



# Your Community's Town Hall

## Your Newspaper, Your Town Hall

### **A Newspapers in Education Curriculum Guide**

Written and compiled by Sandra Cook, Ed.D., N.C. Press Foundation,  
Newspapers in Education with contributions from Mary Miller, New York  
Newspaper Publishers Association, NIE. Designed by Tracy Manning.

# YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL

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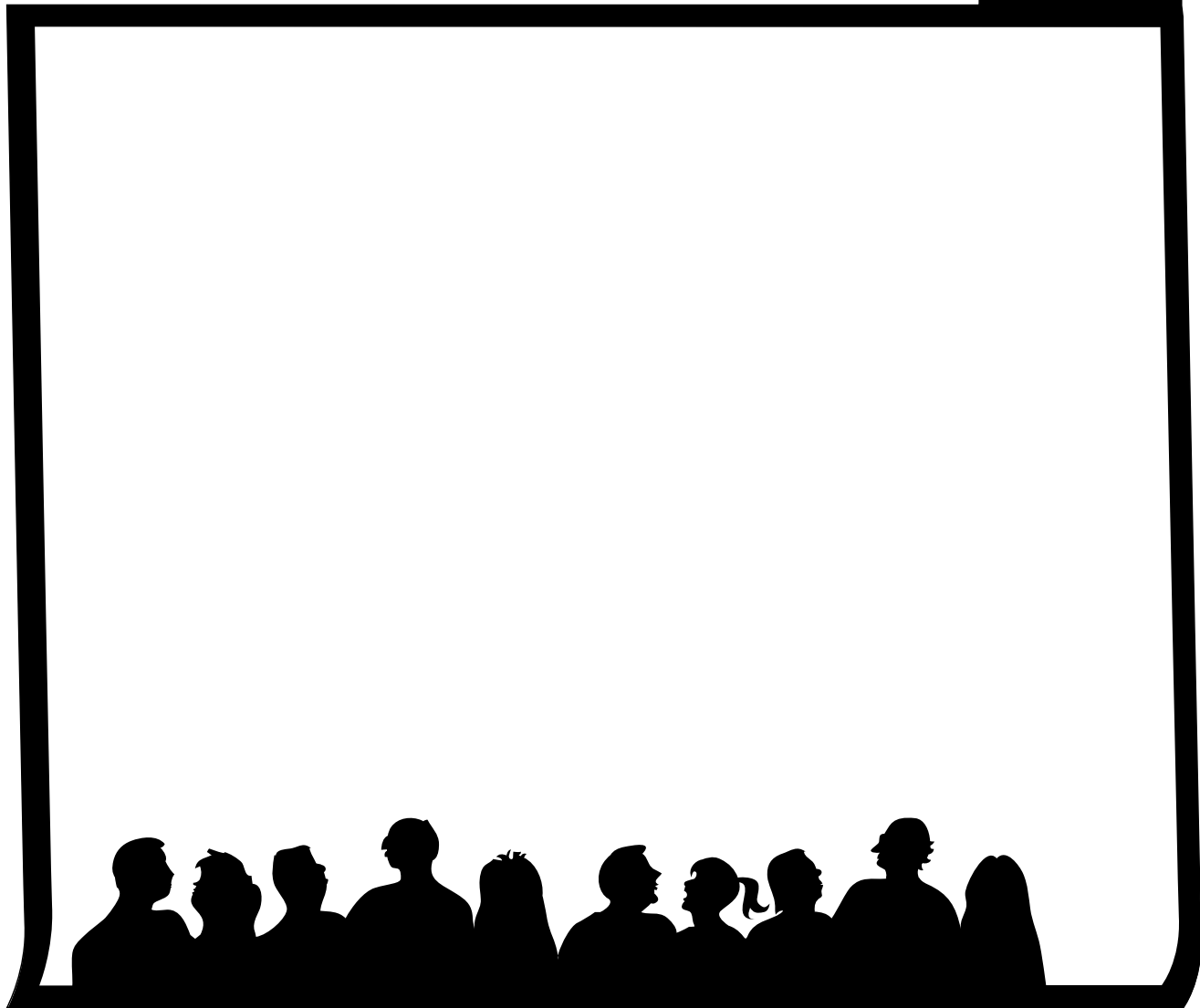
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# YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL

## TOWN HALL



Cut out photos and stories about the people who work at your Town or City Hall.



**FOLLOW-UP:** What does your town or city government do for you and others in your community? Why should newspapers cover what happens in town or city hall?



# YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL DISCUSSING ISSUES



Identify situations in the newspaper in which citizens are discussing problems.

Who are the individuals or groups involved? How do the different parties view the problem? Complete the outline, as if you are one of the individuals or groups involved.

Individual or Group \_\_\_\_\_

Problem
Cause (s)
Effect (s)
Solution(s)
Obstacles to the solution (s)

**FOLLOW-UP:** Draw your own conclusions. What do you consider a good or the best solution?

# YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL

## READERS' OPINIONS



Citizens speak out through their newspapers. Locate the Letters to the Editor in your newspaper.

How many letters do you find? \_\_\_\_\_

Who wrote the letters? \_\_\_\_\_

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What are the topics? \_\_\_\_\_

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Choose a letter that you think is very convincing. Cut and paste it below:

What makes this letter effective? \_\_\_\_\_

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**FOLLOW-UP:** Write a letter to the editor about a concern you have.

# **YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL**

## **DEBATING the ISSUES**



Debate issues that affect your community just as citizens do in town meetings. Use your newspapers to collect facts and opinions about a topic. Write a question on which you and your classmates can draw conclusions. List pros (yes) and cons (no). Debate the issue and then write your opinion.

<b>YES</b>	<b>ESSENTIAL QUESTION: SHOULD</b>	<b>NO</b>
_____		_____
_____		_____
_____		_____
_____		_____
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**FOLLOW-UP:** Did what you learn and discuss change your views?

# YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL

## TODAY'S NEWS



Every issue of a newspaper invites readers to think about what is going on in their community.

Spend 20 minutes reading through your newspaper. First read headlines, subheads and the cutlines that accompany photos, and then study the photos and other graphics. Be sure to read the editorial page of the newspaper. Complete the following about community news:

I learned...
I want to know more about...
I think....
I agree...
I disagree...

**FOLLOW-UP:** If your town held a town meeting and you had responsibility for setting the agenda, from the newspaper, what would you have citizens discuss? If your town meeting involved students in your school, what would have them discuss?



# **YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL**

## **VOICING OPINIONS**



The Town Meeting is a gathering in small towns where citizens come together to get information and voice opinions about issues that affect their communities. The same can be said about newspaper readers. They come to newspapers looking for information and viewpoints on which to form their own opinions, and they vote based on their reasoning about what is right and best for themselves and their community.

Identify a topic in your newspaper that interests you.

1. What do you already know about the topic?
2. What opinions do you hold?
3. What do you expect to learn by reading the story (or stories)?

Now, read carefully the story or stories.

4. What did you learn?
5. Did gathering more information and hearing varying opinions on the topic change your views on the subject?
6. What more do you want to know?
7. Where can you go to find out more about the topic?

Continue to read about the topic in newspapers.

**FOLLOW-UP:** How do citizens who are able and willing to learn and consider the well-being and opinions of others contribute to a democracy?

# YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL

## NEWSPAPERS as MODERATORS



Moderators run town meetings. Citizens speak on the topic that is on the floor. They stand to speak and wait until the moderator acknowledges them and then must give their names, addresses and precincts. They address their remarks to the moderator and, if commenting on facts and opinions offered by others, they speak to the moderator, not to the person whose remarks please or displease them, and, to avoid personal attacks, they state the issue not the name of the person in their responses. The rules exist to maintain order and promote productive debate on issues that affect their lives.

Similarly, through newspapers, citizens come together to talk about issues that affect their community and state, the nation and the world. The newspaper offers its own opinions through editorials and publishes different opinions through columns written by journalists and community leaders with special interests in and knowledge of the topics. Newspapers attribute statements made in a newspaper to the persons or institutions responsible for them.

Find the following in your newspaper.

### Pages

- \_\_\_ 1. Quote in a story  
Whose opinion? What qualifies the person to speak on the topic?
- \_\_\_ 2. Advice in a column  
Whose opinion? What qualifies the person to speak on the topic?
- \_\_\_ 3. Letter to the editor  
Whose opinion? What qualifies the person to speak on the topic?
- \_\_\_ 4. Column on the editorial or other opinion page  
Whose opinion? What qualifies the person to speak on the topic?
- \_\_\_ 5. Editorial  
Whose opinion? What qualifies the newspaper to speak on the topic?
- \_\_\_ 6. Political cartoon  
Whose opinion? What qualifies the cartoonist to speak on the topic?
- \_\_\_ 7. Other \_\_\_\_\_  
Whose opinion?

**FOLLOW-UP:** Why should readers know the source of the information provided in a newspaper and other publications?

# YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL

## VOTING METHODS



Voters at town meetings use various methods. Have you ever voted in any of these ways, in your home, classroom, school and other settings?

Voice vote — Say “yea” for yes and “nay” for no. The moderator or someone selected to do so decides which side receives more votes, but voters can challenge the decision.

Show of hands — Raise your hands if you support; raise your hands if you oppose. The moderator counts after each vote and announces the results.

Roll call — Say “yea” or “nay” when your name is called; a tally is kept.

Standing vote — Rise if you vote for; rise if you vote against. Count after each vote is taken.

Secret ballot — Fill out and hand in or deposit the ballot.

Source: [www.sec.state.ma.us/cis/cistwn/twnidx.htm](http://www.sec.state.ma.us/cis/cistwn/twnidx.htm)

Through reading the newspaper and other research, determine how votes are taken in different situations:

Town or city council —

School boards —

County commissioners —

State legislature —

U.S. Congress —

Citizens on Election Day —

United Nations —

Other

    Polls —

    Surveys —

**FOLLOW-UP:** After debating issues in the news, use the different methods of voting and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each method and the effects the methods have on the outcome of the vote.

# YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL TAKING ACTION



At public gatherings, such as town meetings, and at voting booths, citizens take action by voting. On their opinion pages in the Letters to Editor section and through polls, surveys and interviews, newspapers provide other ways for citizens to express their views.

Newspapers also write about individuals who work to bring about change through organizations formed to lobby for change and through protests of different kinds, such as boycotts, pickets and petitions.

In the newspaper, find examples of the following. Record the source and date for each.

1. Picketing or carrying signs

Source \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

2. Boycotting or refusing to purchase from a company or country

Source \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

3. Petitioning or signing statements calling for a change in policy or action

Source \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

4. Founding or working for an organization to support or address a specific cause or concern

Source \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

5. Fundraising to support an organized activity to bring about change

Source \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

6. Debating issues

Source \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

7. Lobbying

Source \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

8. Forums

Source \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

9. Other organized activity

Source \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

FOLLOW-UP: How do you judge the effectiveness of each protest or action?

# **YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL**

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT**



Town hall. City hall. Both refer to local government and the actions taken by elected officials to address the needs of their community. The town or city hall “beat” is important in all newspapers, the largest dailies and the smallest weekly newspapers.

Find out about local government through your newspaper.

1. Who are the members of the council?
2. Who runs the meetings?
3. Does your town or city have a mayor and city manager? Are they elected or appointed?
4. When and where do the town or city councils meet?
5. What was on the agenda of the most recent meeting?
6. Did members disagree? On what issues?
7. What decisions were made?
8. Are town or city council meetings open to the public?
9. How will the actions taken at the town or city council meeting affect you and others you know?

**FOLLOW-UP:** Display in your classroom or collect photos of officials and stories about decisions that are made at council meetings. Identify the reporter or reporters who write about town government. Visit your Web site for your town or city to obtain additional background information.

# **YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL**

## **A TOWN MEETING—A CIVIL CONVERSATION**



Experience “Pure democracy” in your classroom. Participate in a simulated town meeting to find out how one works.

1. Over several days, read your newspaper to decide the topics for consideration during your town meeting.
2. Compile a list of topics. Select a student or have the teacher keep the list. Invite all of the students to suggest topics from the news.
3. After everyone has the opportunity to suggest topics, hold a vote to determine the top ten. Decide on a method for voting and have the person leading the discussion tabulate and announce the results.
4. Select groups of four or five and have each group list its top three topics. The topics should be assigned based on the preferences of each group.
5. Each group must analyze the stories about the assigned topic and then present the information to the class. Each member of the group must contribute in some way. They could:
  - Summarize the information.
  - Identify key statements or quotes and the persons or individuals that made them.
  - Illustrate some aspect of the story, using clay, pencils, pens, paper, scissors, glue and/or other tools to create a visual representation.
  - Develop a question or advocate a position that can be debated by the whole class. For example, Should XXX be held responsible? Should XXX policy be changed? Or pass XXX law, yes or no?
6. Decide who in the group will serve as the moderator and recorder during the class discussion.
7. Expect participation by every student in the class. Have the recorder keep track of the students who speak or have students place a sticky note on their desks after they comment on the topic. Allow students second comments only after all have contributed.
8. Hold the class discussion around the topic, led by the moderator. Each person should stand when he/she speaks and wait for the moderator to acknowledge him or her before speaking.

# **YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL**

## **A TOWN MEETING—A CIVIL CONVERSATION, continued**



9. Each group should choose a method for voting on the question or position taken by the group. Methods might be voting by secret ballot, standing or voice vote. The moderator should take charge of the voting and announce the results. If members of the class choose not to vote, discuss why and how those who do not vote affect the outcome.
10. Evaluate your town meeting. What worked and what did not work? Why? Did everyone understand and carry out his or her role? Did speakers stay on topic? Were the leaders fair?
11. Allow another group to present its topic and follow the same steps.

**NOTE!** For a town meeting to be effective, citizens must understand the issues and all members need to participate. In real life, some citizens fail to attend town meetings; others attend but do not speak up. If a moderator cuts off someone, allows someone to dominate discussion or makes other choices that seem unfair, then members of the community might not accept decisions made at the town meeting. They might even vote to replace the moderator. Because the moderator is so important in a town meeting, encourage many students to serve as moderator and develop criteria for the moderator to use to evaluate his or her performance.

The town meeting served as a model for the framers of the Constitution and founders of our country. Are the discussions and debates that take place in town meetings similar to those that take place in legislative bodies?

Source: [www.sec.state.ma.us/cis/cistwn/twnidx.htm](http://www.sec.state.ma.us/cis/cistwn/twnidx.htm)

**FOLLOW-UP:** Editors hold budget meetings to decide what goes on the front page of each day's newspaper and where the stories go on the page. List the topics in one day's newspaper and organize in to groups. Discuss which topics should go on the front page. Then discuss where to place the stories on the page and compare your decisions with those made by other groups and the newspaper.

# **YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL**

## **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES**



1. From newspapers and other sources, collect and display photos of citizens expressing their views and elected officials carrying out their duties. Identify the source of all photos.
2. Gathered from the newspaper and other sources, identify words and phrases associated with town meetings and democratic practices. Share what you find. Maintain a word bank.
3. Imagine a newspaper that is censored by the government. Place an "X" on all stories or remarks critical of any level government, local, state and national. How does that affect the newspaper? the community, state and/or country?
4. After studying important debates in American history, stage town meetings in which students assume the roles of citizens living at that time. For example, take the roles of colonists who are debating the call for independence from England. Also, simulate town and city council meetings in your town or city. Assume the roles of those who attend the meetings and make the decisions or work for the town or city. Choose a real topic before the council to consider in your town meeting.
5. Determine whether local elections are partisan or non-partisan. Even if the elections are non-partisan, from newspapers, can you determine the political party or philosophy of those seeking office from what they say and do? Investigate to find out why many local government elections are non-partisan.
6. The moderator leads town meetings. He/she is the person who calls on speakers and decides when to move from one topic to another. The citizens of a town elect the moderator. Why is that important? Why is having a fair and neutral moderator important for the town meeting to be effective? Why are similar principles, accuracy and fairness, important to journalists?
7. Town meetings in which all citizens vote represent a form of pure democracy and as such are often heralded as models for public debate. Citizens elect the moderators, selectmen and others involved in making the town meetings work and vote on topics on the agenda or warrant issues in advance of meetings. But, most governing bodies are examples of indirect democracy or representative government in which representatives speak for citizens. Even in representative systems, laws allow for "purer" forms of democracy, such as referendum, initiatives and recall. Look for debate over each of these. Find out the laws in your state that establish whether and how each is carried out.



# YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES, continued



8. The tradition of the town meeting has a long history in the United States. However, before the suffrage movement only men had a voice at these meetings. Look through the opinion section of the newspaper. Find a controversial topic that is of interest to the class and take a vote. Tally the results. Then take another vote. However, this time only allow the boys to vote. Tally the results. Did the vote come out the same? Why or why not? Imagine how life might be different today without the women's right to vote. Note too that voting by black Americans was not allowed at the founding of our nation.
9. Look through today's newspaper for articles that tell of two or more groups of people who disagree on an issue. As a class, try to come up with a reasonable compromise. Also, in the newspaper, look for people settling disputes through compromise. Do you think their solutions will work? Why or why not?
10. Politicians and others hold what has been dubbed "town hall meetings," an assembly of citizens to discuss issues. They are often criticized as staged events that do not allow people open discussion and serve more to improve the public images of the politicians and others who organize the meetings. Read to find out more about what supporters and critics of town hall meetings have to say.  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town\\_meeting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town_meeting))
11. Technology provides new ways for newspapers, other media and individuals to report on events and conduct debates on issues. Often dubbed e-democracy, virtual meetings take place in chat rooms, Weblogs and other venues on the Internet. Find out if newspapers in your area use Weblogs as places for reporters and readers to interact. Also, conduct research to find out more about the effect of technology on journalism. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town\\_meeting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town_meeting))

# **YOUR NEWSPAPER, YOUR TOWN HALL SOURCES**



The teaching curriculum, Your Newspaper, Your Town Hall was written and compiled by Sandra Cook, Ed.D., North Carolina Press Foundation with contributions from Mary Miller, New York Newspaper Publishers Association, Newspapers in Education. Designed by Tracy Manning.

SOURCES for the teaching ideas in the Town Hall activities come from the following Web sites.

[www.sec.state.ma.us/cis/cistwn/twnidx.htm](http://www.sec.state.ma.us/cis/cistwn/twnidx.htm)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town\\_meeting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town_meeting)

[www.newrules.org/gov/towmtg.html](http://www.newrules.org/gov/towmtg.html)