

# Voices in the Shadow of Death: The Lost Narratives of the Bubonic Plague and Covid-19

Unit plan by Adam Guerrero

Recommended Age(s)/Grade(s): Age(s) 14-18/9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> Grade(s)

## Lesson 1: What are under-reported stories and how do you find them?

### Objectives: Students will be able to...

- Evaluate how they get their news, what stories they seek, why news is important, and questions you have about how the news is made
- Define the term “under-reported story” and describe examples of these stories
- Analyze how under-reported stories are different from other news stories and why they matter
- Evaluate how under-reported stories connect to issues you see in their communities, and brainstorm under-reported issues in their communities
- Practice methods for identifying and analyzing under-reported stories by evaluating news and conducting your own research.

*Note: This lesson is adapted from the lesson plan, “How to Find and Analyze Under-reported Stories,” which can be found [here](#).*

### Resources:

Students can use [this graphic organizer](#) to track their lesson notes and homework.

### Warm up:

1. Students brainstorm a definition for the word “news” and compare it to the definition found in the dictionary.
2. Students discuss how they get their news, the stories they often see, and the stories they wish they saw more of in the news. Here are guiding questions to ask in the whole group discussion:
  - a. What are the top three things a person needs to know about what is happening in the world this week?
  - b. How did you learn about these issues?
  - c. What stories do you see the most in the news?
  - d. How might the stories you chose differ from someone else in your class? Or in your family? Or from someone in another part of the world?
  - e. What is something that you think is important, but that you don’t see much about in the news?
  - f. Why do you think news outlets choose to feature some stories more than others.
  - g. Why are some news stories receiving less attention? Try to think of at least three reasons!
2. Students watch this [video](#) from the Pulitzer Center’s editors and journalists and answer the following questions:

- a. According to the speakers in the video, what is an under-reported story?
- b. How are under-reported news stories different from other news stories? Reference examples from the video in your description.
- c. How can you find under-reported stories, in the news and in your own communities?

**Reading and Analysis: How do you find and analyze under-reported stories?**

1. Have students select one of the following students to read.
  - [“Health Care Workers Seek to Flatten COVID-19’s ‘Second Curve’ --Their Rising Mental Anguish”](#) by Rodrigo Pérez Ortega for *Science Magazine*
  - [“El bus que nunca llega: Los migrantes varados en las calles de Lima tomada por la pandemia”](#) by Musuk Nolte for *Ojo Brujo* (spanish)
  - [“Pictured with their Past: Survivors of Canadas’ ‘Cultural Genocide’ Speak Out”](#) by Daniella Zalcmán for *National Geographic*
  - [“Beijing’s Rat Tribe: The Chinese Dream Goes Underground”](#) by Sim Chi Yin for *Foreign Affairs*
2. After reading, students reply to the following questions:
  - What details stood out to you from the story the journalist reported?
  - Why do you think this qualifies as an under-reported story?
  - Why is this story important? What connections can you make between this story, and issues/people/places in your own community?

**Independent Practice: Find under-reported stories from where you are right now!**

1. Students review [a video from Pulitzer Center editors](#) that outlines how journalists use the following methods to identify under-reported stories.
  - a. Analyze news and question what is missing
  - b. Talk to people about issues that matter to them
  - c. Observe the people and places around you, and get curious
2. Allow students to choose one of the following activities to research under-reported stories from their local community. (To be done for homework)
  - a. Analyze news and question what is missing
  - b. Talk to people about issues that matter to them
    - i. Have students:
      1. Make a list of people you have seen in the last week. Consider, who do you want to know more about?
      2. Pick one or two people who you feel comfortable talking with, and use the following questions to guide your conversation:
        - a. What issues are important to you, and why?
        - b. What issues are impacting the people you know, and how?
      3. Use your interviews to identify an idea for an under-reported story. Write a 3-5 sentence description of your story idea below that answers the following questions: What is the under-reported story you want to investigate? Why do you think this story is important? How would you research this story?

- a. Consider the following as you outline your plan: What online sources could you use to learn more? Who could you interview? Who is connected to this issue and how? What places might you visit to see the causes and impacts of this issue for yourself?
- c. Observe the people and places around you, and get curious
  - i. Have students:
    1. Make a list of the places that they have seen in the past day. (ask the following questions)
    2. Pick one of these places, and use the following questions to come up with an idea for an under-reported story that you could investigate on your own:
      - a. What doesn't make sense to you?
      - b. What do you see that feels unfair or confusing?
      - c. What do you want to know more about?
    3. Write a 3-5 sentence description below of your story idea that answers the following questions:
      - a. What is the under-reported story you want to investigate?
      - b. Why do you think this story is important?
      - c. How would you research this story? Consider the following as you outline your plan.
        - i. What online sources could you use to learn more? Who could you interview? Who is connected to this issue and how? What places might you visit to see the causes and impacts of this issue for yourself?

## **Lesson 2: Voices in the Shadow of Death: The Lost Narratives of the Bubonic Plague and Covid-19**

### **Objectives: Students will be able to:**

- Analyze a series of historical 14th century sources on the Black Death for their author, bias, and purpose in order to evaluate which voices are not present in the documents.
- Analyze contemporary sources surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic for the above-mentioned elements and seek to determine similarities and differences between the sources.
- Students will analyze under-reported news stories on the coronavirus pandemic, and evaluate what stories might have been under-reported during the Black Death

### **Resources:**

Students can track their notes throughout the lesson using [this graphic organizer](#).

**Warm up:**

1. Students watch a [video](#) from *SheKnows* that features teens who are describing the emotional challenges they have been facing during the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. Students then perform a Book, Head, Heart analysis of the video and seek to make connections between the stories of the individuals in the video and their own lives. ([Here is a blog post](#) that describes this structure for making personal connections to texts.) Students should prepare to discuss the following questions:
  - a. Who is being affected?
  - b. Why are these stories not being discussed more often in the media?
3. Students track their responses using page 1 of this **Lesson 2 Graphic Organizer**.

**Reading and Analysis of Primary Sources about the Experiences of Different Communities During the Bubonic Plague and COVID-19 Pandemics:**

1. Students review a brief historical overview of the Bubonic Plague on page 1 of the **Lesson 2 Graphic Organizer**.
2. Using pages 2-6 of the **Lesson 2 Graphic Organizer**, students analyze primary source documents that articulate stories about the Black Death from the Middle Ages and the modern Covid-19.
  - a. **Resources** (Links are also embedded in the graphic organizer):
    - i. Article: [“Undocumented in the Pandemic: Nowhere Else to Go”](#) by Emily Kassie and Ben Solomon for PBS *Frontline* and *The Marshall Project*
    - ii. Article: [“Between Borders”](#) by Anna-Catherine Brigida, Acacia Coronado, and Emily Kinskey for *The Texas Observer* and *El Malpensado*
    - iii. Article: [“Sources believe coronavirus outbreak originated in Wuhan lab as part of China's efforts to compete with US”](#) by Brett Baier and Gregg Re for *Fox News*
    - iv. Article: [“Asian Americans in San Francisco are dying at alarming rates from COVID-19: Racism is to blame”](#) by Marco della Cava for *USA Today*
    - v. Excerpts from [“The Black Death,” which was translated and edited by Rosemary Horrox](#). *Translated and edited by Rosemary Horrox. The Black Death. Manchester ; New York : New York, NY : Manchester University Press ; Distributed exclusively in the USA and Canada by St. Martin's Press, 1994.* **The excerpts below are already included in [the graphic organizer for this lesson](#).**
      - “The Persecution of the Jews”
      - “Accusations of well-poisoning against the poor”
      - “The astrological causes of the plague, Geogfrey de Meaux”
      - “The Sins of the English”
  - b. **Guiding Comprehension Questions** (also outlined in the graphic organizer):
    - i. What is the author’s purpose and bias?
    - ii. Who is controlling the narrative?
    - iii. Whose voices are highlighted in this story?
    - iv. Whose voices are missing from the document?
    - v. What misinformation regarding the pandemic, if any, is being spread in this document?

**Closing Discussion:**

1. Using their notes from Lesson 2 Graphic Organizer, students engage in a discussion using the following questions:
  - a. What role did superstition and religion play during the Black Death?
  - b. Why were certain groups targeted during the Black Death?
  - c. Who is controlling the narrative of the stories? Whose voices are dominating the conversation?
  - d. What sort of misinformation was being spread during the Black Death?
  - e. In what ways is the Black Death similar and or different from the pandemic of COVID-19?

### **Lesson 3: Reporting During the Black Death**

**Objectives: Students will be able to...**

1. Analyze a series of historical 14th century sources on the Black Death for their author, bias, and purpose in order to evaluate which voices are not present in the documents.
2. Analyze contemporary sources surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic for the above-mentioned elements and seek to determine similarities and differences between the sources.
3. Analyze under-reported news stories on the coronavirus pandemic, and evaluate what stories might have been under-reported during The Black Death
4. Apply interview skills to the composition of original interviews that highlight under-reported stories from The Black Death

**Resources:**

Students can use [this graphic organizer](#) to plan and compose their mock interviews.

**Warm Up:**

1. Students engage in a discussion using the following questions about common themes seen in the primary sources explored in lesson 2. ***Note: Students should utilize their responses from Lesson Plan 2 Graphic Organizer as part of the discussion.***
  - a. Guiding questions
    - i. Whose voices are highlighted in these stories?
    - ii. Whose voices are missing from these documents?
    - iii. What misinformation regarding the pandemic, if any, is being spread in these documents?
    - iv. In what ways is the Black Death similar and or different from the pandemic of COVID-19?

**Introducing the Final Activity:**

1. Having analyzed the documents, students will identify specific groups of people who were impacted by the Black Death, but who were not represented in dominant coverage of the pandemic.

2. Students will then prepare to conduct an interview with the individuals they identified. Their goal is to compose an interview that creates space for people who were under-represented during the Black Death pandemic to communicate what their lives were like.

**Planning and Conducting a Mock Interview with a Person Who Was Affected by the Black Death:**

1. Students review the video "[Interview Techniques for Telling Under-reported Stories](#)"
2. Students use the following questions to identify a person whose story they want to illuminate using a mock interview:
  - a. Who might you want to focus on for your mock interview?
  - b. What are the demographics of the individual that you are interviewing? How were they impacted by the Black Death?
  - c. What makes their story an under-reported story?
  - d. How might this person's story compare to the stories researched on day two?
  - e. What would this person say about the events taking place when they were alive? What would they want us to know about their experience that history books have left out?
3. Students write their interview in a question and answer format (minimum of six questions) using the graphic organizer, "[Lesson 3: Reporting During the Black Death.](#)"

**Closure:**

1. Have students complete the closure [form to document what they learned from the unit](#).
  - a. [Click here](#) for a glimpse at responses from students who engaged with the unit in fall 2020.