Press Agent for a Day

This activity provides students with an opportunity to consider events from different perspectives

by Adrienne Mason

Subject areas: language arts, science, geography
Key concepts: communication, different perspectives, environmental effects of oil
Location: indoors (classroom)
Time: 1 to 2 hours
Materials (optional): glass jars with lids, water, detergent, motor oil

In this activity, students read about an oil spill and then write a press release from a particular perspective. Press releases are written by organizations, governments, businesses, and individuals in order to provide information to the media. As such, press releases often emphasize or de-emphasize events and information, depending on their bias and perspective. This activity provides students with an opportunity to consider events from differing perspectives.

Press releases are short — usually one or two pages — and provide journalists with information, including quotes, that could form the basis of a news article or report. All press releases include a contact name and information, so that journalists can obtain more information from this person or conduct an interview. Sometimes press releases are used as a form of advertising or promotion; at other times, they are used to respond to an issue or to attempt to get accurate information to the public through the media.

Warm-up activities (optional):
1. Fill a glass bottle with water and add a few drops of motor oil. Put on the lid and tighten. Shake the bottle. Ask students to observe whether the oil and water mix. Then add a few drops of detergent and shake again. Ask the students if the oil is still there or if it has dispersed. Repeat using more oil.

This activity demonstrates that detergents disperse oil by breaking it into tiny droplets and spreading it throughout the water. Discuss whether this would be a good way of dealing with oil spills. Have students suggest or try other clean-up methods, such as putting oil and water in a bowl and using a cotton swab to collect the oil or “corralling” the oil with a string.

2. Dip a feather in some oil. Ask students to observe what happens to it. Would a feather covered in oil be able to insulate a bird? Research some environmental effects of oil spills.

Procedure:
1. Read aloud, or provide for students to read, the following account of an oil spill:

On July 23, 1989, the S.S. Bunker Queen, owned by the Oily Oil Company of Vancouver, British Columbia, was traveling south from Alaska with a full load of oil destined for Vancouver. During the evening of
the 23rd, the Bunker Queen hit a large rock about three kilometers (two miles) offshore, close to the small fishing community of Squeaky Clean Cove. The rock was clearly shown on the ship’s charts. The ship began to lose oil. There are rumors that the captain of the ship had not slept for more than 24 hours, owing to poor weather, and was playing rock music at full volume to help him stay awake.

The ship’s crew immediately contacted the Coast Guard and began trying to contain the oil spill. However, millions of liters of oil had escaped and begun to come ashore on remote beaches. Many of the local residents, including fishermen, have been hired by the Oily Oil Company to help with the cleanup. They are being paid $25 per hour. A seabird breeding area is near the site where the ship hit the rock.

2. Discuss the situation described, using some of these ideas as prompts:
   - A rumor is mentioned: is this something that should be stated in a newspaper or magazine article?
   - What might have contributed to the accident?
   - Very few people live in the area where the accident happened. Does this make the oil spill an environmental disaster?
   - What significance might this oil spill have to people who live a great distance from where the accident happened?

3. Have the students write a press release of two to three paragraphs about this accident. They could work in pairs or small groups. Suggest that they begin writing what they consider to be the most important points. Have students write the release from the perspective of one of the following:
   - a representative of a local environment group
   - the president of the local birdwatching group
   - a member of a fishing crew
   - a public relations person for the Oily Oil Company
   - the mayor of Squeaky Clean Cove

4. Ask students to read aloud their press releases. Compare the various points of view and the different things emphasized in each press release. Were some things omitted by some people?

Extensions:
   - For one week, have students collect stories on environmental issues from magazines, newspapers, and the Internet (e.g., from websites of environmental organizations). You could also contact an organization involved in an issue to request its press releases, so that students can see what a real press release looks like. (Sometimes they are posted on a website and can be printed.) Have students collate the information they have gathered under various headings such as the types of issues, the people involved, and which organizations are represented. Hold a discussion of students’ impressions of the stories. Did one issue dominate the week’s news? Did journalists have different points of view on the same issue?
   - Research ways in which oil spills are actually cleaned up.
   - Discuss whether we, as consumers, are in any way responsible for oil spills or other environmental disasters, such as tire fires. After this discussion, read the class this quote from the Southam News Environment Project: “Close to 300 million liters [80 million U.S. gallons] of motor oil vanish into the Canadian environment each year, much of it carelessly poured down sewers by do-it-yourself mechanics. That’s almost eight times more oil than spilled when the Exxon Valdez ran aground off Alaska.”

Adrienne Mason is the author of many education books, including The Green Classroom: 101 Practical Ways to Involve Students in Environmental Issues (Pembroke Publishers, 1991), from which this activity was adapted. She lives in Tofino, British Columbia.