Activities for the Spanish (or Portuguese) Language Classroom

**How We Got Started and Why**

Latin American historian, W. John Green, a self-proclaimed “news junky,” founded ***Latin American News Digest*** in 2013. His love of Latin America and current events gave birth to the idea that maybe other scholars and students of Latin America and its languages might benefit from his news obsession.

John Green conceived the ***Digest*** as a manageable news source with a mission: to help others inform themselves about the trends and anomalies across the nineteen Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries that share our hemisphere. So, who has time to read over 100 news sources from so many countries? We do it for you in the attempt to present you with a variety of voices and topics from every corner of the region.

**What’s In It for You and Your Students?**

Each week, the editors at ***Latin American News Digest*** research over 100 news sources from the region to bring you and your students interesting and informative articles about Latin America by Latin American journalists. Each issue features a Main Story, a hot topic that’s being covered by multiple news media outlets across several different countries. The Main Story synthesizes over a dozen articles from a variety of news sources and summarizes, in English, the unique perspective and contribution of each to the topic at hand. The link for each article is included for easy access to the full original version in its original language (Spanish, Portuguese or English).

In addition to the Main Story, ***Latin American News Digest*** features sections on Arts and Culture, Economy, Environment, Inter-American Relations, Latin America and U.S. Relations, Latin America and World Relations, News in Brief, Politics, Opinion, Society, Travel and Tourism, and War, Peace, Drugs and Violence. The News in Brief section provides an inter-active map. By clicking on one of the countries, you get access to a news item for that country. Our aim is to cover news from all of the Latin American nations, not just the big ones.

**Why Use *Latin American News Digest*?**

Sure, there are lots of newspapers and magazines in Spanish, but nowhere will you find one that draws on as many different news sources from so many countries as ***Latin American News Digest***. We give your students a broad perspective of the happenings in the region, and no other publication does this like we do.

In addition, we offer a summary in English of every article. Let’s face it; Latin America is unknown territory for most students. Tackling a newspaper article about an unfamiliar topic happening in a foreign country can be an obstacle to learning. By having your students read the English summary before clicking on the link to the original article, their understanding of the topic at hand, in the original language (Spanish or Portuguese), is much more conducive to learning about that topic. Getting over students’ “I don’t understand anything” hump allows educators to focus on the nuances of the language and engage students in communicative activities that encourage not only the use of the language, but also a connection to a community that is ***not*** as unfamiliar as students may have thought initially.

**How to Use *Latin American News Digest* in the Spanish (or Portuguese) Language Classroom**

At ***Latin American News Digest***, we know that being an informed citizen is everyone’s responsibility. Using news media in the classroom helps to instill that idea in high school and college students, too. We’ve come up with a few activities for Novice, Intermediate and Advanced-level students, based on the American Council for Teaching Foreign Languages’ guidelines and Can-Do Statements, which can be accessed [here](https://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Can-Do_Statements_2015.pdf).

Based on the level of language sophistication needed to communicate the ideas of certain topics, we recommend the following distribution of the news sections of the ***Digest*** for Novice, Intermediate and Advanced-level language students. We offer this only as a guide.

**Novice:** Arts and Culture, Environment, Travel and News in Brief

**Intermediate:** Economy and Politics, as well as Arts and Culture, Environment, Travel and Tourism, and News in Brief

**Advanced:** Main Story, Opinion, Inter-American Relations, Latin-America and U.S. Relations, Latin America and World Relations, and Society, as well as Economy, Politics, Arts and Culture, Environment, Travel and Tourism and News in Brief.

Although most of our news sources are in Spanish, there are a few in Portuguese, too. The following activities can be adapted to the Portuguese language classroom.

**Getting Started: Vocabulary, Grammar and Geography**

Before beginning the communicative activities that stress reading, writing, speaking and listening, we recommend an initial exploration of the vocabulary and targeted grammar structures for all language levels.

**Vocabulary Building in Context**

Choose one of the ***Digest***’s sections recommended for your students’ level. For example, Novice students might begin with a perusal of the Travel and Tourism section. If students have access to tablets or laptops, put them in pairs or small groups and assign an article from that section to each. If your classroom does not have several tablets or laptops to share, project one article from the section on a screen to do this as a whole-class activity.

--Have the students read the English summary of the article. For novice and intermediate-level students, in particular, a pre-reading of the English summary of the article helps them to contextualize and familiarize themselves with the topic.

--Click on the link to the original article. Have students make a list of cognates and a list of unfamiliar terms and write them on the board where everyone can see them. Have students try to guess the meanings of the less familiar terms from the context of the article. Circle the ones that appear the most on the separate lists. In addition, decide which ones might be most vital to understanding the topic of the article.

--Over the course of several issues of the ***Digest***, come up with a common list of recurring key words for talking about certain topics like Environment or Travel and Tourism, etc. Focus on the most frequently used words and make sure everybody is memorizing and using them in the communicative activities.

**Grammar: Parts of Speech and Particular Structures**

It should not come as a surprise to any language teacher that grammar study is the least appealing activity for students. Fortunately, by using ***Latin American News Digest*** for grammar review and reinforcement, there’s an interesting context built in.

For novice-level students, you might focus on just a few sentences of the article to identify parts of speech, noun and adjective agreement, and to make sure that students can identify the subject of a phrase and its corresponding verb. Intermediate-level students might identify different verb tenses throughout an article, or the referents for object pronouns in a paragraph. Advanced-level students might hunt for uses of “se” in expressing passive voice or impersonal expressions. There are many possibilities; they just depend on the targeted grammar structure of your lesson plan.

**Geography: Where are we?**

Using the inter-active map of the News in Brief section, have students point to the country or countries featured in the article. Hover the cursor over the country and the name will pop up to confirm their answer. Ask them to identify the neighboring countries, as well.

For more detail, students can research the geographic characteristics of the country, as well as the location of the capital and other notable cities and areas of interest.

**Communicative Activities**

**Novice-level**

***Sí o No, Dónde, Cuándo, Quién y Qué***. This is an opportunity to practice forming questions and answering them. You can start out with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions. With these types of questions, you can ask things as simple as “*¿El periódico es de México?*” “*¿El artículo es sobre animales?*” or “*¿Enrique Peña Nieto es el presidente de México?*” Or look for a more sophisticated understanding of the article’s topic with questions that can also be answered simply, like “*¿El artículo es negativo o es positivo?*” “*¿Las personas protestan esta situación?*” or “*¿Quieres visitar este lugar?*”

Moving on to questions that require a short phrase, you might ask, “*¿Cómo se llama el periódico?*” “*¿Quién es el autor del artículo?*” or “*¿Quién escribe el artículo?*” “*¿Dónde ocurren los eventos?*” or “*¿De qué país es el periódico?*” “*¿Cuándo ocurre/n el/los evento/s?*” or “*¿Cuál es la fecha del artículo?*” “*¿Cuál es el problema?*” or “*¿Cuál es el evento?*”

If the article is long, focus on the first two or three paragraphs. Ask students to come up with their own questions to ask their classmates.

**Intermediate-level**

***Preguntas y hechos***. Have students re-read the article in Spanish. If it is a long article, focus on the first two or three paragraphs. In pairs or small groups, students each come up with at least three questions to ask the class, either orally or in writing. You can place conditions on the types of questions. For example, don’t allow students to repeat question words or pose only ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or ‘true’ or ‘false’ questions.

Reverse the above activity by having small groups come up with statements, and in Jeopardy style, the class has to decide who or what the statement refers to in the article. For example, *El artículo dice que el hermano de este presidente es corrupto*. Answer: *¿Quién es Jimmy Morales?*

***Entrevistas***. Students imagine that they have the opportunity to interview a person mentioned in the article. Have small groups come up with questions. Share the questions with the entire class and let the class pick the “best” questions to ask in the interview. If they are feeling dramatic, have students take turns pretending to be the person interviewed and answer a question or two from the class.

***Cuéntame****.* Students can give a brief oral or written summary of the article in Spanish. Have them imagine that a friend wants to know what they read. Direct the students to tell their friend the main points of the article in an email or ‘Mega’ Twitter message (maximum 140 *words* instead of characters), or a one-minute voicemail.

***Más detalles***. Have students research and give a brief oral presentation or write a short biography or description of a featured person, organization, place or event from the article. You might have them follow the format of a Wikipedia page or a History Channel feature. If students are working in pairs or small groups, they can act out an event for the class.

**Advanced-level**

The following activities are based on individual sections of the ***Digest*** that might be of particular interest to advanced-level students.

**Main Story**: Have students do further research on the people, places and issues discussed in the Main Story. Present this information to the class orally. This activity emphasizes the ability to describe.

**Opinion section**: Students can express agreement or disagreement with statements from the opinion pieces. Ask students to find sentences in the articles with which they agree or disagree and explain why. Have them do further research on the topic and decide if their views have changed or become more decisive. This activity emphasizes the ability to give an opinion.

**Society:** Keep a list of topics by country. Which are the most common topics? Ask students to identify issues that affect their lives and communities, as well. Have them describe differences and similarities with the ones they read about in the Society section.

Students can create a news report on a particular issue or write a letter to a political representative to express their reactions, opinions or suggestions. This activity emphasizes the ability to react and recommend.

**Inter-American, Latin America and U.S., and Latin America and World Relations**: Keep a list of the topics discussed among articles in each issue. Are the relationships among the countries generally positive, negative or neutral? In what ways? What are the areas of agreement and dissent?

Have students work in pairs or small groups, with each student representing a different country at an imagined summit or diplomatic meeting. What issues would they discuss? What would be the position of each country on those issues, and what sort of resolutions might come of the meeting? This activity emphasizes the ability to make hypothetical statements.

**And Finally, Let’s Work Together**

There are many more ways to use ***Latin American News Digest*** in the classroom. We encourage you to adapt these to what makes sense for your students, and to come up with more on your own. We hope you will find that your students are learning about Latin America, while using their language skills.

We’d love to hear about your experiences, and your suggestions, so please do not hesitate to reach out to us through the [Contact Us](https://latinamericannewsdigest.com/contact-us/) portal on the home page of the ***Digest***.

Finally, please know how much we appreciate all educators and the work that you do to inform our students, teach them critical thinking skills, and inspire their imaginations. ¡GRACIAS MIL!