Facts First

A Guide for Grades 9–12

With the abundance of information in today's media, it can be difficult for students to distinguish between fact and fiction. Having a good grasp of news literacy and knowing the basics of what constitutes a reputable source are essential to successfully navigating journalism, social media, advertising, and other avenues of information.

Use the lesson plans and activities in this guide to equip your students with strategies to identify the different types of disinformation we encounter daily, understand how they spread, and know how to spot them.

Find video, additional activities, and more resources online at **scholastic.com/factsfirst**.

Facts First
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LESSON 1

Fact and Fiction

GOAL Students will be able to identify disinformation disguised as credible journalism by looking at real-life examples.

TIME REQUIRED 45 minutes

STANDARDS-BASED SKILLS Analyze and summarize text objectives; cite strong and thorough textual evidence.

MATERIALS Activity Sheet A

PREP

1. Tell students that in order to become informed citizens with a good grasp of news literacy, they'll need to be able to identify disinformation, often what people are calling "fake news," when they see it. Disinformation intentionally misleads readers, and technology is making it easier to produce and spread this so-called fake news that looks like credible journalism.

2. Discuss with students some of the types of disinformation and non-news content they've likely encountered. Start the conversation by writing some examples on the board:

   - A movie studio's strategy to market a 2017 horror film backfired when the fake website it set up confused international readers of a Houston newspaper. The campaign yielded public outcry and apologies from the studio: https://nyti.ms/2ljexJi.
   - In the lead-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, false stories spread rapidly online. One story identified candidate Hillary Clinton as the recipient of thousands of fraudulent ballots in her favor, while another presented a false 1990s-era quote from Donald Trump that derided his future voters: http://cnn.it/2BQWosv.
   - Four hours of video footage broadcast on Facebook Live that purportedly showed a real "rotating thunderstorm" was proven to be nothing more than a looped video that an artist created with a storm chaser's high-resolution photograph: http://bbc.in/2ufzg53.

INSTRUCTIONS

3. Distribute Activity Sheet A: *Fact and Fiction*. For a class discussion, students should use what they know about disinformation, building their own definitions and various examples of it.

Definitions for discussion:

- ***Propaganda*** information—often false—used to shape public opinion to achieve an objective
- ***Hoaxes*** tricks on the public; see Orson Welles's "The War of the Worlds" hoax in 1938
- ***Agenda-Based Misrepresentation*** news that is written to benefit a certain group or agenda by distorting the truth
- ***Circular Reporting*** news based on few or no facts but that is re-reported by one outlet after another

4. Tell students that discerning fact from fiction also involves identifying non-news content. For example, "clickbait" describes stories with juicy headlines that sometimes offer few facts. Reporters' errors—if not quickly corrected—can become part of widely circulated news stories. Sponsored content and native advertising—marketing content that can yield ad revenue for news outlets—don't always look promotional and can be mistaken for news. Direct students to take the online quiz about these types of non-news content and disinformation at scholastic.com/factsfirst.

5. **Going Further** Organize a class debate to determine which kind of disinformation is intentionally used in a dangerous way. Divide students into groups and assign each group one kind of disinformation or non-news content. Have students prepare an argument about the dangers involved with their topics. Allow groups two minutes to present arguments and one-minute rebuttals. Afterward, hold an anonymous vote on which kind of misleading content the class agrees is most dangerous.

LESSON 2

Be an Active News Consumer

GOAL Students will engage in critical examinations of information found in the media.

TIME REQUIRED 45 minutes

STANDARDS-BASED SKILLS Write arguments to support claims; initiate and participate in a range of collaborative discussions.

MATERIALS Activity Sheet B

PREP

1. Tell students that becoming active consumers of news relies on critical-thinking skills. They should ask themselves these questions as they analyze news.

   - ***Authorship*** Where did this news come from? Is there a reporter to whom the article is attributed?
   - ***Sources*** Who shared this information with the reporter(s)? If there are unnamed sources—i.e., when people are listed as anonymous, possibly for legal or job-related reasons—can you trust the news outlet to provide context to support the reporting? Are there named secondary sources who corroborate the information?
   - ***Format*** Does this article or presentation include evidence and logical arguments? Or is it mostly opinions and exaggerated or emotion-based language that is used to grab attention?
   - ***Audience*** Who is the audience? Does the article target a certain group in a way that seems suspicious?
   - ***Content*** What information is being presented? Is it based on facts? Does it seem objective, as in: Are the facts presented in a neutral and unbiased manner?
   - ***Purpose of Message*** What is the purpose? Is it simply to share information, or does it seem to be guided by an agenda?

2. If you would like to delve deeper into these questions, visit The News Literacy Project at thenewsliteracyproject.org.

INSTRUCTIONS

3. Distribute Activity Sheet B: *Be an Active News Consumer*. Return to Lesson 1's examples of disinformation and non-journalistic content. Help students search for other examples online. Students will use their activity sheet to paraphrase an example of disinformation or non-news item and a piece of credible journalism. Next, have students pair up and see if they can tell which of their partner's stories is credible.

4. **Going Further** After completing the activity, encourage students to discuss the similarities they found between their stories. Have students create one-page flyers detailing how to spot disinformation to share within the school community.

Fact and Fiction

There are many types of material produced in our digital age that are meant to persuade consumers, to sell products, or to exploit big issues—some more dangerous than others. An article that looks like news but is actually an advertisement for a new shopping mall is not as dangerous as an article that appears to be objective but is actually propaganda meant to influence a local election. Once you understand the varieties of non-news content and disinformation out there, you're on your way to becoming an informed reader of news.

INSTRUCTIONS Below, use what you learned in class to fill in the definition for each kind. Then, provide an example of that category of content that you have seen or read. If an example does not come to mind, imagine an example that would fit the description.

DEFINITIONS	EXAMPLES
■ *Propaganda* _____	*Example* _____
■ *Hoax* _____	*Example* _____
■ *Agenda-Based Misrepresentation* _____	*Example* _____
■ *Circular Reporting* _____	*Example* _____
■ *Clickbait* _____	*Example* _____
■ *Advertisements or Sponsored Content* _____	*Example* _____

Be an Active News Consumer

Spotting an artificial version of something can be hard. Counterfeit dollar bills are made to look identical to real currency. Pieces of forged art have been sold for millions of dollars. And spotting disinformation disguised to look like credible journalism can be tricky. At first, anyway.

Fortunately, there are ways to look at news that help us tell serious journalism from other kinds of content. In the spaces below, paraphrase a piece of disinformation or non-news content and an example of credible journalism, both of which you'll find online. Include a source for each, but don't label which is which (for now). Later, you will challenge a partner to figure out which is the credible reporting and which isn't.

News Story #1

News Story #2

When analyzing a piece of news, ask yourself what you know about the following:

AUTHORSHIP | FORMAT | AUDIENCE | CONTENT | PURPOSE OF MESSAGE

LESSON 3

The Spread of Disinformation

GOAL Students will learn how disinformation spreads and how it confuses fact with fiction.

TIME REQUIRED 30 minutes, plus independent research time

STANDARDS-BASED SKILLS Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text; analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance a point of view; use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing products.

MATERIALS Activity Sheet C and the videos at scholastic.com/factsfirst

PREP

1. Ask students if they have ever seen a news story shared on social media that wasn't credible. Ask for volunteers to share their examples, where they saw them, and how they became suspicious about the materials presented as "facts" in the story. Discuss why these stories can be so problematic: The stories are depicted as objective, in other words as being grounded in fact and without bias regardless of the journalist's opinion or beliefs. When information is portrayed as credible journalism and shared alongside reported news stories that are based on witnesses' or observers' testimony, they gain an unearned credibility.

2. Have students view the videos *Facts First* and *The Spread of Disinformation*. Suggest that students take notes on the videos. (Consider having them watch the videos once straight through, and then again while taking notes.) The videos contain statistics about the increasingly common phenomenon of disinformation being packaged as credible journalism online and how it spreads.

3. Discuss with students the facts presented in the videos. Ask students to relay some of the statistics and facts about navigating the abundance of disinformation available online. (According to a 2016 survey conducted by nonpartisan organization Pew Research Center, about one-third of U.S. adults report seeing disinformation online. They also report being confused by it. Approximately one-quarter of adults share journalism that isn't credible within their social media networks. People consume and share news articles that share their perspective, so disinformation can easily become viral.)

4. Have students brainstorm various implications of these findings. Discuss potential outcomes: What will happen to the country if we consume disinformation as frequently as we consume credible journalism? Who stands to gain from an explosion of disinformation? Who stands to lose? What will happen to elections if news that isn't credible becomes even more common?

INSTRUCTIONS

5. Distribute Activity Sheet C: *Fighting Fiction With Facts*. Divide students into small teams that will research a topic and write an article using journalistic standards. The activity sheet will guide them through the steps of research and writing.

6. Remind students to divide their work evenly among team members. Collaboration is a key element of today's journalism, and often a large team works on a single story. Encourage students to think of themselves as journalists for the duration of the project.

7. **Going Further** Have teams compile articles as if they were producing a digital or print magazine. Assign publishing roles to different teams, so that students can map out a cover idea, prepare a hypothetical page layout, and conduct a careful copy edit!

Fighting Fiction With Facts

In our modern times, disinformation is spreading fast. But there is a good way to fight it: We can do a better job of focusing on the facts. In this activity, you and your team will become journalists for a day and dig up the facts for a big story.

Use this sheet to organize your efforts. Follow the steps below.

1. **Choose a story.** Spend a few minutes brainstorming a list of current events that interest you. (This is often what editors do in newsrooms.) It can be of any scope you like: local, national, or global. Select the topic you think would make the best news story. Perhaps your topic is an event that is unfolding overseas or a confusing trend in pop culture. It's up to you!

   TOPIC: _____

2. **Pose questions** to guide your research. Using the "Five W's" is often a good way to start. These can kick-start your research.
   - **Who** is involved?
   - **What** is happening? What is at stake?
   - **When** did this happen?
   - **Where** did this happen?
   - **Why** is this happening?

3. **Do your own original reporting**. Be sure to use reliable sources and to avoid secondhand information. Also, government reports and press statements that are fact-checked are better sources than an opinion piece in a newspaper. Divide the work among yourselves so that everyone is tackling a different side of the story. Use at least four or five sources to support your story.

4. **Write the article** in an engaging but factual way. Remember, facts first. Most news articles include these elements:
   - A **lead sentence** to grab your reader's attention.
   - A short **introduction** to set the scene and give the reader an idea of what the story is about.
   - The **main body** of the article should provide facts and more details on the story's topic.
   - **Quotations** help to breathe life into a piece.
   - **Sources**, when not kept confidential for legal or other sensitive reasons, should be carefully cited throughout.
   - A **conclusion** to wrap up the main points of the article.

5. **Edit, edit, edit.** The best writing is often the most heavily edited writing. Team members should edit each other's work rather than their own.

6. **Publish.** Add a visual component to your article, if possible. This might include a photograph, chart, graph, or video. Assemble your text and visuals in a compelling layout—either online or in print—and distribute it to your readers.

Congratulations, you've just produced credible journalism. You can distinguish it from disinformation because it has sources, facts, and objectivity. Plus, you can be proud of it for leaving your readers more informed. This is what happens when you put facts first!

TOP 3 RESEARCH TIPS

1. Use primary sources!	2. Take notes!	3. Cite your research!
A primary source is the original record—a firsthand witness's account, court transcripts, or a credible scientific study. Many news reports are valuable sources of firsthand accounts.	The more notes you take, the more material you'll have for your article.	Retain and cite all pertinent information about any reports or studies you use, and be careful to accurately record names, titles, and contact information for sources.

LESSON 4

The Responsibility of the Media

GOAL Students will explore the ethics of journalism and the responsibilities of those writing on the web.

TIME REQUIRED 30 minutes

STANDARDS-BASED SKILLS Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text; analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance a point of view; use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing products.

MATERIALS Activity Sheet D

PREP

1. Tell students that credible news agencies have a code of ethics and a set of professional standards. These standards include accuracy, fairness, and a responsibility to the audience. However, the idea of what "journalism" is has expanded in the Internet age. With so many new platforms on the web where people can share information or opinions, countless nonprofessionals have begun publishing information without following journalism standards and practices.

2. Describe the following challenges in contemporary journalism:

   - ***Mix of journalism and entertainment*** In an effort to reach more viewers, some news outlets have blurred the line between journalism and entertainment, which if not conducted responsibly, can lead to low-quality journalism. There are several ways this is done. Frequently, sensational content—like editorials or opinion segments that aren't based on facts—is intermixed with news content, making it hard to know where one stops and the other begins. In other instances, stories about celebrities are often reported as news even if the bulk of the content is rooted in gossip and rumors.
   - ***The writer's identity*** It is important to know who produces your news, in order to judge their credibility. In a written article, the name of the writer is presented and called a "byline." On the web, writers are often anonymous, which causes several major problems. Not only does it allow someone to post a story knowing that he or she won't be held accountable for it, but anonymity encourages people to be more extreme and reckless than they would be if their name were attached to a piece.
   - ***Information bubbles*** The web also creates the problem of "information bubbles" when websites only show readers stories they think they will like based on those readers' browsing habits. In the long run, this makes readers less likely to see objective news stories.

3. Explain that individuals and small organizations producing news and information often hold themselves to a different standard than professional journalists. To some degree, this is inevitable, because professional journalism requires many resources that smaller outlets don't have. These resources include a staff of reporters around the world, researchers to dig up facts, and editors to fact-check stories. In fact, these expenses have proven so daunting in recent years that most traditional media outlets have scaled back their operations. As journalists and news consumers adjust to this new situation, both sides must do their best to insist upon the high standards the industry developed in the last few decades.

INSTRUCTIONS

4. Distribute Activity Sheet D: *The Responsibilities of the Media*. Students will use what they've learned to create a short newsclip about disinformation in our digital age. The activity sheet will help students conceptualize their video and organize their production schedule. Final products will be saved in different formats and available for sharing.

5. **Going Further** Have students share their videos with parents, other students, or other family members to spread the word about news literacy, and being able to discern fact from fiction.

The Responsibilities of the Media

Disinformation is spreading fast in our digital era, but it can't stand up to the scrutiny of serious journalism. Grab a camera and make your own story exposing the phenomenon of how quickly this type of content can spread. The story should include at least five facts about disinformation and one persuasive argument about it. Use the Production Notes below to plan your video.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

1. Assign jobs (executive producer, news writers, camera operator, video editor, anchors):

2. Write a script. (A good script avoids overly formal language and is written as if you're speaking. It features a well-researched topic and clear transitions between speakers. Don't forget to remain objective and cite sources.)

3. Edit your script (fact-check, cut for length if needed, and be sure to read it aloud so that it sounds good).

4. Choose a location (whether indoors or outdoors, it should be quiet).

5. Develop equipment list (smartphone or video camera; perhaps a tripod, microphone, lighting, and teleprompter app):

6. Film it! (Anchors should be articulate and energetic.)

7. Edit it! (Cut the clip for length and smoothness.)

SCHOLASTIC

Credible journalism is based on facts. Period.

Investigative Steps to Discern Fact From Fiction

STEP 1

Study the purpose of the article. Does it focus on the facts or does it support a hidden motive?

STEP 2

Analyze how the story is presented. News should be objective and professionally written, not emotionally charged.

STEP 3

Look up the author. Is he or she a professional journalist or someone whose job it is to push an agenda?

STEP 4

Assess whether a story sounds too extreme. Exaggeration is not the sign of good journalism.

STEP 5

Be suspicious of stories that sound too simple. Life is rarely black and white, and real news rarely is, either.

STEP 6

Explore different sources of professional journalism. The more high-quality news you get, the more informed you will be and the easier it will be to tell fact from fiction.

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