

Follow the evidence.

A companion to *The Deadline Plate*

The Chronicle Keepers, Book One | Eric Jourgensen

About this guide

Designed for high-school discussion, with educator judgment about reader suitability. Pages 1-3 do not reveal the ending. Page 4 contains spoilers. The activity on pages 2-3 is an original fictional exercise, not a scene or quotation from the novel. No book purchase is needed to use the activity.

Before reading

Four student journalists encounter a printing plate that carries news of their disappearance and sends them to 1887 New York. Ask: what would you need to see before believing an impossible headline?

Six questions to carry into the story

When does a source become evidence? What does independent corroboration add?

Can every detail in a story be accurate while the overall impression is misleading? Explain with a hypothetical example.

What makes a correction useful to someone who saw only the original story?

What responsibilities do reporters have toward someone who could be harmed by publicity?

If a document disappears, what other records might help establish what happened?

What can historical fiction help a reader imagine? Which claims still need checking against historical sources?

Facilitator note

The novel addresses institutional mistreatment and vulnerable witnesses. Let students discuss fictional decisions without requiring personal disclosures. Distinguish the invented time-travel story from the documented history of Nellie Bly; the novel is not a substitute for historical sourcing.

Would you publish it?

An original fictional reporting exercise

The claim

A social post says: "The school canceled the newspaper because its last story criticized the administration." Your newsroom has the following material. All people, records, and events in this exercise are invented.

Source A: the notice

A dated notice says the newspaper room is unavailable next week while its electrical outlets are repaired. It does not mention cancellation of the publication.

Source B: the witness

A student says: "I saw boxes leaving the room yesterday. I heard we were being shut down." The student witnessed the boxes but heard the reason from someone else.

Source C: the screenshot

A cropped screenshot says: "We cannot publish from that room next week." The full message is unavailable. The sender and surrounding conversation are not verified.

Source D: the second post

Another account repeats the cancellation claim and links to the first post. It offers no new reporting.

Source E: the response

The adviser says the newsroom will meet in a different room and intends to publish on schedule. The team has not yet checked the new room booking or spoken with the facilities office.

Run the exercise

3 minutes: read individually. 7 minutes: label each item as direct observation, document, hearsay, or repeated claim. 7 minutes: complete the source ledger and choose two follow-up questions. 5 minutes: write a defensible 50-word update. 3 minutes: explain what you still cannot verify.

The source ledger

Name: _____ Date: _____

The precise claim we are checking

What our evidence directly establishes

What is reported but not independently verified

Which sources repeat the same underlying claim

The missing context we need

Two people or records we would check next

Our defensible headline

Our 50-word update, including uncertainty

What holds up?

Activity answer guide

The materials support a report about temporary loss of access to a room. They do not establish cancellation of the newspaper or retaliation. The student directly observed boxes but not their purpose. The second post is not independent corroboration. The screenshot lacks necessary context. The adviser offers an attributable statement that can be checked.

Possible update

A notice says the newspaper room will close next week for electrical repairs. The adviser says staff will meet elsewhere and publish on schedule. Students have circulated claims that the paper was canceled, but the materials reviewed do not establish that. Reporters are seeking the room booking and facilities confirmation.

Assess the reasoning

Look for precise attribution, separation of observation from inference, identification of repeated sourcing, specific follow-up questions, and a headline that does not exceed the evidence. More sources do not automatically mean more independent evidence.

After finishing the novel: spoilers below

1. Lila initially leaves out a custodian's explanation. How does the final reporting respond to that earlier decision?
2. Mary needs protection as well as recognition. Why is preserving a name alone insufficient?
3. The students support Nellie's reporting rather than taking it over. How does that choice shape their role in history?
4. The school archive connects the present investigation to Marisol's reporting. Why must the students still distinguish the older water complaints from current causes?
5. What do multiple copies, witnesses, and public checking accomplish that one heroic reporter cannot?

Continue the conversation

Ask students to propose an archive-preservation plan for a fictional newsroom. Include a correction trail, source permissions, backups, and a clear distinction between verified facts and unanswered questions.

Author and resource inquiries: ejourgensen@gmail.com