Lesson Plan: What Counts as Terrorism?

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Featured resources

KQED's The Lowdown: Why Are Some Violent Attacks Considered Terrorism, But Not Others?

NowThis World: **What is the Definition of Terrorism?**

(2:49)

A vigil held after the June 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting, which was considered a terrorist attack. (Wikipedia)

Opening quick write prompt:

When you hear the word "terrorism," what events come to mind? What about these events fall into the category of terrorism, in your opinion?

A quick write allows students to write down their thoughts before discussing the opening question in order to increase participation and make the discussion more accessible to English Language Learners.

Objective

- Students will analyze how the definition of terrorism has changed over time and how it affects the media and political responses to mass shootings and other acts of violence.

- Students will evaluate and reflect on the definition of terrorism in the context of both historical and recent violent attacks against civilians.

Essential Question and Lesson Context

What is terrorism? Why do some attacks on civilians count as terrorism and others don't? How does the motive, race, ethnic background and/or religion of the attacker affect the way attacks are responded to?

Violent attacks on U.S. civilians, including mass shootings, are sadly nothing new. But why are some of these tragedies labeled "terrorism" and others not? It turns that there are multiple and sometimes conflicting definitions of the term. In post-9/11 federal legislation, terrorism is defined as violent acts -- like mass killings or kidnappings -- intended to intimidate or coerce the population, or influence government policy or conduct. Some definitions require that terrorists be associated with foreign terrorist organizations, though some critics disagree with applying the terrorist label only to perpetrators with ties to foreign, rather than homegrown, ideologies. This lesson will explore the ever-evolving definition of terrorism in the context of recent and past attacks.

Key vocabulary

Pre-teach key vocabulary before students do the reading, especially if you have English Language Learners. After going over the simple definition, consider providing a visual aid or having students draw one. More ideas for how to pre-teach vocabulary can be found [here](#).

Word	Simple definition
ambiguous (adj.)	Having more than one meaning, not expressed or understood clearly *The definition of terrorism is **ambiguous** because people can't decide on a single meaning of the word.*
deterrent (n.)	Something that makes someone decide not to do something *Some say stricter gun laws would be a **deterrent** to mass shootings. Others say improving mental health services is the answer.*
ideology (n.)	The set of ideas and beliefs of a group or political party *Many say terrorists are motivated to commit violence because of a political **ideology**.*
magnitude (n.)	The size or importance of something *The **magnitude** of terrorist attacks is often measured by the number of people injured or killed.*
perpetrator (n.)	Someone who commits a crime *A **perpetrator** of a mass shooting is not always considered a terrorist. It depends on the perpetrator's motivation for committing the crime.*

Investigate

- Discuss the quick-write prompt to gauge what students consider terrorism and why. Some students may define terrorism by the number of people killed or injured in an attack. Others may connect the term terrorism to an effort to frighten or intimidate a population.

- Make a list of all events students name as terrorism, but don't discuss them quite yet.

- Explain that there is no single legal definition of terrorism. However, almost all definitions focus on the perpetrator's *motivation*. Most often, an act of violence is considered terrorism when the person is motivated by an ideology or belief system. This ideology is usually in opposition to a government policy or action, or a society at large.

- As a class, watch the video, [What is the Definition of Terrorism](#)? The information in the video stops at 2:49.

- **Check for understanding after viewing the video:** Define terrorism in your own words. Explain how terrorism is different from the examples in the video (organized crime, mental illness or political oppression)?

- Review the definition of terrorism provided by the video (found at 0:30) and pull out the FBI definition of international terrorism in the first part of [The Lowdown post](#).

- Ask: How do these definitions differ? Which one do you think is a better definition? Call on students to share their thoughts about the definitions. Remind students there is still no single agreed-upon definition.

- Revisit the list of terrorist events from the quick write. Choose an event and discuss whether or not it should be considered terrorism, based on the information in the video and the class discussion. Remind students to use evidence in their arguments.

- Individually or in small groups, students read the rest of [The Lowdown post](#). As they read, they should look for evidence to answer the questions: How has the definition of terrorism changed over the years? What factors lead to some attacks being considered "terrorism" and not others?
  - **Note:** To scaffold the text, chunk [The Lowdown post](#) into sections and read and discuss each section before moving onto the next.

- **Check for understanding after reading:** Ask students to describe how the definition of terrorism changed over time, and then ask: Based on what you read, how do you think terrorism should be defined today? Refer back to the list of events from the quick write and choose one of the events also listed in The Lowdown post. If relevant, continue the discussion of this event.

- **Transition to the Make and Share:** Tell students they will have a chance to share their thoughts on this issue in the comments section of The Lowdown. The first time they comment, students must sign in to [Disqus](#), a free discussion app embedded in The Lowdown.
  - To sign in to [Disqus](#), click the "Comments" button at the bottom of the post.
  - Click the blue "Get Started" button in the gray "Welcome to Disqus" box.
  - Students will need to enter a username. We recommend first name, last initial.
  - After signing in for the first time, students must verify their email address before commenting. A verification email will appear in their inbox once they sign in to Disqus.

Make and share

- Individually or in small groups, students post in the comments section in response to what they have learned about the definition of terrorism and why some events are considered terrorism.

- o Responses should be supported by evidence from the video and The Lowdown post.
- o Encourage students to reply to other comments after posting their response. Remind them to use evidence to support their claims and respectful language when responding.

- Students can write their own response or use the following questions as a starting point:
  - o How should terrorism be defined?
  - o Does racism or Islamophobia play a role in who is deemed a terrorist and who isn't? Explain using evidence from the video and The Lowdown post.
  - o How do you think the government should respond to mass shootings and other acts of violence? What do you think will stop these tragic events from happening?
  - o Have recent mass shootings and other violent attacks affected how you feel about your personal safety, especially when out in public? Explain using specific examples.

Assessment/reflection

- Students reflect on what they have learned either through a class discussion or in writing:

  - o What have you learned about how terrorism is defined? Did your opinion change or stay the same as you learned more about the issue?
  - o What was it like to post your responses publically and reply to other posts? What did you learn from other students? What do you hope they learned from you?

Circle chats, small-group discussions and think-pair-share provide a safer space for students to practice speaking and listening, and also boost participation during whole-class discussions.

Extension/homework

Write/speak locally: Students turn their opinions about this issue into a letter, short speech or presentation, then research ways to make their voice heard in their community. (Example: Speaking during the public comment section of a city council meeting, posting on an online forum, etc.) For a list of how to contact local officials in your area, check out KQED Learning's Local Election Toolkit.

Common Core standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7	Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W1	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.