

MODULE FOUR

In the content session, members examine local newspapers and their coverage of local problems. In the second, members select a community problem and research the problem.

CONTENT SESSION: CONDUCTING A NEWS SEARCH

The local newspaper is a tremendous resource for learning about the community. In this session, members use the local newspaper as a tool for gathering information about community problems. First, members read about newspapers and news articles. Then members search for articles on community problems, arrange them by problem area, and report their findings to the larger group.

Facilitator Checklist

- Pens and paper for members
- Recent copies of local newspapers for members
- Copies of Handout 4A for members

Learning Objectives

Members will be able to:

1. Find newspaper articles on AmeriCorps issue areas.
2. Evaluate newspaper coverage of local problems and issues.
3. Explain why it is important to be well-informed on public issues.

Notes

Conducting a News Search

Introduction

As a citizen, it is important to be well-informed. Newspapers can supply a great deal of information about community issues on education, public safety, the environment, and other human needs. How does your local newspaper cover these issues? In this session, you will use the local newspaper as an information-gathering tool.

I. Newspapers

News stories are written in an “inverted pyramid” style, which makes them easy to scan. The most important and latest information comes in the first paragraph, known as the *lead paragraph*. This paragraph is short, usually only one sentence with fewer than 30 words. The first two paragraphs answer the six basic questions of a news story: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? The story then proceeds to provide greater detail, with the most important facts coming first and the less important later.

News stories are structured this way so they can be shortened easily to fit the space available in the newspaper. Editors can simply stop the story anywhere and omit the lower part. They can be confident that the main part of the story has already been told and they are only leaving out less important parts.

This structure also allows readers to understand the important details of an article without having to read the entire story.

II. Activity

In small groups, search your local newspaper for articles on the topics of **education**, **public safety**, **the environment**, and **other human needs**. List the articles you find under each topic. Write a brief description of the main idea of each article. Choose one person for each topic to report your findings to the larger group.

Here are some tips to help you search the paper quickly and easily:

- Scan the **headlines** for words and ideas relating to the topics listed above.
- Skim the **lead paragraph** of the story to grasp the main idea.
- Study the **article** for facts on the topic.
- Think about what you read. Later, you are going to discuss the information you read.

III. For Discussion

1. What topics did the newspaper cover the most?
2. Did it cover the problems you think are the most important problems in the community?
3. Do you think the newspaper described the problems fairly and accurately? Explain.

Conducting the Session

1. Distribute **Handout 4A**. Have members read the **Introduction**. Ask them: “Why do you think it’s important to be well-informed about public issues?” Hold a brief discussion.
2. Ask members to read **Section I: Newspapers**. When they finish, use a copy of your local newspaper to locate its different sections and explain their function.
3. Divide members into groups of four. Distribute one newspaper to each group. Tell members to use the tips in **Section II: Activity** to search the paper for articles on education, public safety, the environment, and other human needs.
4. Tell members to make a list of the articles they find according to each of these topics and write a brief description of the main idea of each article. Tell them to choose different members of the group to report to the whole group on each of the four topics.
5. Call on groups to report on the articles they found on education. Repeat the process for each topic.
6. After all groups have reported, hold a discussion using the questions in **Section III: For Discussion**.

Optional Follow-up Activities

- Ask members to collect news articles on the problem area that interests them most.
- Ask members to watch a television news broadcast and compare the problems covered in the newspaper with those mentioned on television.

ACTION SESSION: SELECTING AND RESEARCHING A PROBLEM

In this session, members select and research a problem. After reading a short selection, members choose a community problem to focus on and begin researching the problem. They carry on their research until the next module.

Facilitator Checklist

- Chalkboard or chart paper
- Pens and paper for members
- Copies of Handout 4B and 4C for members
- Members bring the results of the poll they conducted on community problems

Learning Objectives

Members will be able to:

1. Identify the different components of a service project.
2. Select a community problem to focus on.
3. Research an aspect of the problem.

Notes

Selecting and Researching a Problem

Introduction

You've already learned a lot about the community's problems. You've interviewed and taken a poll of community members about these problems. Now it's time to select a problem that you want to work on and research it. Below are some ideas for doing these things.

I. Choose and Study a Problem

Select a Problem. Before you decide on a problem, discuss what you learned about problems from interviewing and polling community members. Then discuss these questions:

- Which problem affects your community the most?
- Which would be most interesting to work on?
- Which could be worked on most easily and effectively?
- Which would you learn the most from?

Research the Problem. The more you know about a problem, the more you'll understand how to approach it. Find out as much as you can about these three question areas:

1. **Questions of causality.**
 - What causes the problem?
 - What debates are there about the problem?
 - Is it related to other problems? If so, how?
 2. **Questions about the problem's seriousness.**
 - How long has it existed?
 - Who does it affect most?
 - What are its effects?
 - What will happen if it is not solved?
 3. **Policy questions.**
 - What is government doing about it?
In the community.
In other places.
 - What are non-governmental groups doing about it?
 - What are some ideas for working on the problem?
 - Who else is working on it or is interested in it?
- To find answers, try the following:
- **Use the library.** Look up newspaper articles. Ask the reference librarian for help.
 - **Search the Internet.** Use a search engine. Look especially at government, media, and non-profit sites.
 - **Interview experts.** Call local government officials. Find people at non-profit organizations that work on the problem.
 - **Survey community members.** Ask questions of people you know. Conduct an informal written survey of community members.

II. For Discussion

1. What do you think should be the most important consideration in selecting a problem? Why?
2. Why do you think it's important to research a problem?
3. What other questions do you think it would be important to find out about the problem? Why?

III. Activity

As a whole group, decide on a problem area.

After deciding on one problem area to focus on, you can start researching it. Divide into three groups. Each group will be assigned one of the three question areas mentioned above. Use **Handout 4C** to help you research your question area.

Conducting the Session

1. Ask members to take out their poll results. Divide members into three groups. Ask each group to tally the results from the poll onto one sheet. When this is done, have representatives from each group meet and quickly compile the results from the three sheets onto a final compilation sheet.
2. Ask the representatives to announce the results. Hold a discussion by asking these questions:
 - What problem (or problems) does the community consider most important? Why do you think community members consider it so important?
 - How accurate do you think your poll was? Why?
3. Inform members that the results from the survey can help them in the next step of their project. Distribute **Handout 4B**. Ask members to read the **Introduction** and **Section I: Choose and Study a Problem**
4. Hold a discussion using the questions in **Section II: For Discussion**.
5. Ask members to read **Section III: Activity**. Have them select a problem area that they want to focus on. To do this, ask members to refer to the tips in the handout and to consider the questions there.
6. When they have decided on a problem, divide them into three groups and assign each group to

Organizations and Experts

Introduction

Many people and groups in your community probably are already working on the same problem as you. To locate them, use your telephone book. Call them and ask: What is being done about the problem? Who else is working on it or interested in it? One group will lead you to many others.

Finding Government Resources

Government officials, committees, boards, and departments work on community problems. Call your local elected representatives. In the telephone directory, find the government pages, usually located just before the White Pages. They list government offices under separate headings for city, county, state, and U.S. government. Under city, look for city council members. Under county, look for county supervisors. If you can't find them, call the main numbers under the city and county listings. Or try searching on the Internet or going to the library and asking the reference librarian for a list of local officials.

Finding Non-Profit Resources

These groups are not in business to make a profit. They vary widely—neighborhood associations, advocacy groups, environmental groups, volunteer organizations, charities, service organizations, fraternal societies, unions, churches, etc. Many play an active role in working on community problems.

Look in the Yellow Pages under "Educational Organizations" and "Educational Consultants"; "Environmental, Conservation, & Ecological Organizations"; "Fraternal Organizations"; "Human Services Organizations" or "Social Service Organizations"; "Labor Organizations"; "Political Organizations"; "Religious Organizations" and "Churches"; and "Senior Citizens' Services & Organizations." Call the United Way or a Volunteer Center. Ask for its information-and-referral directory and about groups working on a problem of interest to you. Also, look on the Internet. To find neighborhood associations, contact your local representative.

Finding Business Resources

Businesses and business groups are intensely interested in your community. Start with local business associations, such as the Chamber of Commerce. Look in the Yellow Pages under "Chambers of Commerce" and "Business and Trade Associations." These groups may also have sites on the Internet.

Next find service organizations, such as Kiwanis, Rotary International, Lions, and Junior Chamber of Commerce. These groups are largely made up of business people. Members join to serve the community, socialize, and network with other business people. Look in the Yellow Pages under "Clubs" and "Associations" or look in the White Pages under the name of the group.

Finally, find individual businesses. Look for businesses near the problem or who would have a natural interest in the problem.

Finding Media Resources

The media—radio, television, newspapers—are businesses with the power to inform and influence the public. Reporters who have covered a problem know about groups interested in the problem. The media can also bring attention to your problem, attract volunteers, and advertise an event.

Read your newspaper or listen to broadcasts. Find out who covers the problem you are interested in. Call and ask for the newsroom and ask to speak with the reporter. Look in the Yellow Pages under "Newspapers," "Television Stations and Broadcast Companies," and "Radio Stations and Broadcasting Companies."

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research one of the following three question areas mentioned in the handout:

- Questions of causality.
 - Questions about the problem's seriousness.
 - Policy questions.
7. Distribute and discuss **Handout 4C**, which will help them do the research. Tell them their research is due at the next action session.

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3. Policy questions.

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To find answers, try the following:

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II. For Discussion

1. What do you think should be the most important consideration in selecting a problem? Why?
2. Why do you think it's important to research a problem?
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III. Activity

As a whole group, decide on a problem area.

After deciding on one problem area to focus on, you can start researching it. Divide into three groups. Each group will be assigned one of the three question areas mentioned above. Use **Handout 4C** to help you research your question area.

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