

# Fake News vs. Real News

How do we to teach ourselves  
and our students to know the difference?

**By Lisa Crate**  
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As the election of 2016 proved, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish real news from fake news. Between social media posts, random Google searches, and the prevalence of Wikipedia, how is anyone supposed to know the difference between fact and fiction? As educators, we are charged with not only teaching students how to find accurate and reliable information, but also modeling that same behavior in our own lives.

Unlike 20 years ago, today's news is reported in real time and is often dictated not only by what is happening in the world,

but what the audience wants to hear and see. In addition, people throughout the world are no longer bystanders who simply watch the news as it happens. They are often part of the news itself, filming or publishing items on their own and instantly uploading those items to social media sites for everyone to see. Taking into account the unfortunate truth that much of the uploaded videos and photos are often manipulated or edited to fit a chosen narrative, it's easy to see why so many people are easily fooled and why it is difficult for students and adults alike to filter out truly reliable information.

So how do educators teach students to become active citi-

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zens? What skills should be imparted so that every student has a better understanding of the information that confronts him/her? Through media literacy courses at the middle and high school levels, students are given the opportunity to explore the news and gain a better understanding of what information is accurate and reliable as opposed to what might be considered propaganda. Students are taught to ask themselves simple questions that will assist them in determining the accuracy of the news they are viewing.

Following are tips to ensure the material you and your students are viewing is worth your time. Reinforcing these habits is one way to ensure your students are looking at reliable, accurate information.

### ✓ **Examine the author and the sponsors.**

When viewing online news sources, it is important to look at who authored the article as well as who sponsors the page. Because we are constantly inundated with advertisements, we can become oblivious to the commercials running on our computer screens. As a result, many of us forget that the sponsors of the page often have control over what information is presented.

While researching healthy eating habits, one of my students was confronted with what seemed like good information, but the student noticed that the website was sponsored by McDonald's. After much discussion and further research, the student decided that though most of the information appeared to be reliable, the source itself was in direct conflict with the information presented.

### ✓ **Check for source reliability.**

Once the authenticity of the author or website sponsor has been verified, students are then taught to look at where the information in the article comes from. Are multiple primary sources listed? Are the source links able to be viewed? If claims presented as fact can easily be disproven through further research, students begin to recognize that the material being presented may not be accurate and should be dismissed.

Primary sources are a must. Documents, scientific data, physical artifacts, and original photos are all excellent examples of what students look for while researching a topic. It is important, however, to remind students that photographs can be taken out of context or appropriated from an unrelated

story to lend credence to an otherwise unreliable story. Remind students that primary sources are essential in establishing whether or not a story is legitimate. Seeking out primary sources must be encouraged in every classroom on a daily basis. Students begin to understand very quickly that if no such sources are listed with a particular news item, or if a link is clicked on and it ultimately goes nowhere, that particular article is not reliable.

**✓ Look at the time and place of the story.**

Another useful tip for students is to determine where the story was published. Take a look at the “About” portion of the site to see if the site is linked to other reputable online news sources. Does the site have a large body of published work that can be examined?

Check the date of publication. This alone can be helpful in determining whether or not a story is factual. People are often concerned if an article or online story is too old, but another red flag is anything published as “Breaking News.” People around the world have the ability to upload anything and call it news. Is the “Breaking News” questionable in content? Can it be verified as something

that has actually happened?

Recently, students in my school who were doing research on the presidential election stumbled upon several websites that help the user generate “Breaking News” stories that could then be uploaded onto social media sites. This was an eye-opening moment for everyone and presented the perfect opportunity to teach the importance of checking the facts and encouraging students to take the time to authenticate what is presented. Each student who participated in this class realized that reposting items on their social media accounts prior to checking for accuracy could cause them some serious embarrassment and potential harm to others.

**✓ Consider the emotions evoked by the story.**

Finally, when watching or reading news reports, students should think about how the information being presented makes them feel. Real news gives facts and information that can be investigated and verified as either correct or incorrect. Propaganda tells a different story. When students take the time to analyze how the news truly makes them feel, there is a better understanding of what is real and what is fake. ►

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Propaganda that is disguised as news may offer some facts regarding a situation or event, but the feelings evoked by a story are often the true indication of its purpose. If a student reads a story and instantly becomes incredibly angry, he/she is encouraged to stop, breathe, and authenticate the facts that are being presented.

Students are also cautioned to consider whether or not an article is legitimate if they completely agree with every word written. It should be a very rare to almost nonexistent occurrence to have everything in a news story line up directly with the reader's beliefs about a topic. After all, what is the purpose of news? It is quite simply to inform and sometimes challenge your thoughts about a topic.

Taking the time to verify what is being presented with at least three different reputable news sources to see what is true, and what is being misrepresented as true, goes a long way in helping students have a better understanding of what real news is. The goal of media literacy at any grade level is to have students understand that they can't believe everything they read or see.

### ✓ **Technology overload.**

With technology permeating

every corner of our lives, it is vital that we begin teaching students from a young age the basics of understanding the difference between real and fake news. Students in every grade level are bombarded with images and stories from the news, and are often unaware of the impact these news items may have on them. While today's educators already have a lot on their plates, it is ultimately in all of our interests to teach students to look at the news with a more critical eye.

Nearly everyone has the ability to read, explore, and understand today's news stories if they are willing to take the time. Asking the right questions is the ultimate key to ensuring that the news that is being viewed is accurate. In this digital world, it is no longer acceptable to take every piece of information as fact.

It is the duty and responsibility of not only every teacher, but every American, to view each tweet, Facebook post, meme, blog, and news story with a critical eye. People can no longer afford to blindly follow the masses and hope for the best. Now is the time to become interested, informed, and empowered, and we must teach every student to do the same. ■

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