



Lesson Plan: Facts of the Union

SUMMARY

It's morning again in America! Jobs are plentiful, the deficit is shrinking, we're reducing our dependence on foreign oil, and all our children are above average. At least that's the impression you might have come away with if you watched President Bush's 2007 State of the Union Address. The facts are a little more complicated, and the picture not always as rosy. This lesson provides students with a good starting point for examining some of the crucial issues Bush laid out in his address. Students will research these issues, analyze the president's statements and claims, and draw conclusions about how straightforward he was with the American people.

OBJECTIVES

In this activity students will:

- Review and analyze major topics presented by President Bush during his 2007 State of the Union Address.
- Generate research questions surrounding the president's claims and calls to action.
- Research information that either supports or refutes the president's statements through questions they have developed.
- Draw conclusions on the credibility of the president's statements.

BACKGROUND

The Constitution provides guidelines for the president to report to Congress on the state of the union and recommend any actions he or she feels necessary. Over the centuries the State of the Union Address has become a platform for the president to announce the coming year's agenda and a unique opportunity for the chief executive to personally convey his or her vision for the nation to Congress and the American people. The president traditionally delivers the State of the Union Address at an evening joint session of Congress in January. In the 2007 State of the Union Address, President Bush addressed topics ranging from climate change to health care to the war in Iraq. The president, who had been suffering from low approval ratings due in part to a protracted and increasingly unpopular war in Iraq, made a strong attempt to rally support for his initiatives while encouraging the American public to believe that past accomplishments can be further advanced.

MATERIALS

1. Student Handout, "Selections from President Bush's 2007 SOTU Address"

- http://factchecked.org/Downloads/LessonPlans/FactsOfTheUnion/Facts%20of%20the%20Union_Student%20Handout1.pdf
2. Student Handout, "Developing Questions on President Bush's Statements"
<http://factchecked.org/Downloads/LessonPlans/FactsOfTheUnion/Facts%20of%20the%20Union%20Student%20Hand%20Out2.pdf>
 3. Student Handout, "Don't Be Fooled: A Process for Avoiding Deception"
<http://factchecked.org/ToolsOfTheTrade.aspx>
 4. Twenty In Ten: Strengthening America's Energy Security (Gasoline Use Reduction)
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/stateoftheunion/2007/initiatives/energy.html>
 5. Annual Energy Outlook 2007 with Projections to 2030 (Gasoline Use Reduction)
http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiaf/aeo/aeoref_tab.html
 6. Overview of U.S. Petroleum Trade – Imports (Foreign Oil)
http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/mer/pdf/pages/sec1_15.pdf
 7. Budget and Economic Outlook: Fiscal Years 2008-2017 (Federal Deficit and Fiscal Discipline)
<http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/77xx/doc7731/01-24-BudgetOutlook.pdf> (Go to Table Appendix Table E-1 and Summary Table 1 under "Tables")
 8. Trends in the Achievement Gaps in Reading and Mathematics (Education)
<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2007/section2/indicator14.asp>
 9. Mathematics Performance of Students in Grades 4 and 8 (Education)
<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2006/section2/table.asp?tableID=453>
 10. Reading Performance of Students in Grades 4 and 8 (Education)
<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2007/section2/indicator11.asp#info>
 11. Unemployment rate for past 10 years (the Economy) (See Attachment)
<http://dev.factchecked.org/Downloads/LessonPlans/FactsOfTheUnion/SH%203%20Unemployment%20Rate.pdf>
 12. Consumer Price Index — Inflation rate in 2005 and 2006 (the Economy)
http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/cpi_01182007.pdf and
http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/cpi_01182006.pdf
 13. Average Weekly Earnings (the Economy)
<http://factchecked.org/Downloads/LessonPlans/FactsOfTheUnion/SH%204%20Avg%20Weekly%20Earnings.pdf>
 14. Total non-farm employees (Job Gain)
<http://factchecked.org/Downloads/LessonPlans/FactsOfTheUnion/SH%205%20Total%20Employment.pdf>
 15. FactCheck.org article, "Facts of the Union"
http://www.factcheck.org/bush/facts_of_the_union.html

PROCEDURE

Before class, make enough copies of items 1 through 3 in the Materials section so that every student can have a set. Also make copies of the last item, the FactCheck.org article, for everyone but *do not* distribute this one until the last exercise. Make enough packets of the remaining materials so that when you break your class into small groups, each group will have at least one packet. At the beginning of class, each student should

receive copies of the first three handouts, “Selections from President Bush’s 2007 SOTU Address,” “Don’t Be Fooled: A Process for Avoiding Deception” and “Developing Questions on President Bush’s Statements.”

In the full class, ask your students some general questions:

- Do you believe what elected officials tell you in speeches? Does it make a difference whether it’s the president speaking or another politician? Why or why not?
- What do you know about President Bush? Do you know his positions on various issues?

Now explain to the class that they will be examining some statements made by President Bush in his most recent State of the Union address, along with evidence that may support or contradict those claims. Explain that they should apply the five steps we have outlined in “Don’t Be Fooled: A Process for Avoiding Deception.” Have them refer to the handout on this. Specifically, they should:

- **Keep an open mind.** Don’t fall into the trap of thinking a claim is correct just because it fits your biases.
- **Ask the right questions.** Look for the conclusion of the argument and then ask yourself what reasons you are being given for accepting that conclusion. Examine each factual claim and ask what evidence would prove it right or wrong. Then ask whether the premises logically support the conclusions.
- **Cross-check.** Look for more than one source of evidence before making up your mind.
- **Consider the source.** Think about which sources of information are most trustworthy.
- **Weigh the evidence.** Do the facts support the speech’s message?

EXERCISES

Exercise #1 – Keeping an open mind, asking the right questions

To the teacher: Emphasize to students the need to keep an open mind in their research and analysis. People tend to accept any information that supports what they already believe and reject information that conflicts with those beliefs. Students need to make an effort to listen to all sides to avoid accepting inaccurate information as truth.

Divide the class into small groups of 3 to 5 students. Using handout 1, have students review each of the excerpts, paying close attention to the sections in bold, and answer the questions on the handout. Provide time for students to share and discuss their answers in their small groups. Then hold a general class discussion around the questions (which are also listed below). Record the essence of the answers on the blackboard or overhead projector.

1. What does the president say to help support or back up the claims he makes?

2. What emotions is he invoking in these statements? (Look for things like patriotism, fear, vanity, etc.).
3. Why might people believe or disbelieve Bush's statements in the selected areas?

Exercise # 2 – Asking the right questions

To the teacher: Point out to students that to be good critical thinkers, they need to ask questions. It is important to know who is making the statements and the sources of their information. It is also good to ask how can the information presented be proved or disproved. What reasons are being offered for the claims you are being asked to believe? Do those reasons logically support the conclusions? How precise is the language used? Is it based on fact or opinion?

Assign one of the excerpt topics to each group of students. If necessary, more than one group can examine any of the excerpts. Have students review the claims made in their excerpt and brainstorm questions for later research using handout 2. Students should use the question prompts in the middle column to guide their questions and the 5 Ws & H method (Who, What, When, Where, Why, & How) to structure them. You might want to run through a few examples to help students structure the right questions. If possible, have students go to the FactCheck.org lesson plan Web page that features video stream excerpts of President Bush's speech and play their assigned excerpt. Allow several groups of students to share some of their questions with the class.

Exercise #3 – Cross-checking / Consider the source

To the teacher: It's important that students review several sources when verifying information. When public figures make statements as fact, they should be checked with different, preferably neutral, sources. Two or three reliable sources independently reporting the same fact is a good indication the information is accurate. If two good sources report different information, then more investigation will likely be needed.

Distribute packets containing research materials (also listed below) and have the students begin their cross-checking by looking for evidence that addresses the questions they've asked in Exercise #2. Have the students set up a "T-Chart" with their questions on the left side and the evidence on the right.

1. Twenty In Ten: Strengthening America's Energy Security (Gasoline Use Reduction and Foreign Oil)
2. Annual Energy Outlook 2007 with Projections to 2030 (Gasoline Use Reduction and Foreign Oil)
3. Overview of U.S. Petroleum Trade – Imports (Gasoline Use Reduction and Foreign Oil)
4. Budget and Economic Outlook: Fiscal Years 2008-2017 (Federal Deficit and Fiscal Discipline)
5. Trends in the Achievement Gaps in Reading and Mathematics (Education)
6. Mathematics Performance of Students in Grades 4 and 8 (Education)
7. Reading Performance of Students in Grades 4 and 8 (Education)
8. Unemployment Rate (the Economy and Job Gain)
9. Consumer Price Index (the Economy and Job Gain)

10. Average Weekly Earnings (the Economy and Job Gain)
11. Total non-farm employees (the Economy and Job Gain)

Exercise #4 – Weighing the evidence

To the teacher: Help students understand what all the evidence means. They need to be persistent – sometimes information isn't presented in a way that allows immediate comparison with the claim they're checking (for instance, a gallon of gas doesn't equal a barrel of oil – some conversion is required). When they check what they've found against the claim being made, they can draw their own conclusions about its truthfulness. If your class has completed the FactCheckED.org lesson plan Monty Python and the Quest for the Perfect Fallacy, you might note that there are no fallacies in any of the excerpts in this lesson, but there are plenty of booby traps for the inattentive. There are a wealth of examples of suppressed evidence and questionable uses of statistics. Teachers could use this lesson as an opportunity to remind students that it is always possible to mislead unwary thinkers without ever making a false claim.

Have the students discuss what they've found in the research in their small groups. Each group should come to some conclusion about whether the claims they've been assigned to check are accurate. Then bring the class back together as a whole and have someone from each group describe that group's results. At this point, give each student a copy of the FactCheck.org article on the State of the Union address.

1. Based on the evidence you've gathered, what are your conclusions about the statements in the section of the speech that was assigned to you (from Exercise #2)?
2. Read the FactCheck.org State of the Union article and compare your answers with those in the piece. How close did you come in your analysis? Were there any issues found in the FactCheck article that you didn't have in your conclusions? What about things you found that weren't mentioned in the FactCheck article? Does this change any of your conclusions about President Bush's statements on your topic?

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY (This could also be used as an assessment.)

Students can develop a response piece (this could be either in written form or they could produce their own audio or video response) to the president's State of the Union Address based on their analyses. In their response they should provide some background, mentioning the name and date of the address, a brief review of what was presented, and their analysis of the topic or topics examined, including their sources. Students can conclude their response by explaining how well they thought President Bush addressed the issue presented in the speech.

CORRELATION TO NATIONAL STANDARDS

For a more detailed version of these standards, please click [here](http://factchecked.org/Downloads/LessonPlans/FactsOfTheUnion/teacher.handout.facts.national.standards.pdf) <link <http://factchecked.org/Downloads/LessonPlans/FactsOfTheUnion/teacher.handout.facts.national.standards.pdf>>.

National Social Studies Standards

VI. Power, Authority, and Governance Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance:

VII. Production, Distribution, and Consumption Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people organize for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services:

VIII. Science, Technology, and Society Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of relationships among science, technology, and society:

X. Civic Ideals and Practices Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic:

The Essential Skills for Social Studies

Acquiring Information

A. Reading Skills

1. Comprehension
2. Vocabulary

B. Study Skills

1. Find Information
2. Arrange Information in Usable Forms

C. Reference & Information-Search Skills

2. Special References
3. Maps, Globes, Graphics

D. Technical Skills Unique to Electronic Devices

1. Computer

Organizing & Using Information

A. Thinking Skills

1. Classify Information
2. Interpret Information
3. Analyze Information
4. Summarize Information
5. Synthesize Information
6. Evaluate Information

B. Decision-Making Skills

C. Metacognitive Skills

Interpersonal Relationships & Social Participation

A. Personal Skills

C. Social and Political Participation Skills

Democratic Beliefs and Values

B. Freedoms of the Individual

C. Responsibilities of the Individual

D. Beliefs Concerning Societal Conditions and Governmental Responsibilities

National Mathematics Standards

Number and Operations Standard

Understand numbers, ways of representing numbers, relationships among numbers, and number systems.

Data Analysis and Probability Standard

Formulate questions that can be addressed with data and collect, organize, and display relevant data to answer them.

Process Standards

Reasoning and Proof Standard

Communication Standard

Connections Standard

National Education Technology Standards

Profiles for Technology Literate Students

Performance Indicators

2. Make informed choices among technology systems, resources, and services
7. Routinely and efficiently use online information resources to meet needs for collaboration, research, publication, communication, and productivity
8. Select and apply technology tools for research, information analysis, problem solving, and decision making in content learning

Information Literacy Standards

Information Literacy

Standard 1 accesses information efficiently and effectively.

Standard 2 evaluates information critically and competently.

Standard 3 uses information accurately and creatively.

Social Responsibility

Standard 7 recognizes the importance of information to a democratic society.

Standard 8 practices ethical behavior in regard to information and information technology.

Standard 9 participates effectively in groups to pursue and generate information.

English Language Arts Standards

Standard 1 Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment.

Standard 3 Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts.

Standard 5 Student employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

Standard 6 Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique and discuss print and non-print texts.

Standard 7 Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a

variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

Standard 8 Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

Standard 12 Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

About the Author

Greg Timmons has been a social studies teacher for more than 30 years in Portland, Oregon, and now resides in Washington and Montana. He is executive director of The Constitution Project, which produces educational materials and workshops on the U.S. Constitution. He is also a freelance curriculum writer and educational consultant for various PBS programs and media outlets including Newsweek, History Channel and Colonial Williamsburg magazine. He is a member of the board of directors of the Oregon Council for the Social Studies and has served on committees for the National Council for the Social Studies.