

Lesson Overview

How many days are needed to teach this lesson?	3
Grade Level(s)	9th
Subject(s)	English, Language Arts
Lesson Summary	Through analysis of investigations into prisons in two U.S. states, students evaluate the role of journalism in uncovering systemic issues and inspiring local action.
Standards	Missouri Learning Standards 9-10.RI.1.A – Draw conclusions, infer, and analyze by citing relevant and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. (<i>**This standard would help students examine the investigative reporting in the article and how the authors present their findings.**</i>) 9-10.W.1.A – Conduct research to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; gather multiple relevant, credible sources, print and digital; integrate information using a standard citation system. (<i>**This would be useful for guiding students in researching incarceration policies and jail conditions.**</i>) 9-10.SL.1.A – Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision-making, clear goals, and deadlines, and individual roles as needed. (<i>**This standard would support classroom discussions on the ethical and societal implications of jail deaths.**</i>)
Focus Pulitzer Center news story	"Deaths in Pa. Jails Are Undercounted. Our Investigation Found Dozens of Hidden Cases" by Joshua Vaughn and Brittany Hailer for PENNLive Patriot-News "Uncovering Deaths in Pennsylvania Jails" by Joshua Vaughn and Brittany Hailer for Penn-News "Renters Are in Revolt. This Tenant Union Plans To Get Them Organized" by Isabel Evans, Marley Cogan, and Charlotte Alter for Time

Theme/idea/issue connecting the Pulitzer Center article to your community	• Systemic failures • Impacts on marginalized communities • Journalism as a reflective tool for change
What additional news outlet(s) in your city/state/region will students learn about in the learning experience?	“Trapped in a fiery kennel’: Lawsuit against Missouri Department of Corrections alleges extreme heat at one prison is a constitutional violation” by Meg Cunningham
Content Advisory (optional)	This lesson may contain information pertaining to unpleasant causes of death and related elements.
Notes on Context	A significant number of my students have family members that are currently incarcerated or have been in the past.

Lesson Plan

Lesson Objectives and Essential Questions

Reading Informational Texts: Standard 9-10.RI.2.D - Evaluate an author's argument, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

Writing Arguments: Standard 9-10.W.2.A - Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence

Essential Questions:

1. What role does investigative journalism play in holding institutions accountable?
2. How can uncovering hidden truths impact individuals and communities?
3. What responsibilities do journalists and citizens have when addressing systemic injustice?

Focus Pulitzer Center News Story/Stories

["Deaths in Pa. Jails Are Undercounted. Our Investigation Found Dozens of Hidden Cases"](#) by Joshua Vaughn and Brittany Hailer for *PENNLive Patriot-News*

["Uncovering Deaths in Pennsylvania Jails"](#) by Joshua Vaughn and Brittany Hailer for *Penn-News*

["Renters Are in Revolt. This Tenant Union Plans To Get Them Organized"](#) by Isabel Evans, Marley Cogan, and Charlotte Alter for *Time*

Introducing the Lesson

Imagine walking into your classroom and sparking a conversation so dynamic that students can't help but dive into critical thinking about real-world issues. This lesson centers on ["Uncovering Deaths in Pennsylvania Jails"](#) by Joshua Vaughn and Brittany Hailer, an investigative piece that exposes systemic injustices and highlights the power of journalism to bring hidden truths to light. With this lesson, your students won't just be reading; they'll be dissecting arguments, evaluating evidence, and connecting journalistic bravery to civic responsibility. It's the kind of classroom experience that leaves them asking, *"What can I do to make a difference?"*

This is more than just a lesson! It is an invitation to turn your students into advocates for social justice and change. By honing their skills in reading informational texts and writing compelling arguments, they will uncover the mechanics of investigative journalism and gain tools to approach injustice with an informed critical

lens. This lesson takes students out of the passivity of their textbooks and into an active role in stories that need to be told.

Warm-up/Opening

Engage students in a discussion about the essential questions for this lesson using the lead-in questions below:

1. What role does investigative journalism play in holding institutions accountable?
 - a. Lead-In 1: "Think about the last time you heard about a major issue exposed by the news. How might the world be different if that issue had never been uncovered?"
 - b. Lead-In 2: "Imagine you're a journalist investigating a powerful institution. What obstacles might you face, and how would you ensure your findings lead to change?"

Review the video, ["How to Become an Investigative Reporter"](#) from NBCU with students.

2. How can uncovering hidden truths impact individuals and communities?
 - a. Lead-In 1: "Consider the ripple effect: If one hidden truth is revealed, how might it change the lives of individuals directly involved, and even those who aren't?"
 - b. Lead-In 2: "Think about the risks and rewards of uncovering difficult truths. Why might some people fear change, even when it's for the better?"
3. What responsibilities do journalists and citizens have when addressing systemic injustice?
 - a. Lead-In 1: "In a society where injustice exists, who do you think holds the greatest responsibility to speak out—journalists, citizens, or someone else? Why?"
 - b. Lead-In 2: "Imagine uncovering evidence of systemic injustice in your own community. How would you respond, and what steps could you take to bring about change?"

Preparing to Engage with the Focus Resource(s)

Before students read the focus story for the lesson, project photos of the two men at the center of the article: Anthony Tralotta and Jamal Crummel. No names. No context. Just ask the question: *"What do you see?"*

Introduce the article, "[Deaths in Pa. Jails Are Undercounted. Our Investigation Found Dozens of Hidden Cases](#)" by Joshua Vaughn and Brittany Hailer and explain that this investigative article from *Penn Live* tells the stories of Tralotta, Crummel and others.

Exploring the Resource(s)

As students read the article, pause periodically to check for understanding and ask the following questions:

1. Does this story connect to anything you've seen or experienced?
2. What can people—what can we—do about this?

Processing the Resource(s)

1. After reading, engage students in some or all of the following questions:
 - What argument are the authors, Joshua Vaughn and Brittany Hailer, making in "[Deaths in Pa. Jails Are Undercounted. Our Investigation Found Dozens of Hidden Cases](#)," and what evidence do they use to support their claims?
 - Why do you think these deaths weren't reported?
 - Does this story connect to anything you've seen or experienced?
 - What can people—what can we—do about this?
 - How does the article demonstrate the role of investigative journalism in uncovering systemic issues?
2. **Optional Group Work:** Divide students into small groups and assign each group a focus audience from the article (e.g., the families of victims, jail officials, policymakers, victims, community, journalists).
 - I. **Map the Impact:** Each group maps out how the investigative reporting affects their assigned group. For example:
 - How does this article influence the families of victims?
 - What responsibilities does it place on policymakers or the justice system?

*** This should be depicted using some type of physical/sensory representation. For example, it could be photographs, drawings, audio, etc.
 - II. **Connectedness Chain:** Groups collaborate to create a "chain" showing how investigative journalism connects these groups and drives accountability. For example:
 - Journalists uncover systemic issues → Families seek justice → Policymakers are pressured to reform systems → Communities become more informed.

III. **Presentation:** Each group presents their accountability chain to the class, fostering a discussion on how journalism can spur change.

3. Connecting to Local Reporting: Engage students in a second article from *The Beacon: Kansas City* titled [“Trapped in a fiery kennel’: Lawsuit against Missouri Department of Corrections alleges extreme heat at one prison is a constitutional violation”](#) by Meg Cunningham. This piece reported that temperatures in solitary confinement at Alcoa Correctional Center had reached 111 degrees—conditions that are inhumane by any standard. After reading, ask students to identify key details from the story. Then, engage students in the following questions:

- Does this story connect to anything you've seen or experienced?
- Why is this happening? Who's responsible? Why don't more people know?
- What can people—what can we—do about this?

4. Engage students in a discussion connecting the two articles. Ask them to think more about what they think should be done about these issues, and who might be able to help. Then, introduce students to the video, [“Renters Are in Revolt. This Tenant Union Plans To Get Them Organized”](#) by Isabel Evans, Marley Cogan, and Charlotte Alter for *Time*. Engage students in a discussion about what they learned from the organizer in the film that could be applied to raising awareness about injustices facing prisoners in Pennsylvania and their communities.

Performance Task(s)

For the final piece of this lesson, students create social media posts to raise awareness about deaths in custody and the lack of accountability from prison systems. Posts should reflect information explored throughout the unit and have a clear audience.

Students also write short reflections documenting how they related to the reporting explored in the unit and what they think should be done about the issue they explored.

Assessment

Students compose a narrative in which they address specific requested components from the teacher.