



## **Classroom Activities**

### ***Post Mortem: This Is Not Your CSI***

#### **VIDEO OVERVIEW**

Watch Chapter One of the FRONTLINE film *Post Mortem* "This Is Not Your CSI" (<http://www.pbs.org/frontline/teach/post-mortem>).

Every day in America, nearly 7,000 people die. When it happens suddenly, it is assumed that there will be an investigation, as seen in popular television crime dramas like *CSI*. In this video clip from *Post Mortem*, students will discover a very different reality: Death investigation in the United States ranges from excellent to completely incompetent thanks to a lack of federal standards and national regulation of the process or of those conducting the investigations.

#### **GETTING STARTED**

For classrooms studying Social Studies, Government, Civics, Ethics and Law, this FRONTLINE teacher's guide includes a set of themes and discussion questions to help students analyze and understand key current events. Watch the video chapter and start a discussion that examines the importance of competent death investigations. Go further into this topic with the *Post Mortem* lesson plan that asks students to examine death investigation across the United States and outline steps that lawmakers could take to improve the system.

#### **VIDEO THEMES**

- Because there is no national regulation of the death investigation process, the competency of these investigations varies greatly from state to state, and incompetent death investigators face no serious consequences for poor work.
- Not all death investigators are subject-matter experts. Forensic pathologists/medical examiners are trained to determine how and why people die, but elected officials, called coroners, typically have no medical training or background.
- Issues such as lack of training, insufficient funding, poor skills and inadequate facilities can result in botched autopsies that miss homicides or result in false convictions.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why does the death investigation process vary so much from state to state?
- Why is competent death investigation important to both the living and the dead?
- Describe how the lack of national standards allowed Dr. Thomas Gill to work as a death investigator in a number of locations across the United States despite his having previously been fired and arrested on the charge of drunken driving on his way to the morgue one morning.
- What changes need to be made to ensure that all families and communities have qualified death investigators and competent death investigations?

## GO FURTHER

*Post Mortem* Lesson Plan: “This Is Not Your CS!”

Web-exclusive Resources:

Interviews With Forensic Pathologists and Coroners

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/interviews/>

Map: Death in America

<http://www.pbs.org/frontline/post-mortem/map-death-in-america/>

## CREDITS

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### **Written by:**

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## **LESSON PLAN: “This Is Not Your CSI”**

### **Overview:**

In this lesson, students will discover that death investigations in the United States are inconsistent, unregulated, and in many cases conducted by people who are not trained in forensic pathology. Students will study and discuss the importance of competent death investigations and outline steps that lawmakers could take to improve the system. For primary source documents and other background materials about death investigation, please see [Related Resources](#).

### **Subject Area:**

Social Studies, Government, Civics, Ethics and Law

### **Grade Level:**

Grades 9-12 (Note: The video chapter used in this lesson contains imagery that some may find disturbing. Please preview before classroom use.)

### **Objectives:**

Students will:

- Define the terms “post mortem,” “autopsy,” “coroner,” “medical examiner” and “forensic pathologist.”
- Analyze a map that shows state by state how death investigations are conducted, whether by medical examiners or coroners.
- Discuss the value of competent death investigations.
- Examine details related to autopsies, the qualifications of coroners, the cost of reforming systems for death investigation, the role of forensic pathologists, and the lack of national standards or oversight of death investigations.
- Write persuasive letters to lawmakers that outline steps that should be taken to ensure competent death investigations.

### **Estimated Time:**

One 50-minute class period.

For classrooms able to spend more time exploring the themes of this lesson, please see the teaching strategies outlined in the [Lesson Extensions](#).

### Materials Needed:

- Internet access and equipment to show the class an online video clip, and to read or print out articles
- Clip from *Post Mortem*: Chapter One: "This Is Not Your CSI" (length: 13:03)
- Handout: What to Know Before You Go

### Procedures:

1. Using Nielsen Television data (<http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/top10s/television.html>) or another resource, display a list of top TV shows. Point out which are dramas related to crime scene investigation and ask students if they watch these types of programs. If so, what do they find interesting about them?
2. Write the words "post mortem," "autopsy," "coroner," "medical examiner" and "forensic pathologist" on the board. Ask students to share what they already know about the meaning of each term.
3. Explain that the class will be watching a film segment that will teach them more about the list of terms and the death investigation process.
4. Watch the video chapter "This Is Not Your CSI" (length: 13:03). Focus student viewing by asking them to add to their definitions of the vocabulary words based on the film's content.
5. After watching the clip, ask students to revisit how the terms are defined, drawing from the following information as needed:
  - a) *Post mortem*: "After death," also used to refer to an autopsy.
  - b) *Autopsy*: An external and internal examination of the entire body to determine the cause of death.
  - c) *Coroner*: An elected official responsible for death investigations. This person typically does not have any medical training.
  - d) *Forensic pathologist*: A specially trained physician working in a public office or private setting to examine the bodies of people who have died suddenly, unexpectedly or violently, as well as other specific classes of death as defined by state laws. The forensic pathologist typically determines the cause and manner of death at the request of a coroner or medical examiner, or on a fee-for-service basis.
  - e) *Medical examiner*: A forensic pathologist serving as a public officer who investigates deaths occurring under unusual or suspicious circumstances. He or she may perform autopsies or oversee others who conduct these exams.

6. Using the “Death in America” map

(<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/map-death-in-america/>), show students the system used in their state for death investigations. Discuss:

- In what ways do coroners and medical examiners differ?
- Which system seems to be most common in the United States?
- How could systematic variations from state to state be problematic in the death investigation process? (Some examples of state variations are provided in the article “How Qualified Is Your Coroner?”) (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/how-qualified-is-your-coroner.html#ixzz1lrSLQYcV>)
- Why is competent death investigation important? What are the benefits to families and communities? What are the risks of incompetent death investigations?

7. Give each student a handout and divide the class into five groups. Have each group read a specific article from Things to Know Before You Go (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/>) and answer the questions for that article on the handout.

8. Ask a member of each group to share with the class what the group learned from their article. All students should complete their handouts with information provided during the group presentations.

9. Have students apply what they have learned in this lesson by writing a persuasive letter to their state or national lawmakers that outline steps that should be taken to ensure competent death investigations.

## LESSON EXTENSIONS

- Invite the local medical examiner/coroner to visit class and discuss his or her views on the death investigation process and the requirements for medical examiners/coroners in the community and nationwide. Help students prepare some basic questions that can be provided to the visitor in advance to help focus the discussion. Students can get ideas for questions by reviewing FRONTLINE's resources "The Real CSI" (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/real-csi/>), "Second Chances" (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/second-chances/>) and "Things to Know Before You Go." (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/>)
- Debate the question, should there be national regulation and oversight to ensure competent death investigations? Have student groups research the pro and con positions for this question and then hold the debate. To get started with research, have students review "No National Standards, Little Oversight." (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/no-standards.html>)
- Examine specific examples involving errors or negligence in the death investigation process. Select cases profiled in FRONTLINE's interview with Dr. Frank Minyard (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/interviews/frank-minyard.html>) or the case of Henry Glover (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/law-disorder/case-five-henry-glover/>) and summarize the errors/negligence by death investigators and the results of these actions.
- Have student groups use what they have learned from the lesson to brainstorm a job description that articulates the qualifications they believe death investigators in their community should have.
- Create a flow chart that illustrates the various steps of the criminal investigation process. A good resource to get students started is the Department of Justice report "Death Investigation: A Guide for the Scene Investigator." (<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/167568.pdf>) Discuss where the cause of death is determined and which steps provide data to inform that decision.
- Take an in-depth look at autopsies using information from "Autopsy 101" ([http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/autopsy-101.html?utm\\_campaign=videoplayer&utm\\_medium=fullplayer&utm\\_source=relatedlink](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/autopsy-101.html?utm_campaign=videoplayer&utm_medium=fullplayer&utm_source=relatedlink)), the College of American Pathologists ([http://www.cap.org/apps/cap.portal?\\_nfpb=true&cntvwrPtl\\_t\\_actionOverr](http://www.cap.org/apps/cap.portal?_nfpb=true&cntvwrPtl_t_actionOverr)

[ide=%2Fportlets%2FcontentViewer%2Fshow&\\_windowLabel=cntvwrPtl&cntvwrPtl{actionForm.contentReference}=committees%2Fautopsy%2Fautopsy\\_index.html&\\_state=maximized&\\_pageLabel=cntvwr\)](#) and [The Virtual Autopsy \(<http://www.le.ac.uk/pathology/teach/va/titlpag1.html>\)](#).

Have students create information sheets that explain what autopsies can reveal, how to get one, who pays for them, and why they take place in some cases but not in others.

## RELATED RESOURCES

Students should be aware that websites often present only one view of an issue. Encourage students to think about and question websites as they are reviewing them. Some guiding questions they can use are: What did you learn from this site? What didn't you learn from this site? Who sponsors this site? What bias might the sponsor have? How current is the site?

### **FRONTLINE: "Autopsy 101"**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/autopsy-101.html>

Read about the importance of autopsies and why so few people get one.

### **FRONTLINE: "Forensic Pathologists: The Death Detectives"**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/forensic-pathologists.html>

Find out what forensic pathologists do and why there are so few of them.

### **FRONTLINE: "How Qualified Is Your Coroner?"**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/how-qualified-is-your-coroner.html>

Learn system variations from state to state and evaluate whether coroners should be replaced with medical examiners.

### **The Innocence Project: "Unvalidated or Improper Forensic Science"**

<http://www.innocenceproject.org/understand/Unreliable-Limited-Science.php>

This site describes how unvalidated or improper forensic science can lead to wrongful convictions. This page also links to a PDF summary of actual cases where this has happened.

### **ProPublica: *Post Mortem—Death Investigation in America***

<http://www.propublica.org/topic/post-mortem/>

FRONTLINE partner ProPublica provides additional data and analysis on death investigation, including autopsy statistics and information on how to investigate coroners and medical examiners.

### **National Public Radio: *Post Mortem—Death Investigation in America***

<http://www.npr.org/series/133208980/post-mortem-death-investigation-in-america>

FRONTLINE partner NPR provides stories and analysis of how incompetent death investigations have sent innocent people to jail, frustrated families seeking answers about the deaths of loved ones, and more.



## **PURCHASING THE FILM**

*Post Mortem* can be purchased from PBS Educational Media.

([http://teacher.shop.pbs.org/product/index.jsp?productId=11188635&utm\\_source=PBS&utm\\_medium=Link&utm\\_content=FRON\\_TTFRL72907\\_postmortem&utm\\_campaign=fri\\_content\\_postmortem](http://teacher.shop.pbs.org/product/index.jsp?productId=11188635&utm_source=PBS&utm_medium=Link&utm_content=FRON_TTFRL72907_postmortem&utm_campaign=fri_content_postmortem))

## RELATED STANDARDS

### **Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects**

([http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI\\_ELA%20Standards.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf))

RH. 9-10.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

RH. 11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

WHST. 9-10, 11-12.1 Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

WHST. 9-10, 11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

WHST. 9-10, 11-12.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

WHST. 9-10, 11-12.9 Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

SL. 9-10, 11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on [grade-appropriate] topics, text, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. (Main lesson activity, Extension 2)

SL. 9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

SL. 11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

**Content Knowledge:** (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Civics, Standard 3: Understands the sources, purposes, and functions of law, and the importance of the rule of law for the protection of individual rights and the common good.

Civics, Standard 28: Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals.

Civics, Standard 29: Understands the importance of political leadership, public service, and a knowledgeable citizenry in American constitutional democracy.

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 3: Uses the grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions.

Language Arts, Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 5: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.

Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Thinking and Reasoning, Standard 1: Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument.

Working With Others, Standard 1: Contributes to the overall effort of a group.

Working With Others, Standard 4: Displays effective interpersonal communication skills.

## ***Post Mortem: Things to Know Before You Go***

**Directions:** Work with your group to read the assigned article and answer the questions. Use the website listed to access your article. Be prepared to share your findings with the class and take notes during other group presentations.

### **Article 1: “Autopsy 101”**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/autopsy-101.html>

1. Why do some experts believe that everyone who dies should get an autopsy?

Do you agree? Why or why not?

2. What happens if an autopsy is delayed rather than being performed within 24 hours of death?

### **Article 2: “Forensic Pathologists: The Death Detectives”**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/forensic-pathologists.html>

1. What type of training is needed to become a forensic pathologist?

2. Why is there a critical shortage of forensic pathologists?

3. Do you think it is important to have a forensic pathologist involved in every death investigation? Why or why not?

### **Article 3: “No National Standards, Little Oversight”**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/no-standards.html#ixzz1IrWq2tVz>

1. How might national standards increase the quality of death investigations in America?
2. Why don't more offices seek accreditation?
3. How does the Criminal Justice and Forensic Science Reform Act propose to combat the problems with death investigation?

**Article 4: "The Price of Reform" (a section of "The Real CSI")**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/real-csi/#ixzz1lrR82Sy1>

1. How much would it cost per person per year to run a good medical examiner's office?
2. Why are taxpayers unwilling to pay this price?
3. What benefits can society expect to get if additional money is spent on death investigation?

**Article 5: "How Qualified Is Your Coroner?"**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/how-qualified-is-your-coroner.html#ixzz1lrSLQYcV>

1. What did you learn about the requirements for being a coroner?
2. What do you think should be the qualifications of a coroner? Why?

3. What keeps states from replacing coroners with more qualified death investigators?  
**logic.**