



Media Bias: The Chilcotin War

This MysteryQuest examines the way in which the Chilcotin “massacre” in 1864 was covered by the media at the time. Students will learn how to identify bias and assess the level of bias evident in the newspaper reporting.

A critical thinking challenge to accompany
Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History

***We Do Not Know His Name:
Klatsassin and the Chilcotin War***

<http://www.mysteryquests.ca/quests/04/indexen.html>

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based on an approach developed by The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC²)
www.tc2.ca

Ages

14-16

Courses

Canadian history, civics, language arts

Key Topics

- media bias
- Aboriginal and immigrant relations in the 1860s

Critical Challenges

- Determine the degree to which historical coverage of the events in the Chilcotin War was biased.
- Prepare an impartial account describing the Chilcotin War for students your age.

Broad Understanding

- Students will learn the importance of reporting an event from an unbiased and impartial perspective.
- Students will learn about the tensions that characterized Aboriginal and immigrant relations in the 1860s.

Requisite Tools



Background knowledge

- knowledge of the events in the Bute Inlet incident
- knowledge of colonialism in British Columbia



Criteria for judgment

- criteria for unbiased reporting (e.g., presents more than one perspective, includes all pertinent information, emphasizes facts equally, free of stereotypes)



Critical thinking vocabulary

- perspective
- close-minded
- one-sided
- prejudiced



Thinking strategies

- data chart
- rating scale



Habits of mind

- open minded
- full-minded
- fair-minded

Independent Study

This lesson can be used as a self-directed activity by having students individually or in pairs work their way through the guided instructions and support material found at <http://www.mysteryquests.ca/quests/04/indexen.html>.

Whole Class Activities

On the following pages are suggested modifications of the self-guided procedures found on the MysteryQuest website for use with a class of students. For convenience, each support material and set of directions found on the website is reproduced next to the relevant suggestions for whole class instruction.

Suggested Activities

Introduce the Chilcotin War

- Using *Introduction* as a guide, explain to students the challenge that is the focus of their investigation.

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1864 a series of killings sent a chill across Canada. The blood of 14 men, spilled into the Homathco River before dawn on the morning of April 29th, 1864, was only the beginning of this conflict. By the end of May, 19 road-builders, packers, and a farmer were dead. Within six weeks an army of over 100 men had arrived in the area to catch the killers.

The killings took place in a remote triangle in central British Columbia that, at the time, was inaccessible by road or even horse trail. The dead men had all been part of the teams trying to build a road from the Pacific coast to the recently discovered goldfields of the Cariboo.

This area was traditional territory of the Tsilhqot'in people who had lived on the high Chilcotin Plateau for centuries, perhaps for thousands of years. The survivors of the attacks identified the principal leader of the more than 20 people involved in the killings as a Tsilhqot'in chief, who was called "Klatsassin" by his people.

Much of what we know of these events depends upon what was reported by the newspapers of the day. Did they give a fair account of what is sometimes called the Chilcotin War? Were the newspapers biased? You are invited to study the evidence and reach your own conclusions.

- Using *The Task* as a guide, outline the activities that students will undertake.

THE TASK

This MysteryQuest invites you to assess the degree to which the newspapers in 1864 fairly reported this violent conflict between whites and First Nations peoples — the bloodiest single such incident to take place on Canadian soil.

Prior to examining documents related to the Chilcotin War, you will consider the relationship between the concepts of "bias" and "perspective." Each of us brings a particular perspective to an issue; the challenge facing historians and journalists is to report on events from a perspective that is unbiased or impartial. You will examine several historical newspaper reports of the Chilcotin War and decide on the degree to which these accounts were biased. Finally, you will prepare your own impartial account of the event intended for use by students your age who are studying European-First Nations contact.

Reflect on bias and perspective

- Using *Step 1: Reflect on bias and perspective* as a guide, discuss with students the terms “bias,” “perspective,” and “impartial.”
- Ask students to suggest how a very large teen event that requires crowd control (such as a rock concert) might be described from the perspective of young people and the same event from the perspective of adults who do not have children. Ask students if either description might be biased. How would the event be described from an impartial perspective?
- Duplicate and distribute to students copies of *Distinguishing Biased and Impartial Perspectives* and *Exploring Media Bias*. Ask students to read the three fictional accounts of a high school hockey game and look for indications of author bias or impartiality. Suggest that if they have difficulty determining which of the three accounts is the most impartial, to refer to the briefing sheet that provides background information.

DISTINGUISHING BIASED AND IMPARTIAL PERSPECTIVES

It is often suggested that everyone has a particular perspective, and that this implies everyone must necessarily be biased in their opinions. This impression is popular among people who think that “perspective” and “bias” are synonyms — that the two words have identical meaning. We believe there is an important difference between these terms.

What is the difference between a biased and an impartial perspective?

A perspective is a viewpoint from which a person sees an event. For example, I might look at an event from a teacher’s or from a student’s point of view, or I might look at an event from high above or from ground level. Clearly, the perspective will influence what a person sees. However, this is not the same as saying one’s perspective is necessarily biased. A biased perspective implies that it unfairly prejudices the result in favour of one person or group. For example, if I looked at an event solely from a teacher’s point of view, I might be biased against the students — I might neglect their side of the story. But what if the perspective I took was to look from both points of view? Instead of favouritism towards one group, I sought to make sure both sides were fully represented and respected. In other words, what if I tried to look at it from an impartial perspective?

Is it possible to offer an impartial perspective?

Can anyone put aside their personal feelings completely and look at an event fairly? You may have a favourite sport team, and naturally you would like them to win the championship. Just because you are a fan of the team, does it mean you are incapable of making an impartial assessment of which team is most likely to win the championship? Surely, if you fairly considered all the evidence and put aside temporarily your personal hopes for the team, you could reach a warranted conclusion. Certainly, the Canadian legal system expects judges to bring an impartial perspective to the cases they hear — they are not to allow their personal wishes to distract them from reaching an informed conclusion based on a fair hearing on all sides in the case. Even if people are not always completely successful in their attempts, it does not mean that they should not try to achieve this goal. This would be like a runner who cannot always beat his personal record, so he decides that he should not make any effort to do so. Because impartiality is an ideal to strive for, it may be more appropriate to talk about the degree to which a person’s perspective is impartial, rather than seeing perspectives as either completely biased or completely impartial.

How do we determine if someone is impartial?

We can best determine the degree to which a person’s perspective is biased or impartial by knowing how they arrived at their conclusions. Unfortunately, historians rarely have the luxury of interviewing people to determine the thinking behind their conclusions. Instead, historians must look for evidence in the writing that people have left behind that might suggest bias or impartiality in their perspectives. The following factors are helpful in determining the degree to which an account is biased or impartial.

Impartial Perspective	Biased Perspective
<i>Open-minded:</i> Is there any indication the author was (or would be) willing to accept new ideas and alter his opinions based on new evidence?	<i>Closed-minded:</i> Is there any indication the author was (or would be) unwilling to consider evidence that might go counter to a predetermined view?
<i>Full-minded:</i> Is there any indication the author was well informed and considered available evidence from various perspectives?	<i>One-sided:</i> Is there any indication the author reached conclusions on inadequate or partial evidence, especially by focusing on information that <u>favoured</u> the author’s preferred position?
<i>Fair-minded:</i> Is there any indication the author sincerely tried to put personal interests aside when weighing the competing evidence?	<i>Prejudiced:</i> Is there any indication the author’s personal attachments pre-judged the result in <u>favour</u> of one side over the others?

STEP 1: REFLECT ON BIAS AND PERSPECTIVE

Before we can decide whether or not a newspaper account is unbiased, we must be clear about the difference between the concepts of ‘bias’ and ‘perspective.’ Many people use these terms interchangeably, creating the impression that everyone is biased simply because each of us has our own perspective or view on the world. This may be an overly simplistic and a misleading assumption. If all people are necessarily biased does this mean that no one is able to examine issues fairly and draw warranted conclusions in light of the available evidence?

If we look carefully at the meaning of these terms we can better understand how some perspectives may be biased and others may not be. A perspective is a viewpoint from which a person sees an event. A perspective is biased if it unfairly prejudices the result in favour of one person or group. The opposite of bias is impartial. An impartial perspective indicates that the person has attempted to remove any prejudice in favour of or against one person or group by ensuring that all sides are fully represented and respected. Because it is difficult to be completely impartial, it makes more sense to talk about the degree to which a person’s perspective is biased or impartial. The following factors are helpful when making this assessment:

A perspective is impartial to the extent that the person is

- *Open-minded:* the person willingly accepts new ideas and alters her opinions based on new evidence;
- *Full-minded:* the person considers the available evidence from the various individuals or groups involved in the event;
- *Fair-minded:* the person sincerely tries to put personal interests or preferences aside when weighing the competing evidence.

A perspective is biased to the extent that the person is

- *Closed-minded:* the person is unwilling to consider evidence that might go counter to a predetermined view;
- *One-sided:* the person reaches conclusions by focusing largely on information that favours his preferred position;
- *Prejudiced:* personal attachments prejudice the result in favour of one group or view over the others.

Read the three fictional newspaper accounts of a high school hockey game found in *Exploring Media Bias*. In each case, look for indications of author bias or impartiality. If you have trouble determining which of the three accounts is the most impartial, go to *Distinguishing Biased and Impartial Perspectives* to learn more about these concepts.

MysteryQuest 4 Support Materials 1 (Briefing Sheet)

Exploring Media Bias

Read the following three fictional newspaper accounts of a high school hockey game. Look for indications of bias or impartiality on the part of the author.

Account One: “Pearson High Cheated of Victory”

Our girls struggled hard on the rink last night, but could not get by the rough play by the Queensville Hawks. The result was a disappointing 3 – 2 defeat. Pearson was ahead by a goal for much of the game. The vicious checking by the Hawks and a couple of tripping infractions that the referee deliberately ignored late in the game allowed the Hawks to score two lucky goals for the win.

Account Two: “Hawks Power to Victory”

Female Hawks are flying high this season as they chalked up a decisive 3 – 2 victory over the flagging Pearson Arrows. Pearson’s skaters could not keep up with the determined efforts of the Hawks. Our team’s “never say die” attitude paid off with two beautiful goals late in the game to secure the victory.

Account Three: “Hawks and Arrows Battle Until the End”

The Pearson High Arrows and Queensville Hawks showed great determination and skill as they battled in a closely fought game. Although the Arrows were leading by a goal near the end of the game, they lost focus when the referee did not call two penalties that the Arrows’ players thought were deserved. One of these incidents probably deserved a penalty, but a championship team can’t let these misfortunes push them off their game. And the Hawks made the best of their opportunities with two quick goals to secure a 3 – 2 “come from behind” win.

- Ask students if the accounts of the hockey game show signs of biased reporting. Discuss the factors that indicate bias, generating a list that may include such things as:
 - favours one perspective over others (one-sided)
 - subjective (prejudiced)
 - includes narrow-minded stereotypes, assumptions or opinions (closed-minded)
 - omits pertinent information (one-sided)
 - emphasizes facts unequally (prejudiced)

Learn about the conflict

- Using *Step 2: Learn about the conflict* as a guide, help students gather background knowledge of the incident. Duplicate and distribute to students copies of the “Welcome” on the homepage of the main website, found at <http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/klatsassin/home/indexen.html>. In a discussion of the events, ask students to comment on anything in the account that surprised them. If students appear to have formed any conclusions about the incident, suggest that they withhold judgment until they have done further research.

STEP 2: LEARN ABOUT THE CONFLICT

Before looking at specific newspaper accounts of the Chilcotin War, it will help to learn more of the background to this event. Begin by reading the *Welcome* page.

Navigate around the site and sample each section. Investigate at least one of each of the following items.

- a map
- a newspaper account of the incident
- a description of Tsilhqot'in (Chilcotin) culture and economy
- a description of the effects of smallpox or other diseases on the First Nations of British Columbia.

Check the *Archives* section and *Contexts* if you have trouble finding what you are looking for.

- Instruct students to work in pairs or small groups to sample several sections of the main website. They should investigate at least one of the following:
 - a map;
 - a newspaper account of the incident;
 - a description of Tsilhqot'in (Chilcotin) culture and economy;
 - a description of the effects of smallpox or other diseases on the First Nations of British Columbia .

Suggest students click on the *Archives* and *Context* sections of the main website if they have problems locating the information. Invite students to share their findings in a class discussion or display them in the classroom. In the discussion of the newspaper accounts, ask students to suggest if the account seems very biased, somewhat biased, somewhat impartial or completely impartial and give reasons for their decisions.

Examine newspaper accounts

- Using *Step 3: Examine newspaper accounts* as a guide, explain to students that their next task is to examine three of the newspaper accounts written around the time of the event to determine whether they reflect their authors' impartiality or bias. Point out to students that, since these accounts were written in the 1800s, they may have to read the documents more than once to familiarize themselves with the way the language is used.

STEP 3: EXAMINE NEWSPAPERS ACCOUNTS

Your next task is to decide the degree to which newspaper accounts at the time reflect a biased or impartial account of the Chilcotin War in 1864. Select three historical newspaper accounts from the list found in *Evidence in the Case*. As you read each document consider the extent to which three factors are present:

- open- or close-minded,
- full-minded or one-sided,
- fair-minded or prejudiced.

For each article, use a copy of *Identifying the Degree of Bias* to record clues you find about the author's impartiality or bias. Assign each factor a score from +4 (highly impartial) to -4 (highly biased). Afterwards, offer your overall assessment of the degree of bias or impartiality of the document.

Evaluation

- Use the rubric *Assessing the Degree of Bias* to evaluate students' ability to identify and assess bias in each of the three newspaper articles. Use the rubric *Assessing an Impartial Account* to evaluate students' written accounts of the event.



MysteryQuest 4 Evaluation Materials 1 (Rubric)

Assessing the Degree of Bias

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
Identifies indicators of bias/impartiality	Identifies many obvious and less obvious indicators.	Identifies many indicators including some less obvious examples.	Identifies the most obvious indicators.	Identifies some indicators but obvious examples are omitted.	Identifies no relevant indicators.
Offers plausible conclusion about degree of bias/impartiality	The conclusion is highly plausible and highly justifiable in light of the evidence.	The conclusion is clearly plausible and justifiable in light of the evidence.	The conclusion is plausible and somewhat justifiable in light of the evidence.	The conclusion is plausible but is barely justifiable given the evidence.	The conclusion is implausible and not justifiable given the evidence.



MysteryQuest 4 Evaluation Materials 2 (Rubric)

Assessing an Impartial Account

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
Provides accurate and important information	Provides abundant factual information that is accurate and includes all the important details.	Factual information is sufficient, mostly accurate, and includes most of the important details.	Factual information is sufficient, mostly accurate, and includes many important details.	Factual information is adequate, sometimes accurate, and includes some important details.	Factual information is very limited, seldom accurate, and misses all the important details.
Offers impartial perspective	Shows consistent openness to other conclusions, considers information from various perspectives, and obviously tries to offer conclusions that are very fair to all sides.	Shows clear signs of openness to other conclusions, regularly considers information from various perspectives, and tries to reach conclusions that are fair to all sides.	Shows passing openness to other conclusions, considers an alternative perspective on key issues, and offers conclusions that show some sensitivity to other sides.	Shows no clear openness to other conclusions, occasionally considers an alternative perspective, and offers conclusions that show very modest sensitivity to other sides.	Is obviously very fixed on the conclusion, consistently considers one perspective only, and gives obvious preference to one side over others.
Communicates clearly	Is very clearly written and highly appropriate for the intended audience.	Is mostly clearly written and largely appropriate for the intended audience.	Is generally clear and often appropriate for the intended audience.	Some ideas are clearly expressed and may be somewhat appropriate for the intended audience.	Account is generally unclear and not at all suited to the intended audience.

Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History©
MysteryQuest 4 - Media Bias: The Chilcotin War
MysteryQuest 4 Home Website - We Do Not Know His Name: Klatsassin and the Chilcotin War

Extension

- Invite students to work individually or as a class to pursue the suggested activities listed in *Extension*.

EXTENSION

Judge the most reliable newspaper

Examine the newspaper coverage of the Chilcotin War listed in *Evidence in the Case* to decide which newspaper—The British Colonist, The British Columbian, the Daily Press or the Daily Chronicle—provided the most impartial coverage.

Sources for the news

Read a selection of the newspaper stories about the Chilcotin War to find out what sources the newspapers were using in writing about the incident. How might these sources influence the reporting of the news?

Construct a map

Use the information in the May 12 issues of the newspapers to construct a map that helps to explain the events.