



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 7-12
About the Author: MediaSmarts

Police in the Media

Overview

This lesson helps students understand the different perceptions of the police force portrayed in the media. Students will learn about the differences between the constructed reality of media and law enforcement in real life and then create their television “cop shows” that provide a more accurate picture of policing.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- understand how media’s portrayal of law enforcement construct reality
- appreciate the differences between the constructed reality of law enforcement and law enforcement in real life
- appreciate the characteristics and conventions of the different types of media portraying law enforcement
- understand how media portrayals of law enforcement affect our understanding of race and justice
- create a critical media text

Preparation and Materials

Prepare to distribute the following handouts:

- *Crime Perceptions Quiz*
- *Bias and the Badge*
- *Series Bible Analysis*

Prepare to distribute the assignment sheet *Series Bible Assignment*

Optional: Prepare to project the video *Media Literacy 101: Media Have Social and Political Implications* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZi6s22yktw>)



Procedure

You Have the Right to Remain Silent

Start by asking students what rights someone has when they are arrested. Prompt them by asking them to imagine a police officer saying “You have the right to…”

Students will almost certainly be able to suggest at least one (most likely “you have the right to remain silent”) and probably some others. Ask students where they heard of those rights (almost certainly from media, unless some have parents who are lawyers or police officers) and whether those rights are under the Canadian or American legal system (if they know them from the media, they are most likely rights held under American law).

Tell students that in Canada you have the following rights when arrested:

- The right to know the reasons for your detention or arrest
- The right to speak to a lawyer, including access to a legal aid lawyer
- The right to remain silent during a detention or arrest
- If you are a youth, you have the right to be accompanied by a parent during questioning

(Source: <http://www.educaloi.qc.ca/en/capsules-rights-of-people-detained-or-arrested>)

While these are similar to the “Miranda” rights familiar to us from American media, there are some important differences: police are not required to inform you of your rights, and while you must be given access to a lawyer they don’t have to be present when police are questioning you. As well, since arrests of youth are fairly rare in media, viewers might not be familiar with their specific rights under the Youth Criminal Justice Act, such as having your parents or another adult present when being questioned by police.

Point out to students that *media have social and political implications*: they affect how we see the world, what we consider to be important, and what we think is right and wrong. This is true of even “disposable” media like TV cop shows — in fact the effect can be more powerful with them because we’re less likely to be critical of things we see as being meaningless — and it’s particularly true when it comes to things like law enforcement, where most of us don’t have much personal experience with it. (You may choose to show the video *Media Literacy 101: Media Have Social and Political Implications* to make this concept more clear to your students.)

Point out to students that this can have a big impact on us because police have consistently been the focus of media texts since almost the beginning of mass media, from silent films such as *The Keystone Kops* and early TV series such as *Dragnet* to recent movies and “cop shows.” (Even children’s series often focus on law enforcement, through fantastic characters like superheroes or the police dog on *Paw Patrol*.) Ask them why they think that police officers and other law enforcement agents have been so popular. Make sure the following points are raised:

- Law enforcement creates an automatic conflict (criminal versus law enforcement)
- Law enforcement lends itself well to both mystery (who done it?) and action (how will the police catch the criminal?)
- Law enforcement works well on TV or in movie series because the work is naturally *episodic*—while most people might only have a few dramatic events in their lives, it is (or seems) natural for police to have a different case each week



- Police work provides a natural *structure* for a TV series because it has a natural beginning, middle and end: the crime is committed or reported to the end, the crime is investigated, and the crime is solved and the criminal captured. (This was particularly important for TV writing, where a standard structure was needed to make room for commercial breaks.)

Crime Perceptions Quiz

Now ask students what ideas cop shows and movies might give them about crime. Let students share their thoughts for a few minutes and then distribute the handout *Crime Perceptions Quiz*. Give students a few minutes to write down their opinions, then go through the answers with the class. (Tell students to write down the correct answers as they will be drawing on them later in the lesson.)

- Do they think a murder victim is more likely to be murdered by a stranger, or by someone they already know? (*In Canada, 85% of victims of solved homicides in 2019 knew their killer.*) Do TV shows portray this accurately? (*TV shows are much more likely to people murdered by someone they did not know. When the victim was murdered by someone they know, it is more often for an unrealistic reason, such as revenge or to cover evidence of another crime; in reality, women are most often murdered by their romantic partners and men most often by people outside of their families.*)
- In general, how likely is an investigation to lead to an arrest? (*The “clearance rate” — the percentage of reported incidents where police laid a charge or otherwise resolved it — was 39% overall in Canada in 2017, and 63% for violent crimes specifically.*) How likely is it in TV shows? (*Nearly all crimes are eventually solved on TV and in movies.*)
- Who is most likely to be a victim of crime in real life? (*In Canada, members of visible minorities have a higher likelihood of being victims of homicide: 31% of homicide victims in 2019 were members of groups designated as visible minorities, while they made up just 22% of the population. In general, statistics suggest that members of visible minorities have a higher risk of being victims of violent crime, and Indigenous people and Black people are particularly likely to be victims. As well, men are about three times as likely as women to be victims of homicide, though women are more likely to have been killed by romantic partners.*) On TV shows? (*White women are highly overrepresented as victims.*)
- What kinds of crime are most common in real life? (*Property crimes, such as vandalism or theft, are by far the most common: in 2017, four out of five crimes committed in Canada were non-violent, while only one in five hundred of those violent crimes was a homicide.*) What kinds are most common on TV shows? (*Violent crimes, especially homicide, are much more often shown than property crimes.*)
- What types of police work are usually not shown in TV and movies? (*Police duties such as writing tickets, community policing, filling out reports and forms, traffic duties, etc. are seldom shown on TV.*)
- Is the rate of violent crime in real life rising or falling? (*Violent crime has been on a slow decline in Canada since 1994.*) On TV? (*With the explosion of streaming services such as Netflix, there are more crimes committed on screen than ever. While it’s hard to determine what portion of total shows involve crime, many of the most popular shows and movies still feature law enforcement in some way, so there’s no reason to think the ‘on-screen crime rate’ is declining.*)



Now ask students: do they think that these differences affect how we think about crime? (*Research consistently shows that crime media affects our views of whether crime rates are rising or falling, which crimes are more common, and how likely we are to be victims of crime.*) How might they affect how we think about law enforcement? (*Point out that by giving us a false sense of how common violent crime is, making us think most crimes are solved, and mostly just giving us the police’s point of view, police shows are likely to give us a much more positive view of law enforcement.*)

Bias and the Badge

Tell students that the impact of media on our views of crime and law enforcement is particularly important when it comes to how police interact with members of visible minority groups. Distribute the handout *Bias and the Badge* and either read through it with the class or have students read it (alone or in pairs) and complete the questions.

- How could police TV shows incorporate more of the reality of the police force into their writings/storylines?
- How could police TV shows more accurately address the effects of race on the justice system?
- How could police TV shows show perspectives other than those of police?

Take up the questions with the class. There are no right or wrong answers; what matters is that students discuss the ways in which media representations of law enforcement can give privilege the perspective of police and give us inaccurate ideas about law enforcement and the interactions of visible minorities with police.

Assessment activity: Series bible

Tell students that they will be developing a *series bible* for a new police-themed TV show.

Distribute the handout *Series Bible Analysis* and explain that a “series bible” or “story bible” is a document that’s made by the producers of a TV series that summarizes what the show is about. Shows need a series bible because they are usually written by many different writers. The story bible is given to writers (and prospective writers) to help them understand the format and characters, to give them a sense of the tone and the kinds of stories that the series will tell, and to keep details consistent. Have students read through the handout and then, working alone or in pairs, fill out the analysis on the other side to “re-create” the series bible of a show they know well. If time allows you can have some or all students share their analyses.

Now distribute the assignment sheet *Series Bible Assignment* and tell students that they will be creating a “series bible” for a TV show they will create. (You can have them do this individually, in pairs or in groups.) Their series bible should follow the format they analyzed above but their show should draw on what they’ve learned in the *Crime Perceptions Quiz* and *Bias and the Badge* activities to present a more realistic view of law enforcement.

Depending on time and your preference, you may choose to have students “pitch” their series bible’s to the rest of the class, which will act as the “network” and decide which shows will be given the “green light” and why.



Crime Perceptions Quiz

Answer the following questions:

1. Are murder victims more likely to be murdered by a stranger, or by someone they already know? Is it different from what's shown on TV shows?

2. When a crime is reported, how likely is it that the police will arrest somebody for it?

- α) 25%
- β) 39%
- γ) 63%
- δ) 88%

3. Who is most likely to be a victim of crime in real life? Is it different from what's shown on TV shows?

4. What kinds of crime are most common in real life? Is it different from what's shown on TV shows?



5. What types of police work are usually not shown in TV and movies?

6. Is the rate of violent crime in real life rising or falling? Is it different from what's shown on TV shows?



Bias and the Badge

If you watch TV shows and movies about police officers, you might come away believing that most murder victims are young, attractive White women, that police officers never use excessive force, and that race is never a factor in whether someone is wrongfully arrested, charged or convicted.

In fact, *Normalizing Injustice*, a 2020 study of TV shows about law enforcement found that police officers who did things that were illegal — like using excessive force, denying a suspect’s right to a lawyer, spying on a suspect or collecting their DNA without permission from a judge, and even torturing suspects — were six times more likely to be portrayed as “good guys” than “bad guys.”

Sometimes these things are used to add drama. When we watch a TV show or movie, we assume that the main character is a “good guy.” When they are shown doing things like police misconduct, we are more likely to think those things are fine than to think the person doing them is bad.

But bias in media doesn’t just come from what’s included. It also come from what is left *out*. What’s left out from crime media, in most cases, is that it is members of visible minority communities who are most likely to be victims of crime, most likely to be wrongly arrested, more likely to be given bail conditions they can’t afford, most likely to be the victims of police misconduct, and likely to be given harsher sentences than White people. Almost none of these are addressed in crime media. In fact, TV shows often show police officers who are members of visible minority groups being part of or approving of police misconduct, and exaggerate the number of judges who are Black—both of which suggest, falsely, that race is not a factor in whether or not justice is carried out fairly.

Thanks in part to social media, news outlets are starting to do a better job covering the realities of race and policing. Why haven’t TV shows caught up?

A lot of it has to do with the *medium* (TV) and the *genre* (“cop shows”).

Medium: Because TV shows run for many episodes, they usually focus on one person or a small group of people, and those people don’t usually change. To feel satisfying, the characters have to face a problem they can solve in one episode by themselves (like solving a crime) instead of one that takes many people over time (like reducing racial bias in the justice system.)

Genre: Cop shows have a very specific structure. There is usually an A (or main) plot focusing on a crime that needs to be solved. There is usually also a B plot, which may be a personal story (if the show focuses on a single character) or another crime to solve (if the show has an ensemble cast). Sometimes there is a C plot which may be a source of humour or a spotlight on a minor character. This structure means that the stories are more likely to focus on the police instead of anyone else, such as victims or those accused of a crime. It also makes it harder to tell stories that are about problems with the legal system: even if police misconduct is shown, it’s usually seen as justified as needed to catch the criminal (if the “good guy” does it) or the work of a single “bad apple” (if the “bad guy” does it.)

Some of it is probably also because most of the people who write and direct TV shows are White and male. (One 2020 study found that three-quarters of writers on scripted crime series were White, and 20 out of 26 series either had just one or no Black writers.) That means they’re less likely to ask questions about how race affects law enforcement or to know about Black people’s experience with police.



Some shows are working to change that, however. The series *The Wire* began as a police show and then broadened its focus to include politicians, dockworkers, journalists and teachers. The producers of the TV series *The Rookie* worked with Color of Change, the non-profit that published *Normalizing Injustice*, to make the show a more accurate reflection of police work and Black people's experience with the law.

Executive producer Terence Paul Winter said "We can't do one special episode, where we feel good and solve racism in the end, and then go back to our usual thing the next week." Instead, while the show will still focus on a White lead character—a middle-aged man starting a new career as a police officer — it will also address "racism on the force, the over-policing of Black communities, the question of alternative solutions to traditional law enforcement and... lots of small things [cop shows] tend to overlook.

Here's how other TV producers said they would change how law enforcement is portrayed on TV:

"Shut down the police station — and write what happens next. Give America the ability to visualize a reality without centralized police."

— Ramy Youssef

"Show how reorganizing, reeducating police could be the answer to the current problems within the institution of policing."

— Kenya Barris

"Dramatize the many things cops do that have nothing to do with catching violent criminals."

—Angela Kang

"Center a longform narrative around the perspective of people the police are interacting with. Changing the narrative lens through which we view policework to see how it changes our views on the traditional cop/criminal tropes and paradigms."

— Lisa Joy

"Create a world where whenever a police officer kills someone, someone in that police officer's family dies instantly. So whatever grief they inflict will also be inflicted on them. Maybe we could call it Eye for an Eye."

—Lena Waithe

Questions

Answer the following questions on lined paper.

In your opinion..

- How could police TV shows incorporate more of the reality of police work into their writings/storylines?
- How could police TV shows more accurately address the effects of race on the justice system?
- How could police TV shows show perspectives other than those of police?

Sources:

Color of Change (2020) *Normalizing Injustice*. Retrieved from https://hollywood.colorofchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Normalizing-Injustice_Abridged-1.pdf

O'Connell, M. (2020) How One Writers Room is Rethinking Policing On TV. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/how-one-writers-room-is-rethinking-policing-on-tv>

O'Connell, M. (2020) "If I Wrote a Cop Show": Issa Rae, Ramy Youssef and More TV Bosses Share How They'd Address the Moment." *The Hollywood Reporter*. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/if-i-wrote-for-a-cop-show-issa-rae-ramy-youssef-and-more-tv-bosses-share-how-they-d-address-the-moment>



Series Bible Analysis

A *series bible* is how many different writers can work together to write a TV series. It summarizes what the show is about. The story bible is given to writers (and prospective writers) to help them understand the format and characters, to give them a sense of the tone and the kinds of stories that the series will tell, and to keep details consistent.

There are many series bibles you can find online if you are interested. They have many different formats: some include illustrations (cartoon series like *Adventure Time* often do this) while some are even written in the voice of the main character. But all series bibles include these elements:

The title of the show. Sometimes this is the last thing you come up with, because it needs to get across a lot of the other things below—the basic concept, the tone, and sometimes the main character’s name.

The premise of the show. What is the show about? Who are the main characters and what makes their life challenging? For example, the series “Freaks and Geeks” aimed to tell realistic stories about the kinds of characters who were not usually seen on teen shows, “freaks” (kids who weren’t interested in doing well in school) and “geeks” (kids who were outside of the “cool” social circle.)

The genre and tone. What kind of a show is it? Even within the bigger genre of “cop show” there are lots of sub-genres: the single detective, the whole precinct portrait, the cops-plus-lawyers show, the specialist show (Do your cops hunt art thieves? Fight crime at sea? Investigate other cops?), even the police comedy. Some shows have a gritty tone, some are very professional and just focus on the cops’ jobs, some pay more attention to their family lives, and some take a lighter tone.

The main characters. In a show with one or two main characters, you’ll spend most of your time on them, and a little bit on the secondary characters. In a show with an *ensemble cast* (several characters who share the spotlight) you’ll give some detail on each of them. Talk about what they want, what role they usually play in a typical story, and how they interact with one another. For example, Jake Peralta in “Brooklyn Nine Nine” is described as “an immature but talented detective”; he annoys his partner Amy both by not taking his job seriously and by being good at it, and has trouble dealing with his by-the-book superior Captain Holt.

The format of the show. What is a typical episode like? What would be a typical A, B (and possibly C) plot? Are there different episode formats? For example, the showrunner of the “Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles” series described three kinds of stories in the series: “Closed-ended, action/mission type stories that I call “Terminator of the Week” stories; Smaller, character driven stories that focus on the Connor family and their day to day struggles; and Skynet mythology stories – longer arcing stories focusing on Sarah’s attempts to stop Skynet from blowing up the world.”

The target audience. Who will the show appeal to and why? This is essential on broadcast TV because advertisers need to know who will be watching, but it’s also useful for streaming services like Netflix because they want to make sure they have shows that appeal to lots of different groups of people.

On the other side of the page, pick a TV show you know well and try to recreate its series bible.



Series Bible Analysis

The title of the show:

The premise of the show.

The genre and tone.

The main characters.

The format of the show.



The target audience.



Series Bible Assignment

For this assignment, you will be creating a *series bible* for a TV series about law enforcement.

Your series should try to show a more realistic view of crime and law enforcement than other police shows.

Draw on what you learned from the *Crime Perceptions Quiz* and *Bias and the Badge* handouts to make your show more realistic while still being exciting and entertaining.

You may use this page for notes, but your assignment should be written in full sentences and submitted on separate paper.

The title of the show:

The premise of the show.

The genre and tone.

The main characters.

The format of the show.

The target audience.



Assessment Task Rubric

	Learning Expectations	Achievement
Understand	<p><i>Reading Media:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> show an understanding of the forms and techniques of a medium and genre understand how format, medium and genre can influence content and meaning <p><i>Media Representation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> understand how media representations can influence our view of reality understand how media representations can influence our opinions on a social issue understand how different audiences can see the same text differently <p><i>Consumer Awareness:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> understand the ways in which commercial considerations can influence content and meaning understand how the media industry works and how that affects what and how media texts are produced and distributed 	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)
Create	<p><i>Reading Media:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> create a text that shows an understanding of a medium, format and/or genre <p><i>Media Representation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> create a text that challenges media representations of an issue or group <p><i>Making and Remixing:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> effectively apply the forms and techniques of a medium and genre 	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)

