

Promoting Media Literacy

Ten Activities to Help Students Create, Evaluate, and Analyze Content



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Media literacy is best defined as the ability to access, create, analyze, and evaluate messages in a variety of forms. Anyone can post nearly anything at any time, from pretty much anywhere, and there are very few restrictions or quality control checks applied to what appears online. To make matters worse, “deepfake” media (photos, videos, and audio recordings that have been manipulated) is becoming more sophisticated and less easily discernible. As such, it is imperative as responsible citizens that we use our critical thinking and analytical skills to evaluate the authenticity of content we consume, especially if we intend to share it with others. Here are ten activities that you can use to teach youth to help them grow in their media literacy skills and move from passive to active, critical consumption of what they see, hear, and read online.

1. FILL IN THE BLANK ACTIVITY. Grab a recent online article that students would find interesting and relevant, and blackout key facts in the article before presenting it to them. For instance, you might mark out the date, times, and locations, as well as the names, race, gender, whether they are a celebrity or another public personality, and any other identifying elements. Then, have students read the redacted article and write out their reflections, opinions, and ideas as to what was redacted. Once done, provide them with the original article inclusive of all of the details you removed. Ask them again to reflect on the article and determine if and how their perception of what happened changed. The activity shows how crucial certain elements of a story are, and how they color our perceptions of what happened.

2. THEMATIC CREATIONS OF VARIOUS ERAS. Have students create a poster, infographic, or set of memes for a specific decade by using information found online. For instance, you might have them watch video clips and read stories about the 1990s. This content might include political ads, music videos, celebrity news, public service announcements, and more. After reviewing all of these social artifacts, certain themes and patterns will rise to the top. We then want them to portray the tone and tenor of the times by synthesizing the most relevant and compelling pieces into a single product. Let them provide their own perceptions, rather than being informed by history books and older family members. After they finish, they might read what history books say about the 1990s, or chat with adults who lived through that decade, and see if their perspective (based on the media of the times) and the historical reality align.

3. EVALUATE MEDIA-SHAPED PERCEPTIONS OF BEAUTY. Have students analyze how the media affects their perceptions of beauty, fitness, health, and celebrity/influencer culture. Assign groups of students to one of these categories, and task them with identifying five commercials from YouTube that are representative of each theme. Are these commercials inclusive in their portrayal of individuals of different races, ethnicities, genders, body types, and sexual orientation? Do they tend to elevate certain definitions of beauty, fitness, health, and celebrity/influencer culture while de-emphasizing others? Ask students how it affects them as viewers, both in their thoughts as well as in how they try to look and act. Ask how it might affect some of their peers, especially those who don't fit certain stereotypes deemed most desirable by messages from media. The goal here is to understand the sheer power that media has on our psyche, well-being, goals, and outlook on life.



4. TIME MACHINE ACTIVITY. Divide students into two groups and informally label them *liberals* or *conservatives*. Depending on their age, you may need to explain the basic tenets of both perspectives. Then assign them the task of creating a time machine that will be opened in exactly 100 years from now by future students at your school. What would they collect and put in that time machine to depict the true condition (positive and negative) of your country most accurately in the current year to those students 100 years from today? (Perhaps those in the “conservative” group would include pictures of human fetuses and/or gang violence by minority groups while those in the “liberals” group would include pictures of melting icebergs and/or unemployed, homeless war veterans.) After giving them time to finish this activity, have each group present and discuss the contents of their time machine with the rest of the class. Finally, discuss how individuals can have completely different interpretations of the state of our country and our people, based on the worldview they adopt and the messages they have heard.

5. CLICKBAIT HEADLINES. Ask students to each collect ten clickbait headlines from various online news sources (for younger students you may need to suggest particular outlets). These should be ones that students believe intentionally lure or dupe people into clicking the link, and which then underdeliver or otherwise fail to live up to the promise of the headline. They can screenshot them on any device they have. Ask them also to reflect on instances when they have been tricked to click through headlines on the Web, social media, or streaming platforms. How did they feel emotionally? Did it make them less likely to trust the source? Help them to realize that the best strategy to counter clickbait is by ignoring the headlines and just using Google to individually search for the subject matter they are interested in. Clicking on clickbait headlines just encourages outlets to keep generating and using them, so self-control is essential.

6. ASSESS THE PLATFORM. Adults often attempt to shield children from news programming because the top stories tend to feature violence and terror, or are increasingly polarizing in the content they share. However, as they enter their teenage years it is beneficial to analyze programs on various channels. Spend fifteen minutes you're your students watching programming on one news channel, and then another fifteen minutes on another channel (with an opposing political bent). Then, ask them whether any statements they heard were biased, loaded, or intentionally inflammatory and provoking. Help them to identify objective facts by recognizing the angles, motives, and agendas of the show hosts. There are also biases related to the publishers or outlets of the shows. We understand that what is aired on Fox News is different than MSNBC. That is because individuals within these companies may have different political purposes they are attempting to serve. There are several websites that evaluate the biases in specific news outlets (see one example [here](#)). This does not mean that students should completely steer clear of sites on the far left or far right, but that they should always proceed with caution..

7. ASSESS THE PERSON. "Reporting" involves stating the facts as they are known, without additional commentary. "Editorializing," on the other hand, introduces analysis and opinion into the presentation of facts. There is nothing wrong with this – it can help us better understand the context and complicated information. We just need to make sure that students understand the difference. To facilitate this, choose a selection of clips from various people offering information about a controversial topic (e.g., gun control, abortion, the death penalty, vaccines, immigration, drug use). Ask students to determine whether the person in the clip is reporting or editorializing, and then discuss any potential problems with the latter. You can also combine this with Activity 6 and evaluate individual messages on particular platforms. Even biased outlets have individuals who simply report the facts, and neutral outlets have individuals who might editorialize and share too much personal opinion, rather than stick to what is objectively known.



8. FACT-CHECK CHECKUP. Have your students watch a 10–15-minute (or longer, depending on the student's age) news segment. The first step is to identify claims, assertions, or statistics. Write down 3-5 of these. Next, search reputable websites to see if the claims or statistics are accurate. Sites such as Wikipedia may be convenient, but the information provided there is *not always* trustworthy and/or updated. In addition, many popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter include warnings about posts whose content is disputed or misleading, but their ability to check and verify the accuracy of all content posted by all users is simply impossible.

This is where our own diligence must come into play. Several sites exist to help expedite fact-checking, especially for major, controversial topics. Sites such as Snopes, PolitiFact, and FactCheck.org are great tools to use before forming an opinion on a subject. In addition, students can use Google to check the facts of what is being shared, and use Google Scholar if there are references to academic articles. Questions that students should ask include:

Are these statistics accurate based on reputable published research?

Are these claims logical and consistent with the evidence found?

Are these sources valid and reliable?

Encourage youth to identify and cross-check multiple legitimate, vetted sources to ensure that what was shared, posted, or reported is factual and not fictional.

9. FOCUS PRIMARILY ON PRIMARY SOURCES. For this activity, you need to first teach your students what a primary source is. An example of a primary source is a researcher who collects data and publishes the results in an academic journal. If the journal is peer-reviewed, then other researchers have scrutinized the work and deemed it acceptable. Another example of a primary source might be a person who has experienced something for themselves. This could be an emergency room doctor who works on a particular type of case every day. We often put too much stock in *secondary* sources: that is, the reporting of the experiences or research of other persons (this is what journalists do). They might accurately convey those experiences and results, but they also might not. And the greater distance between the primary and secondary source ("my cousin's sister-in-law heard from their neighbor..."), the greater the likelihood of miscommunication or misinterpretation.



After explaining the difference to students, have them find five examples of information from various sources about a particular topic. Have them first try to identify the primary source of the information presented in articles articulating for or against the subject matter, and then ask themselves if they are comfortable with the source's credibility. Also, have them consider if the person conveying that information has a particular expertise that makes them an authority on the topic being discussed. They should then determine if the majority of scientists (or subject matter experts) agree about the issue. Ideally, students will sharpen their ability to identify what information comes from secondary sources that cannot be trusted at face value – and what they can rely on.

10. BEWARE OF RED FLAGS. Below are some red flags from [Ad Fontes Media](#) that you can use to help students evaluate content. These warning signs can help them determine when news stories are unreliable, disreputable, and embarrassing for them to share with others.

Red Flag 1. The story explicitly states that it is telling the truth and/or everyone else is lying to you.

"We know the truth!"

"What the media/government/corporations are hiding from you"

"This is definitely true!"

Your logic should tell you: If they have to preface it by swearing it's true, it's probably not.

Red Flag 2. The story contains short, conclusive opinion statements.

"It's all hogwash!"

"The media have it all wrong!"

Your logic should tell you: Good journalists typically don't write like this.

Red Flag 3. The story is organized as a list of questions or hypotheses.

"Why wasn't this...?"

"It doesn't add up that..."

"It's really unlikely that X happened."

Your logic should tell you: This literally is the opposite of news, which involves answers, not questions.

Red Flag 4. The story puts the burden on YOU to answer the questions.

"If you can't answer these questions..."

"Do you REALLY know what happened?"

Your logic should tell you: ??? I thought you were supposed to be the journalist here.

Red Flag 5. The story asks you to prove a negative, which is often impossible.

"No one has proved that the government WASN'T involved!"

"They SAY it was X, but how do you know it wasn't Y?"

Your logic should tell you: Pro tip—don't try this argument in court.

Red Flag 6. The story suggests an insidious plot by someone ("the media," "elites," "corporations," "the government") but doesn't say exactly what the plot IS or provide any evidence for it.

"No one knows how deep this goes..."

"There's no telling who's behind all of this..."

Your logic should tell you: Cool story, bro!

See if your students can find examples of these red flags on popular websites or social media platforms. For younger students, you may need to send them to particular pages with more obvious examples. For older students, let them try to find examples on their own.

