convey the images and experience to the outer world, because that was the whole point – to produce theater of the horrible so striking that the reasons for the demonstrations would become apparent to everyone.”

Then, distribute copies of Handouts #1-3 that explain the Code of Ethics for *The Washington Post*, the National Press Photographers Association, and the Society of Professional Journalists. Have students read them silently. Invite your students to discuss what ethical concerns a reporter or photographer must consider in a situation like this. Is it bad, as a reporter, to contribute to the very scene you are reporting on? What position do the national publications and journalistic organizations have on the subject? Was Mal Browne right to photograph this event? Why or why not? Allow students to debate their opinions.

4) Return to the class' previous discussion about their findings regarding the colorful reporting of Ernie Pyle, Richard Harding Davis, the Writing 69th, Morley Safer, and Martha Gellhorn. Based on the types of reporting each correspondent(s) did, ask students to speculate what kinds of situations they might have encountered where they might have found themselves altering or contributing to the actual scene they reported.

5) Finally, distribute past copies of the school newspaper. Have students read past issues with an eye toward finding articles that might have yielded a situation where the reporter covering the issue might well have affected the situation itself. Make lists of the articles and then have students share their findings with the class. If time permits, invite the editorial staff from the newspaper to conduct a discussion of how they handled each situation.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

For further study, assign students to develop story ideas for your school or campus that would involve reporting close to the scene or action in order to obtain detail or color. Assign individual students to report on some of the particular scenes or sights around the school, charging them to obtain as much detail and color as possible, and then to write up in a feature format what they observed and saw. Then, in a reflective essay, assign each student to write about possible ethical dilemmas that would have accompanied reporting this particular scene so closely and how they did handle them or how they would have, if none occurred.

Assign students to research and locate some of Mal Browne's photographs of the suicide at Xa Loi pagoda, some of Gellhorn's original articles detailing descriptions of the children affected by the war, Morley Safer's reporting of Cam Ne, the Writing 69th's articles about the one bombing raid on Willemshaven that they witnessed, and Richard Harding Davis' accounts portraying Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt. After students read the actual accounts, assign them to write an analysis explaining any evidence they found in the article of the reporter possibly contributing to the story at hand.

After viewing the documentary consider the following: How could a reporter or photographer in a situation like Browne was in achieve a compromise and still report on the story while ensuring that he or she wasn't contributing to it in any way? What exactly does reporting on the "daily life", as Martha Gellhorn called it, reveal to the reader or viewer that matters so much during wartime? Does it run the risk of being biased in any way? Why or why not? Reporters have continually grappled with the inherent difficulties of their role. Are they detached observers or willing participants? Are reporters obligated to be objective, or should they advocate a particular position? What place do propaganda and censorship have in the reporting of war?

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Review the following passage excerpted from an interview with Rick MacArthur:

“Choosing sides in a war is not necessarily a bad thing. Gellhorn and Hemingway, I think, were passionately attached to a cause. And it may have blinded them in some ways, but may have also spurred them to try harder to get the story. War correspondents need more than just the truth to get them to risk their lives.”

What are the risks of a journalist not being completely objective regarding the topic they are covering? Speculate on how this very sort of sentiment might have come into play during the recent war coverage of the war in Iraq.

RELEVANT STANDARDS:

This lesson addresses the following national content standards established by NCTE

<http://www.ncte.org/standards/standards.shtml>

Standard 5: Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

Standard 7: Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

Standard 11: Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

Standard 12: Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Lisa Greeves has taught high school English and Journalism classes for two Virginia school systems: Fairfax County Public Schools and Rockbridge County Schools. She has a bachelor's degree in English and Communication from James Madison University and a Master's Degree in English from Virginia Commonwealth University. She recently had a chapter published in the 2002 NCTE publication *Applying NCTE/IRA Standards in Classroom Journalism Projects*.