

INVESTIGATE

1.1 WordCounter

Purpose

This first activity, using the online *WordCounter* tool, allows participants to look at what words are used in a document and the frequencies with which those words are used. This is the most basic way to *investigate* media products. The activity also introduces to participants the power of creating ways to *visualize data* with simple word clouds and pictures they create themselves to convey meaning.

Learning Goals

Participants will:

- Analyze word use and word frequency in specific media products
- Create alternate stories, through words and pictures, based on their analyses
- Reflect on the different ways numbers and pictures convey meaning
- Understand and appreciate that media products contain patterns that affect us consciously or sometimes unconsciously

Time

30 to 45 Minutes

Supplies

- Computers (*1 for every 3 participants*)
- Projector and access to the Internet for all computers
- Large pieces of paper (*roughly 2 feet x 3 feet*)
- Thick crayons or markers
- Several large tables or floor space or tape to stick paper to walls so participants can draw

Facilitator Preparation

WordCounter is a simple tool. It includes some “ready made” media texts for participants to analyze. However, this activity will be much more meaningful (and fun) if you upload materials ahead of time that will be especially interesting to your group of participants. News articles or speeches will make good examples. Longer advertisements may also be interesting and song lyrics are fun.

Documents and links to documents are easy to upload in the *WordCounter* tool. Go to <https://civicidea.databasic.io/en/wordcounter/> and look in the dropdowns to see what is already there. Then find content to copy and upload that will interest your group.

Practice analyzing a few media products yourself and thinking about what the results suggest. Decide which examples you will use to demonstrate the tool to participants. Plan on at least a couple of hours preparation for this activity.



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WordCounter, *continued*

Introduce the Activity to Participants

Begin with several open-ended questions to get learners thinking about the importance of analyzing media content (rather than just being passive consumers). (Accept all ideas unless they are 100% false.)

- How many of you read about the news online? What are the sources you most often look at?
- Do you go to these sources yourself, or do you get “newfeeds” on your different apps?
- When you read a news article, or look at an advertisement, do you ever find that certain words or phrases are used over and over, or affect you very strongly?
- How often is information conveyed with data visualizations? Does this help you understand the information or data being conveyed?

Launch the Activity

Part 1:

1. Participants break into groups of three with a computer for each group.
2. Each team signs on to *WordCounter* (<https://civicidea.databasic.io/en/wordcounter/>).
3. **First**, each group picks a document to analyze. (If they have time, they can experiment with several documents and see which produces the most interesting results.)
NOTE: Advance learners may wish to copy their own documents or links from the web if there is time.
4. Remind learners that to “activate” the tool, they should click on the orange “COUNT” button at the bottom of the box.
5. Remind participants to look at both the word count results and the word cloud/picture results.
6. Give the groups 5-7 minutes to experiment with the tool.

Part 2:

1. When they have picked a document and had a chance to experiment with the tool, explain that they must take one of the large sheets of paper and draw their own picture of what the most frequently used words suggest to them.
2. Emphasize that there is no right or wrong answer to this question. They can depict whatever the words convey to them, even if it seems “off the topic.” Very simple drawings and stick figures are fine.
3. Tell participants they have 10 minutes to draw the activity.

Introduce and Demonstrate the Tool

Tell participants they're going to use a simple tool today that helps analyze the words used in some media products. Demonstrate the tool. Open up *WordCounter* <https://civicidea.databasic.io/en/wordcounter/>. Select an article from one of the dropdowns or paste a link to a recent local news article (that you have previously selected) using the Paste a link tab. Press Count to show an analysis of the words written in the selected article. Scroll down the list of words so learners understand how the results are presented. Explain that the size of each word represents how frequently it is used. In other words, it's a way to *visualize* the results.

Part 3:

Ask each team to share the source of the content they used. Then give them one minute to explain why they drew this particular picture (which words they were depicting and why the words suggested this image).

Debrief and Reflect

End the activity with several open-ended questions to encourage sharing and reflection, such as:

- Was the tool easy/fun to use?
- Did the results ever surprise you, give you some insight into the producer of the media?
(*What is the effect of seeing some words over and over? Does it help present a point of view?*)
- Did you find the word “counts” or the word “clouds” more interesting? Would they be effective in different circumstances?
(*Pictures affect different parts of our brains and can elicit emotions.*)
- Do you think you might use this tool again on your own? If so how/when?
(*Including the word cloud tool*)