

## Teaching with Primary Sources Quarterly Learning Activity – Secondary Level

### From the “Unsinkable” to the Unthinkable: Analyzing Historic News Coverage of the *Titanic*



[Detail] *The evening world*. (New York, N.Y.) 1887-1931, April 15, 1912, Final edition. From the Library of Congress, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers site: <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1912-04-15/ed-1/seq-1/>

#### OVERVIEW

Students activate their background knowledge of the *Titanic* disaster before analyzing the front page of *The New York Evening World* newspaper’s April 15, 1912 final edition. Using this historic newspaper’s subsequent front page coverage of the tragedy, students consider, “Which is more important to the *Evening World* in 1912: selling newspapers or reporting accurate information?” They discuss their findings and the historical context before writing letters to the editor from a reader’s perspective in 1912 to explain why they would or would not continue to buy the *Evening World* based on its *Titanic* front page coverage.

#### Objectives

After completing this learning activity, students will be able to:

- Analyze a primary source
- Define the phrase, “yellow journalism”
- Express an opinion based on evidence from primary sources
- Write a fictional letter from a historical perspective using primary source findings

#### Time Required

Two 45-minute class periods

#### Recommended Grade Range

9-12

#### Topic/s

News, Journalism & Advertising

#### Subject

Language Arts

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### OVERVIEW (CONT'D)

#### Standards

McREL 4<sup>th</sup> Edition Standards & Benchmarks  
<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

#### *Language Arts*

Standard 4. (Writing) Gathers and uses information for research purposes

Standard 7. (Reading) Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts

Standard 10. (Media) Understands the characteristics and components of the media

#### Credits

Adapted from “*Titanic News*,” a lesson plan created by Betsy Mecham, Canton High School, Canton, IL

### PREPARATION

#### Materials

Have the selected primary sources listed below ready before the activity:

- Print one copy of the front page from the April 15, 1912 issue per student
- Print one set of all remaining five front pages for each pair or group of students
- Each url leads to a page with the option to print a PDF document
- If possible, provide students with magnifying lenses
- Alternatively, have students view digital versions

*The evening world*. (New York, N.Y.) 1887-1931, April 15, 1912, Final Edition  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1912-04-15/ed-1/seq-1/>

*The evening world*. (New York, N.Y.) 1887-1931, April 16, 1912, Final Edition-Extra  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1912-04-16/ed-1/seq-1/>

*The evening world*. (New York, N.Y.) 1887-1931, April 17, 1912, Final Edition-Extra  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1912-04-17/ed-1/seq-1/>

*The evening world*. (New York, N.Y.) 1887-1931, April 18, 1912, Final Edition-Extra No. 3  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1912-04-18/ed-1/seq-1/>

*The evening world*. (New York, N.Y.) 1887-1931, April 19, 1912, Final Edition-Extra  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1912-04-19/ed-1/seq-1/>

*The evening world*. (New York, N.Y.) 1887-1931, April 20, 1912, Latest Extra  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1912-04-20/ed-1/seq-1/>

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### PREPARATION (CONT'D)

Have the materials listed below ready before the activity:

- Print one copy of the *Teacher's Guide to Analyzing Books and Other Printed Texts*  
<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/guides.html>
- Print two copies per student of the *Primary Source Analysis Tool*  
<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/guides.html>

### Resources

Before guiding students through the activity, teachers can familiarize themselves with the background of *The New York Evening World* by reading:

About *The evening world*. New York, N.Y. 1887-1931.  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/>

For references to additional Library of Congress resources relating to the *Titanic* disaster:

*Titanic* Treasure Trove - Reference Bonanza on Ill-Fated 'Unsinkable' Ship by Mark F. Hall  
<http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9805/titanic.html>

### PROCEDURE

1. Connect to students' prior knowledge about the *Titanic* disaster of 1912 through facilitated class discussion. Prompt students with guiding questions to establish consensus on key facts and a timeline; write these responses on the board. Possible questions include:

- What do you know about the *Titanic*?
- When did this historic disaster take place? Where?
- Why did this tragedy occur? Who was responsible?
- How did people at the time learn about what happened?

2. Display (if possible) and distribute copies of the front page of *The New York Evening World* newspaper's April 15, 1912 final edition along with copies of the *Primary Source Analysis Tool*.

3. Use preselected questions from the *Teacher's Guide to Analyzing Books and Other Printed Texts* to guide the class in analyzing the front page. Model how to record ideas on the analysis tool. Prompt students to compare and contrast their prior knowledge to their new findings, and consider the possible reasons for any conflicting information. Possible questions include:

- How do these front page headlines compare to our prior knowledge of this historic event?
- What might explain any inaccuracies in the *Evening World's* news coverage?

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### PROCEDURE (CONT'D)

4. Pose the question, “Which is more important to the *Evening World* in 1912: selling newspapers or reporting accurate information?” Explain that pairs of students will analyze a set of subsequent *Evening World* front pages covering the *Titanic* disaster for evidence that will help them answer this question.

Their assignment will be to:

- analyze each primary source using the *Primary Source Analysis Tool*;
- establish a position on the assigned question; and,
- prepare to discuss their opinions on what primarily attracted this newspaper’s readership using evidence from its front page coverage of the *Titanic* disaster.

5. Divide students into pairs. Provide each pair with the set of front pages and copies of the *Primary Source Analysis Tool*. Use pre-selected questions from the Teacher’s Guide to support students as needed in analyzing the primary sources. Pairs should establish a position on the assigned question, and prepare to discuss their opinions based on the *Evening World*’s front page coverage of the *Titanic* disaster.

6. Prompt the class to dig deeper into the historical context. Read aloud the following excerpt describing how the competition for readers between the *Evening World*’s publisher, Joseph Pulitzer, and William Randolph Hearst, publisher of the *Evening Journal*, led to sensationalized news coverage:

“...intense competition for readers led the two publishers to embrace ‘yellow journalism,’ and they competed over which evening paper would be the most strident, shrill, and loose with the facts.”

From the Library of Congress, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers site: <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/>

Considering this additional information, ask students:

- How might this competition for readers have influenced the *Evening World*’s *Titanic* coverage?

7. Facilitate a class discussion responding to the question, “Which is more important to the *Evening World* in 1912: selling newspapers or reporting accurate information?” Students should justify opinions based on evidence from the pages analyzed. Possible questions to help guide this discussion include:

- How did the *Evening World*’s front page coverage of the *Titanic* disaster evolve? Why?
- What conflicting accounts did the *Evening World* publish about this tragedy? What factors might have contributed to inaccurate reporting (e.g., unreliable sources, deadlines, limited long-distance communication technologies)?
- Think about the historical context: what do you know about life in New York City in 1912?

8. Conclude by assigning students to write letters to the *Evening World*’s editor from a reader’s perspective in 1912, explaining why they would or would not continue to buy this newspaper based on its *Titanic* front page coverage.

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### ACTIVITY EXTENSIONS

- Have students select and read an *Evening World* article relating to the *Titanic* tragedy that exemplifies “yellow journalism.” Acting as the editor of a reputable newspaper from 1912, they must edit it for publication, including: revising the headline, circling any “facts” in need of corroboration and generating additional questions for the reporter to investigate.
- Ask students, “Why do people today consume media coverage: for information or entertainment?” and have them identify and use evidence from current print or online publications to support their opinions.

### EVALUATION

- Active, thoughtful participation in class discussions
- Active engagement with a partner to analyze primary sources, resulting in thorough completion of the *Primary Source Analysis Tool*
- Completed “letter to the editor” that demonstrates understanding of the historical perspective using evidence from the primary sources