

# THE CIVICALLY ENGAGED CLASSROOM

**READING, WRITING,  
AND SPEAKING  
FOR CHANGE**

**Mary Ehrenworth | Pablo Wolfe | Marc Todd**

**HEINEMANN**  
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A silhouette illustration of a diverse crowd of people at a protest or rally. Many individuals are holding up rectangular signs, and one person in the foreground is using a megaphone. The scene is set against a light, textured background.

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Online resources for *The Civically Engaged Classroom* can be found under Companion Resources at: <http://hein.pub/CivicallyEngagedClassroom>.



Dear Educator,

Thank you. By picking up this book you must be ready to create change. Good for you. Our world and our students will be better for it. Change will come. Our hope is that with this book in your hands you will be encouraged to be brave and begin this work now. As Cornelius Minor encourages us all with his brilliant mantra, "We Got this!"

Change will come if critical conversations are happening in our classrooms. Change will come if personal stories are encouraged and shared. Change will come if the conversations and the stories we tell about ourselves are honest. Change will only come if we are equipped to use critical lenses to sift through the daily onslaught of information and data our students consume alone on their devices. We need to create classrooms as a space where truth is practiced or exposed or accepted or challenged or embraced or resisted.

It is okay to be afraid and struggle with this work. The work can also be uncomfortable at times. And that's okay, too. It is uncomfortable to talk about and realize the barriers that people encounter. However, left unacknowledged, the barriers remain unseen and securely in place. That matters because we are teaching young adolescents who are developing their own precious identity. That identity will influence their behavior and sense of self for the rest of their lives. If you are teaching middle school and high school, then your students are in need of this work. The aha moments we know so well as educators now need to include the "oh wow!" moments when we all look at ourselves.

We teach who we are so we must do all we can to know who we are. I am a gay, cis-gendered, white, middle aged, middle class, male teacher, with pre-revolutionary settler privileges working in the most segregated school system in the country. Please don't put the book down because of who I am. Keep this book in your hands because of who you are. I came to education from an undergraduate and master's degree in theatre. In theatre we seek the truth of the characters we play and in the moments shared on stage with other performers. In theatre, both our actions and our feelings must be present and equal in order to be believable. In our classroom the truth is who we are as educators, the words we use, the relationships we have, and the community we create with our students.

As Cornelius's mantra, "We got this!", plays in my consciousness, so does Paulo Freire's, "The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves."

Mary, Pablo, and I, thank you for picking up this book and being ready to create change.

In admiration,

Marc Todd

Dear Reader,

All right coconspirator, are you ready? This book is not a curriculum, it's not advice on classroom activities, it's not a pedagogical treatise; no, this book is a call to arms. Grab your laptop, make those remote-learning links, pick up your markers, chart paper, and document camera—and get ready. "For what?" you ask? Well, in the words of James Baldwin, to "achieve our country, and change the history of the world" (1993).

Yes, that's the task set before us.

It has always been the task set before us, but in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd, it becomes even more essential that we work deliberately to create a better world. Of course, we won't do it alone—we'll combine forces, collaborate, and steel each other with outrageous love for the struggles ahead. And, it goes without saying, we'll partner with young people who, ultimately, will do the hardest work of re-envisioning our nation. We won't be alone, but this won't be easy.

It was never meant to be easy; after all, democracy is by its nature difficult, but tyrants and demagogues as well as nativists and racists would have us believe otherwise. They promote an illusion that this country was purer, better, in some utopic past. They peddle a dulling nostalgia that lures people to sleep while racist gears continue to grind. They lie and obfuscate. Either you fall to the narcotic and are lulled into passivity, or you're so enraged in response that you exhaust yourself shouting at the car radio in the morning or complaining to like-minded friends. As teachers, we can't fall into either camp; we can't detach and ignore, nor can we fool ourselves that complaining is the same as action. Our society, and our young people in particular, can't afford to have teachers watch the proceedings from twenty thousand feet.

So, instead, we will embrace complexity; we will embrace discomfort and failure. We will embrace the challenge that as citizens we have duties to uphold, not just rights to claim. We will recognize that if we are to claim any rights at all, it is only after we have upheld our duties to one another, for how can we have a social contract from which people only withdraw and never contribute?

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the injustice at the core of our society and the ineptitude of many of our leaders. It is plain that our system must change. The road ahead is long; for while the virus itself may be novel, the crisis of our democracy isn't. We must acknowledge that we live in a house built on a rotten foundation. Racial injustice exposed by the pandemic is not an ugly aberration—it's a founding principal. The hypocrisy of proclaiming freedom for all while pursuing a genocidal campaign against Indigenous Peoples and enslaving Africans has infected all facets of American life. We aren't in a new catastrophe; it's just that more of us who have been privileged enough to live at a comfortable remove are becoming aware of what has raged from the beginning. To them we say, "Join us in preparing

the next citizens who will make this country what it should be!" And to those of us who have been painfully aware of the poison coursing through these American veins, those who are like, "You see it *now*? All right, better late than never, I suppose. Can we get some shit done, then?" To them we say, "We're with you, willing accomplices, in the work ahead."

I'll start with the challenge to myself. I find it so easy to be comfortable, to sit back and coast on the privileges that have been placed in my lap through no exertion of my own. Parents who were professionals? Check. Light skin? Check. (White dad. Puerto Rican mom—although compared to my mom or sister, I'm still woefully melanin-deficient.) Fancy-pants private schooling? Check. Graduated from a liberal arts college, debt-free? Check. Married, two healthy children. Professional. Homeowner. I check the boxes and realize how fortunate I am as well as how easily I can slide into comfort and let it envelop me as I ignore the injustices around me. What good are antiracist thoughts if not met with antiracist actions? What good is there complaining about the state of our country and world if these thoughts are not tied to work? I return to Baldwin, who reminds us "that a civilization is not destroyed by wicked people; it is not necessary that people be wicked but only that they be spineless" (1993). Nothing melts the spine like comfort.

So, this book is a call to *work*. Throughout it we've included a feature called "Practice What You Teach," a regular reminder that the work in these pages is for all of us to take on, not just our kids. We can all do more to be better citizens; we can all do more to re-envision our democracy. This is not about indoctrinating children, but it is about our duty as educators to help them realize that they have a lot of responsibility in this society and that if they don't take it up, or aren't adequately prepared for it, they'll continue to perpetuate grievous harms to themselves and to others.

I can't wait to walk this path with you. Let's put in this work together.

Yours in struggle,

Pablo Wolfe



Dear Colleagues and Collaborators,

I offer this book, with my beautiful and disruptive coauthors, Pablo and Marc, out of a sense of horror at the hate speech and rabid propagation of misinformation that have menaced this nation and spread around the world, at the violence done to families, at the despair of young dreamers. And I offer this book out of a sense of wondrous love for the young political candidates, the teen activists, the coalitions of civically engaged citizens, and especially, the teachers who strive to protect people who need champions and to better conditions, every day, for the students and families in their care.

I am a white, cisgender, bi woman with degrees from Ivy League universities, and my current professional position is Senior Deputy Director of an influential nonprofit think tank at Columbia University, the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. For many years, I saw the teaching of literacy as itself an act of social justice. To help young people find their voices, to instill in them the love of reading that will make books and ideas central to their lives, to teach them to write through trouble and to hold onto beauty—that seemed enough. But it isn't enough. The world needs us to teach an explicitly anti-oppressive curriculum. Young people need us to acknowledge the kinds of oppression people suffer daily and to teach anti-racism, antisexism, and anti-homophobia. And the world needs us to teach students that civics matters—that their words and actions can make a difference; that being civically engaged is not only worth it but critically important to the lives they will live; and that it is vital to pay attention to the events that unfold around them, the voices that shape people's thinking, and their place in this chaotic, often painful and sometimes spectacularly beautiful world.

It's not fair that kids have unequal access to education in this country. It's not right that young people are vulnerable to violent speech and action because of their skin color, their culture, their religion, the places their families came from, and the places they live. It's not fair that some children go to schools that are full of books and interactive whiteboards and artwork, with teachers who love their work and their students, while other children go to schools that seem devoid of human compassion. We need to do more in the service of equity. We need to instill a sense of respect and even awe for the lives people live, for the remarkable strength and beauty of the human spirit, for the interconnectedness of humans. Part of this work is instilling in young people a sense that they matter; that they can be part of changing things for the better; that their vote, their voice, their outrage can fuel change.

With humility and hope for the influence of teachers and the future of the generation we teach, we offer a vision of classrooms where teachers and young people know that the world is not good enough, and act daily to confront injustice and to hone their minds and spirits for the work of making it better.

All the best,

Mary Ehrenworth

# INTRODUCTION

*Do the best you can until you know better.  
Then when you know better, do better.*

—Maya Angelou (2015)

*Thinking about our thinking, imagining things for ourselves, seeking a community of concern in a public space: These may be the phases of our striving for social justice, our striving for collectivity, our striving for what is always in the making—what we call democracy. These may be our ways of reaching toward each other in safe and unsafe spaces, seeking equity, seeking decency, seeking for a common world.*

—Maxine Greene (2000, 303)

*I would unite with anybody to do right;  
and with nobody to do wrong.*

—Frederick Douglass (1855)

## The Challenges Facing Our Democracy and Our Students

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COVID-19 exposed every flaw and crack in our society, and education and protest have never mattered more. While rich and poor alike are susceptible to the virus, there is no question who has been dying at greater rates. While some of us sheltered in and continued to collect paychecks, many exposed themselves daily to the virus in order to maintain their income. As unemployment numbers ballooned, many struggled with no income at all. Access to healthcare has been unequal and unfair, with BIPOC and immigrant families enduring racial injustice in our healthcare systems. Immigrants were detained at the United States-Mexico border in inhumane conditions that continued to spread the virus. As the country with the highest incarceration rate in the world, the United States saw the virus tear through its prisons. The litany of injustices revealed by the virus is long and sobering and it doesn't take rigorous analysis to see that its consequences are felt

in vastly different ways across racial fault lines. Faced with this oppressive reality, which is just one in a list of injustices that haunt the daily lives of so many citizens, our great fear is that our young people will retreat and disengage.

There are reasons for them to feel disenfranchised and disillusioned. And, for most of our young people, there is reason to distrust the world that adults have made for them. In her piece about Ibram Kendi, journalist Lonnae O’Neil describes the climate in the United States as one where “the threat of shoot-you-down, run-you-over racial violence feels as close at hand as the peril to the republic from fake facts and revisionist history” (2017). If that description feels overstated, then probably your privilege protects you from these conditions. That happens inevitably. We seek places to live and to work where we can be safe and productive, where our colleagues are like-minded, where we are protected from bigots and hate-mongers and those who are afraid of anyone who is not just like them. But that sense of security also isolates us.

As teachers, this moment calls on us to examine our history in light of the current disturbing tides of xenophobia, police brutality, racism, and sexism, with our colleagues and the young people in our care.

The antidote to creeping hopelessness is action. In our classrooms, whether virtual or brick-and-mortar, we must look collectively at the resistance movements, the moments of light and possibility when things changed for the better, when people spoke up, marched, wrote, formed coalitions, and voted—and take example from their investment in bettering our society. Our young people can’t vote yet, but they will. It’s not our job to tell them what party or candidates to vote for. It is our job to instill a sense of civic engagement. It’s our job to help them become citizens who seek knowledge from multiple sources, who are alert to bias, who are critical—and engaged—consumers and producers of media.

Here’s a little of what we’re up against. In the 2020 election, the very possibility of fair elections is cast into doubt by COVID-19. States are scrambling to improve their capabilities for mail-in voting while some politicians attempt to impede such efforts. Even in the best of times without the pandemic preventing our public gatherings, according to the Pew Research Center, compared to other highly developed democracies, the United States ranks 26th out of 32 in voter turnout. Only 56 percent of eligible voters voted in the 2016 presidential election. Voter participation in the United States is notoriously low, especially among young people, minorities, and those living under the poverty line—and there are concerted political efforts to further suppress turnout. The very core of democracy, the freedom to vote, is under regular attack. Just think about the rollback of parts of the Voting Rights Act in 2013, the voter ID requirements that disproportionately target Black and brown citizens, the outright conflict of interest of elected officials overseeing the recounts of their very own election results, rampant gerrymandering, an antiquated electoral college system that elects presidents who lost by millions of votes, a president who

said openly that he welcomes the aid of foreign powers who provide dirt on his opponents, social media networks that widely disseminate misinformation and hate speech, and the disproportionate influence of corporate money in elections. Put together, these attacks from within pose as dangerous a threat to our democracy as any foreign power.

Phew. As Shakespeare said in *Hamlet*, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” If our students are to become the citizens our society needs, we need to prepare them for this struggle—first, by raising their awareness of injustice, then by helping them develop the critical thinking skills to coherently critique our societal ills, and lastly, by helping them practice the civic virtues our future as a nation will depend on.

## What We Can Do

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For all the truly frightening oppression and bias that infuse the very air we breathe, let’s also look at the signs of transcendent possibility and power that make it possible to teach with hope. Picture fifteen-year-old Greta Thunberg going from her sit-in outside her school to talking to the entire United Nations about the climate crisis. Picture fifteen-year-old Xiuhtezcatl Martinez getting fracking banned in his county. Picture sixteen-year-old Mya Middleton and seventeen-year-old Emma Gonzalez each speaking to thousands of protestors at the March for Their Lives. Picture the many children who shared messages of hope and demonstrated fortitude during an international pandemic, and who joined Black Lives Matter protests in hopes of a better world.

We live in a time that shows us, perhaps more than any time prior, the remarkable possibility of youth. In the adult-created mayhem of civic strife, it is remarkable how many young people are taking up activism.

Yet even as young people become more politicized, teachers remain unsure about their own political status in the classroom. Because we want to be careful about proselytizing, we sometimes remain quiet about public figures and policies. We avoid classroom discussions of current events. The problem with that approach is that silence is not neutral. Silence props up existing power hierarchies and does nothing to protect vulnerable students. We have a responsibility to respond when our President calls nations “shitholes,” mocks the disabled, or engages in name-calling. Silence in these circumstances signals consent. It is not surprising that the Southern Poverty Law Center reported an upsurge in hate language and bias attacks and harassment in schools. Their report is sobering: “on the upswing: verbal harassment, the use of slurs and derogatory language, and disturbing incidents involving swastikas, Nazi salutes and Confederate flags” (2016).

It's not okay for teachers to ignore that a president and his political and social allies have made young people more afraid. It's not okay that it is increasingly dangerous for young people in this country to identify as immigrants, Muslims, BIPOC, or LGBTQIA+. So, part of our job, regardless of our political affiliation, needs to be that we make our classrooms and our schools places where we stand up to hate speech, and where we encourage students to bring and embrace their whole identity. That means explicitly doing antibias work and identity exploration. We dedicate Chapter 1 to this work, because it feels so important, especially in times of strife and discord.

If part of our work is to support students' identity construction, and their ability to express and celebrate all the parts of themselves, another part of our work is to teach in such a way that kids are educated for participatory democracy. In his speech accepting the Paul H. Douglas Awards for Ethics in Government at the University of Illinois, Former President Barack Obama addressed America's youth this way:

To all the young people who are here today, there are now more eligible voters in your generation than in any other, which means your generation now has more power than anybody to change things. If you want it, you can make sure America gets out of its current funk. If you actually care about it, you have the power to make sure we seize a brighter future. But to exercise that clout, to exercise that power, you have to show up. In the last midterm elections, in 2014, fewer than one in five young people voted. One in five. Not two in five, or three in five. One in five. Is it any wonder this Congress doesn't reflect your values and your priorities? Are you surprised by that? This whole project of self-government only works if everybody's doing their part. Don't tell me your vote doesn't matter. I've won states in the presidential election because of five, ten, twenty votes per precinct. And if you thought elections don't matter, I hope these last two years have corrected that impression. So if you don't like what's going on right now—and you shouldn't—do not complain. Don't hashtag. Don't get anxious. Don't retreat. Don't binge on whatever it is you're bingeing on. Don't lose yourself in ironic detachment. Don't put your head in the sand. Don't boo. Vote. Vote! (2018)

While our classrooms are not the only place where young people will learn how to interact with democratic society, they are an essential space for them to experience what it means to live in community with others, to balance their own interests with those of the group, to challenge themselves to overcome differences, and to



ask the questions that help them understand the crux of an issue. These are civics lessons that must be lived in our schools today, and we need a committed corps of teachers to deliver them.

You are one of these badass teachers.

And to you, our fellow badass teachers, we have a similar exhortation. Under the current conditions facing our country, the teacher cannot sit idle; the teacher must be an active proponent of reason, logic, empathy, and passionate inquiry—none of which should be the exclusive province of a particular political party or ideology. You must get out there and teach. Teach!

There is a perception in the United States that teachers must remain apolitical, but we argue in this book that we have a responsibility to be exactly the opposite: we have a duty, as part of our profession, both to defend democratic values and to fight alongside young people as they shape the future they want to live in. In these pages we hope to offer a rallying cry for, a guide to, and examples of, civic education that spurs teachers and students alike to be active participants in society. You can be a political being without sharing your voting record!

Currently, education reformers push the raising of standards; they tout the importance of making sure that schools be measured on how “college and career ready” their students are. The current educational paradigm calls for a view of school as a training ground for future workers, whether their work is intellectual or manual; and reformers are looking at education through a largely economic lens. We all experienced, though, during the COVID-19 crisis, that schools need to be places that address issues of connection, of equity, and of visibility. We argue for the type of education that not only teaches students how to write clear, concise sentences and well-organized essays but also ensures that those essays are directed at the moral issues of the day, to the causes that need to be addressed. Amy Gutmann, in *Democratic Education*, reminds us, “Education, in great measure, forms the moral character of citizens, and moral character along with laws and institutions forms the basis of democratic government” (1999, 49). Our teaching must ensure that our students are more than “college and career ready,” they must be “citizen ready,” and that means we have an obligation both to teach in democratic ways and to have students produce work that allows them to practice civic virtues through real-world experiences.

When we became educators, we entered into a covenant with young people. We promised to sustain and protect, to teach and inspire. Maxine Greene, Professor of Philosophy at Teachers College, writes: “There is no question but that our schools must educate for a range of literacies today. Everyone (including those classified *at risk*) has a claim to be able to seek some sort of status, some sort of security in a society as unpredictable as ours” (1993, 223).

We must be brave. We must find our courage to do this work. Change making does not belong to one group of people. We must be courageous enough to create a classroom, grade level, or school of students in pursuit of social justice. Students and teachers engaged in this work see themselves differently, listen to their peers and colleagues differently, and experience the collective power of activism that is needed to create change. The New York Public Library's exhibit *Love and Resistance: Stonewall 50* reminds us that society changed because people organized and participated in politics passionately and personally. Those individuals protested, organized, wrote, argued, and embraced each other through it all. They were brave. They created change. As educators, we have to provide an opportunity for our students to be brave enough to care.

It may be scary, but there's no doubt about it: teaching is a political act—not because we name our political party, or tell our kids how we'll vote, or whom they should vote for. It's political because we live in the world, and all our decisions and actions, what we say and what we don't, implicitly empower some and disempower others, whether we mean to or not. This book isn't suggesting that we lead kids toward one or another political party. It is suggesting that we lead kids toward the voting booth. This world needs young people to engage with voting, activism, and the empowerment of their generation. We hope, here, that you find out more about how to create a civically engaged classroom that teaches the skills necessary to be an alert and active citizen and that models what it means to be a member of a democracy that is full of both pain and potential.

This book and the work inside it overall exist in the wake of John Dewey and Maxine Greene's work on the role of public school as formative to participatory democracy. These philosophers—both of whom taught at Teachers College—believed that teaching ethics, orchestrating participatory experiences, and studying ways to engage with the world are central to schooling in a democracy. We especially love Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916) and Maxine Greene's *Dialectic of Freedom* (2018). Since then, Bettina Love's *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (2019) calls into question how schools continue to fail Black and Brown students, and thus fail at the democratic covenant of public education.

Then there is Gloria Ladson-Billings' *The Dreamkeepers* (2009). When this text came out, it was the first time we were pushed to rethink our liberal practices and our liberal identities. Ladson-Billings' work remains essential to helping teachers really think about, research, and connect with the students in our classes, including their histories, cultures, and dreams. Her work sparks much of the identity exploration of Chapter 1.

Finally, Randy and Katherine Bomer, Smokey Daniels and Sara Ahmed, Carla España and Luz Yadira Herrera, and Cornelius Minor help us conceptualize our literacy curricula as sites where important social justice work can happen. If you didn't read Bomer and Bomer's *For a Better World* when it came out in 2001, read it now. It is relevant and useful and beautiful, showing us how to position book clubs and literacy discussions as places where kids will engage with important social issues. Pick up *Upstanders* by Daniels and Ahmed (2015) as well, if you haven't already. These two activists help us harness the sense of outrage, urgency, and awakens that teens are capable of, and show us how to activate and keep that sense alive in our classrooms. And you've surely read Cornelius Minor's *We Got This* (2019). Keep it by your side, to fill you with faith that you can tackle tremendously important work if you believe in your students and yourself. Most recently, Carla España and Luz Yadira Herrera came out with *En Comunidad: Lessons for Centering the Voices and Experiences of Bilingual Latinx Students* (2020). It is an anthem and a protest, a call to make our classrooms ones where all kids' histories and their voices are celebrated.

All of these thinkers and educators are concerned with injustice in the world and ways to position oneself toward resisting injustice and embracing liberation. In the upcoming chapters, we offer specific guides to other significant current readings that have shaped our thinking and that feel important for educators to engage with at this moment. We thank our many colleagues in the field who constantly recommend, produce, and challenge us with their texts.

Our goal is to create more alert, thoughtful, engaged, inquisitive, and active citizens by reframing teaching so that it's not only about content and standards but also about *civic virtues*. We promote teaching methods that are democratic and that encourage teachers to create experiences that allow students to practice what it means to be a citizen in our democracy. Some of these experiences feel immediately liberating, others create initial discomfort.

The theory of allowing discomfort as part of learning will be a thread throughout this book. Being civically minded and striving toward ethical interactions is not always comfortable. When Lisa Damour, author of *Untangled* (2017) and *Under Pressure* (2019), spoke at Teachers College about the process of change and growth, she reminded her audience that, "stress is crucial for change, and change is crucial for growth" (2017). We believe that. We believe that to create conditions in which growth is possible, there will also be periods of uncertainty and discomfort, for us as well as for our students. Uncertainty is better than complacency. Distress is better than ignorance. And imperfection in this work is okay. Awareness is an ongoing process of learning, of putting aside old selves and trying out new selves.

## How This Book Is Structured, Conditions for This Work to Succeed, and What's Offered in Each Chapter

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The chapters in this book are each dedicated to crucial civic virtues, from acknowledging identity, bias, and privilege, to seeking and building background knowledge, to close and critical reading and ethical research skills, to composing nuanced stances in writing, to building coalitions and engaging in activism. In each chapter we describe classroom structures, curricular possibilities, and specific lessons or teaching methods that have made a difference. We've also included student work and teaching charts and tools. We hope this collection will make it easier for you to try this work inside your own classroom and with colleagues.

Below are the civic virtues we attempt to foster throughout this book. We see this list as both a guide and a pledge:

In the process of becoming an engaged citizen, I:

- celebrate my own identity and the identities of those in my community
- become alert to my own biases
- realize how my bias might shape my consumption of media
- resist the “echo chamber” by recognizing how modern media can solidify my biases
- recognize the gaps in my knowledge
- care enough to research deeply and ethically
- attend to a balance of perspectives
- seek out missing voices
- look for complexity within a topic
- critically consume media and texts
- question sources and pursue further research
- resist resignation and cynicism
- find my voice through writing
- engage with urgent social issues
- revise my thinking willingly and openly
- become a radical listener
- identify social causes
- build coalitions

- inform myself about local government
- advocate for social change.

As we take on the teaching of these civic virtues and the application of them to our own lives, it helps to think about the conditions that make learning and exercising these virtues possible.

### Conditions for a Civically Engaged Classroom

- belief in one's own power to change systems, expose oppression, and influence others
- social networks that extend through, and beyond, the classroom to the community
- access to texts and sources, to mentors and media
- knowledge of skills, strategies, habits, and behaviors that help one engage critically with texts, ideas, events, and each other
- a class culture of care and respect
- awareness of oppression and injustice, and hope and liberation
- willingness to find out more about local issues and activism, systems of local government, and nongovernmental institutions that are designed to amplify individual voices
- awareness of rights and responsibilities and the distinction between the two
- love.

If we can establish these conditions, our classrooms will become the places of civic training and discourse that our society needs. The Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy has issued a report titled *Crisis in Democracy: Renewing Trust in America*, which cautioned:

Today, Americans need to strive for a stronger vision of democracy and citizenry. It includes the right and obligation to voice one's beliefs and to grant the same to all fellow citizens in search of shared truths. As Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote a century ago, "The best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market. . . . That, at any rate, is the theory of our Constitution." The marketplace for ideas, though, presumes an electorate willing and able to search for the truth. (2019, 19)

The creation of an electorate that is willing and able to search for elusive truths falls to us, the teachers. So, enough preaching, let's get started.

Onward!



# CHAPTER

## *Civic Virtues Addressed in this Chapter*

- critically consuming media and texts
- questioning sources to spur further research
- resisting resignation and cynicism

## *Planning Your Time*

Introduce questioning sources of information by devoting significant time, from three days to a week, inside of a unit of study. Begin by teaching ethical research and close, critical reading practices. Then, work with colleagues to carry these practices across the curriculum so that students internalize the act of interrogating texts. When an incident or event occurs, guard against introducing only one text on the event. Even in a short time frame, try to position reading in such a way that students see that critical reading, within and across texts, is a consistent way of engaging with media.

# R THREE

## ENGAGED CITIZENS QUESTION THEIR SOURCES OF INFORMATION

**A**s civically engaged teachers of adolescents, it's our responsibility to foster the questioning spirit and sense of justice that our young people bring into the classroom naturally and to channel it toward wrestling with the difficult problems facing our world. Our students are not only ready to do this work, they are hungry for school to offer them a challenge worthy of their attention! Questioning the motives and credibility of sources of information poses just such a challenge. By giving them the tools to consume media intelligently, you are satisfying their growing desire to be a partner at the table rather than an object of adult whims.

In tackling this critical-reading work with your students you'll first need to unpack the notion of nonfiction. In our experience in schools, it's not uncommon to hear students say that fiction is not true and nonfiction is true. While this is a clear and simple distinction, it leaves children and adolescents vulnerable to a wide range of misinformation. Instead, teach that nonfiction, even at its best, is someone's perspective on the truth. At its worst, it is a complete fabrication.

We have the difficult job of teaching young people to approach nonfiction cautiously. On one hand, we must teach them that a text will inevitably reflect biases and concerns that may be significant even if they are submerged. On the other hand, we must protect our students from disillusionment: when citizens stop trusting journalism and news, they stop seeking information, stop weighing the news, and stop trying to make a difference. In "*The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth*," Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris find that to a vast extent, US citizens' exposure to journalism is now through soft news—news-as-entertainment shows like *Last Week Tonight*, or *Fox and Friends*, which might differ in their stance but not in their emphasis on soundbite and spectacle. It turns

out that this consumption of news as spectacle makes viewers more cynical toward political systems. Ironically, viewers report a sense of greater understanding of politics, but a decreased urge to engage or vote. As Baumgartner and Morris find, “lowered trust can perpetuate a more dysfunctional political system” (2006, 363).

Striking the balance between critical questioning and outright distrust of the media is essential for the health of our democracy as a whole—especially in today’s media minefield, where apps that deliver news feeds seek to profit off our “likes” and where foreign governments deliberately abuse such platforms in order to sow social discord.

The antidote is to teach students to read closely, to bring sophisticated reading practices to the texts in front of them, including reading for underlying, implicit ideas; for logical reasoning and logical fallacies; for connotative language, and to interpret embedded numbers, statistics and charts.

We’ll begin this chapter by briefly introducing the teaching structures that will best support the close reading required to question sources. Then, we’ll give some suggestions for introducing the idea of using multiple texts rather than relying on a single source. Finally, we’ll offer lessons for reading critically, weeding out the most problematic of sources, and questioning sources.

In this chapter we’ll help you to:

- proceed with care and caution
- utilize teaching methods that support close, critical reading of nonfiction
- make reading across multiple sources the norm
- teach students to read with healthy skepticism
- teach students to be wary of persuasive techniques and logical fallacies
- teach students to weigh sources and their credibility
- involve families and communities
- be ready for anything
- practice what you teach.

## Proceed with Care and Caution

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In the previous chapter we worked on quickly building our background knowledge about a topic. This process usually has us and our students treating sources largely as repositories of relevant facts. We are in need of the *who*, *what*, *when* and *where* of a topic, so we look across sources to get a strong grounding in shared, accepted truths. In this chapter we will focus on how to go deeper into our sources, looking at them not as collections of facts, but rather as *interpretations* of facts. In this shift we’ll wade into difficult waters. The texts that will be most problematic, those that

will very concretely betray bias in a way that helps our students see how nonfiction is someone's interpretation of the truth, have the potential to be hostile to the identities of the students in our room. You will need to proceed with awareness as to how your students may be emotionally impacted by the bias communicated in the text you choose, whether the time frame is historical or contemporary.

You may want to return to the identity work that you launched earlier in the year. Do the texts that you plan to read together attack, demean, or diminish the identities of your students? For example, below we use newspapers from the late 1890s and early 1900s that address the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. During the COVID-19 pandemic, historical anti-Chinese sentiments became even more raw in the classroom, for instance. The papers from the 1880s denigrate Chinese people and promote a policy of barring them from entry into the country. While the ugliness of humanity needs to be explored both in history and the present, especially if it's an inescapable reality, what might appear to be an intellectual exercise for a white teacher could be retraumatizing for a student who has been oppressed because of their race. You'll likely want to:

- consider the words of Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi in *Stamped: Racism, Anti-Racism and You*, or watch one of their many video interviews as they discuss how important it is to not evade reality when teaching kids, especially kids who suffer oppression due to their race, ethnicity, or religion
- seek out and highlight alternative texts and voices so that the history you teach is not only a history of victim narratives but also one of protest and change
- offer a range and choice of texts, so, for example, some kids might read about the Chinese Exclusion act while others might read about other immigration events of the time period. This gives kids options for negotiating the curriculum.
- preface any all-class reading by explaining your rationale for reading it to students and families; be transparent about curriculum
- acknowledge that it's possible the texts will elicit strong emotions, and offer the students opportunities to express those emotions. Let students know that you have an open-door policy: any student who has issues with the texts you are reading can come to talk to you privately and express their concerns. It's possible that students may feel too intimidated to address their concerns directly, in which case, you might add extra time for free-writing, with the option of giving their writing to you.
- be explicit about racist tendencies that produce certain texts and agendas. Don't attempt to apologize for or whitewash racist or otherwise bigoted texts. Show them for what they are.

As with other sections of this book in which we suggest diving into difficult topics, we always recommend transparency with the parent community and with administrators. You may also want to enlist the aid of mental-health professionals in your school and ask their advice about presenting difficult content and addressing emotional responses appropriately.

## Utilize Teaching Methods that Support Close, Critical Reading of Nonfiction

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Questioning sources of information is complex and demanding work. Even experienced readers can take the path of least resistance and end up wholly trusting the authority of the words on the page. To combat this tendency, we'll need to create structures in our room in which we can share responsibility for critiquing sources of information.

A read-aloud, shared reading, and partner reading are indispensable teaching methods when working to improve students' ability to question their sources, especially when students may be accustomed to taking the authority of the texts in front of them for granted—and especially those given to them by their teachers. The transition to becoming healthily skeptical is a difficult one. In a read-aloud, you orchestrate a strategic reading of the text, not only reading aloud to make the text more accessible but also inserting critical lenses and discussion prompts. In shared reading, you return to a portion of a text, inviting students to study collectively with you, annotating, interrogating, rereading to figure out not just what the text says but how it works. In partner reading, students read silently for a bit, then compare their understanding and response to the text so far, then go on, unpacking a text in partnership. You can read more about all of these techniques, and how to implement them with grace and purpose, in Lucy Calkins' *The Art of Teaching Reading* (2001).

Collaborative reading practices support students in thoughtful critical reading and set the foundation for the type of reading we hope students will do as adult citizens who create—and debate—meaning with others. Our favorite literacy books on this are Sonja Cherry-Paul and Dana Johansen's *Breathing New Life Into Book Clubs* (2019), Kate Roberts' *A Novel Approach* (2018), Christopher Lehman and Kate Roberts' *Falling in Love with Close Reading* (2014), and Shana Frazin and Katy Wischow's *Unlocking the Power of Classroom Talk* (2020). The same techniques that we use to develop kids' literary conversations—partnerships, analytical prompts, sentence starters and academic language prompts, and mostly, highly engaging and relevant texts—will work with developing kids' talk around nonfiction texts.



## Using Prompts to Support Critical Reading

Our work in supporting students as critical readers lies in giving them enough structure to support growth but not so much direction that they lose their sense of autonomy. Well-chosen prompts—when paired with the collaborative reading practices below—can provide that just-enough structure. Students can use analytical prompts such as these to question sources:

### Reading Around the Text

- Read about the author. Ask: “Who are they—do they have an area of expertise? Does anything in their bio suggest any agendas?”
- Read for sources. Ask: “Where did the author get their information? Do the sources seem to represent any particular groups or coalitions?”
- Read other perspectives/sources. Ask: “Are there nuggets that appear in most sources or that suggest an underlying truth? Are there highly contested parts or versions?”

### Reading for Warrant, or Reasoning

- Read for argument. Ask: “Does the author state an explicit opinion? Does the author try to lead their audience to an opinion? Do they acknowledge other opinions?”
- Read for evidence. Ask: “In what ways does the author support an opinion or claim? Is the evidence convincing, or does it seem slippery?”
- Read for angle. Ask: “What aspect of a big topic is the author spending most of their time on? What do they not mention, or spend little time on?”

### Reading for Craft and Structure

- Read for the writer’s word choice. Ask: “Does the word choice suggest the sympathies of the author? Are there surprising word choices? Why might the author have made those choices?”
- Read for the writer’s techniques. Ask: “What writerly moves is the author using, and what effect do they have on you as a reader?”
- Read for structure. Ask: “How does the author lead me to ideas? How do the parts fit together?”

### Reading for Representation and Perspective

- Read for audience. Ask: “Who is the author writing for? Who would benefit from this piece?”

- Read for voice and representation. Ask: “Who is included in this piece? Who is left out, marginalized, or distorted?”
- Read for #OwnVoices perspectives. Ask: “Whose stories are being told here, and whose voices are telling those stories?”
- Read for power and resistance. Ask: “How does this text reinforce existing powers (voices, groups, structures, narratives, points-of-view). How does it resist or disrupt those?”

## Using Strategic Read-Alouds

To give students shared, interactive practice with close reading, use a strategic read-aloud, where you read a text aloud and engage students in collective interpretation—thinking, talking, and jotting along the way.

The following shows the components of a strategic read-aloud for a class that is about to read a 1901 newspaper article titled “Chinese Exclusion Convention Comes to a Most Brilliant Close” as part of their study of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a topic that gives historical context to the Anti-Chinese racism during the outbreak of COVID-19 and the various travel bans and quarantines. Of course, before embarking on this topic, a teacher would have made sure to explain that the newspapers and images they will examine use language and images that are offensive and racist. She might say something like, “We’ll be exploring this era to better understand the fear and racism that has shaped our country in the past and continues to shape it today. Before we begin let’s think about ways to handle the difficult feelings that may come up when studying this material—individually and collectively.” She would then lead a discussion on classroom norms for responding to difficult and inflammatory content. Facing History and Ourselves’ website ([www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)) provides some very helpful guidance for “contracting,” or setting expectations with students. Their process begins with student reflection and then moves into discussing classroom norms that include using “I” statements, listening, working with the teacher to find a way to be heard if the space does not feel safe, and responding to hurtful or oppressive interactions by identifying the comments (rather than the individuals) as problematic.

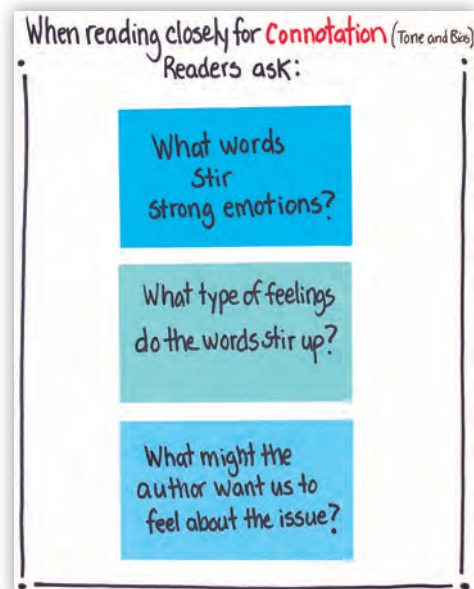
A read-aloud is generally comprised of the following major elements:

**Text Introduction and Rallying Cry:** Introduce the text in a way that stirs up interest and rallies kids toward higher-level thinking work. For example, here’s what this part of a read-aloud might sound like: “Historians, we’ve been exploring a dark time in American history, a time when both citizens and government were so afraid of immigrants that they created a law called the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The goal of this law was to ban an entire ethnic group from entering the country. In the wake of COVID-19 in 2020, some fringe groups made

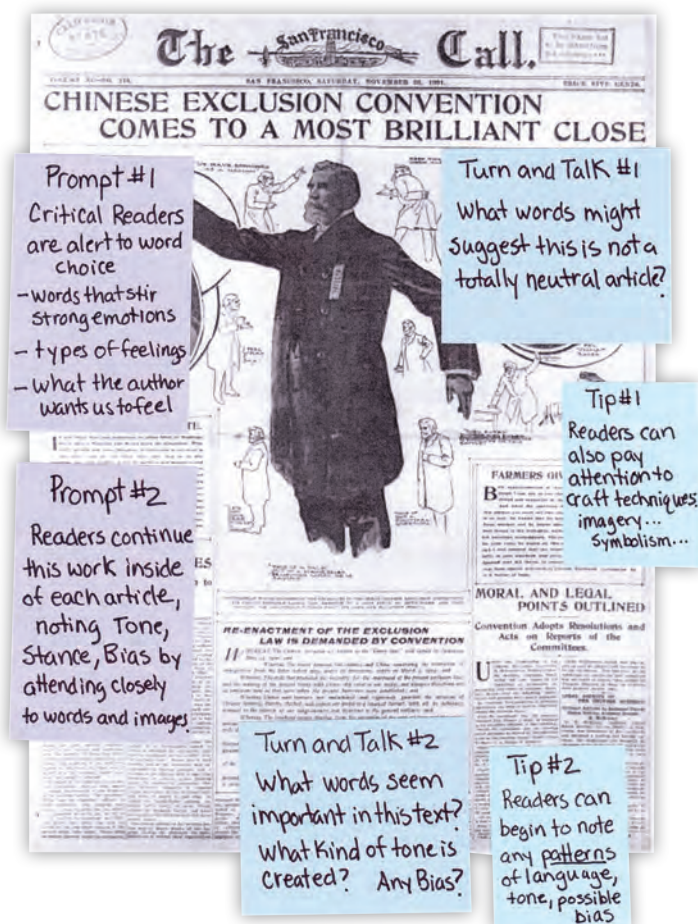
the same call, lumping all people of Asian descent together, no matter where they lived or whether they had any more contact with the virus than non-Asians—so this study of how people justify racism matters, in history and now. The article we will read together today was published in 1901 in *The San Francisco Call*. It describes a convention in which people discussed renewing the law.”

**Analytical Prompt and Reading:** Introduce an analytical lens and invite students to listen closely, with this lens in mind, as you read the text aloud. (See Figure 3.1 for an example of how we might plan points to discuss in a text.) Students may jot as they listen. Explain: “When we think of a newspaper article, we usually believe that it will be totally objective, that it will present only the facts of what happened and not the opinions of the writer. We have to be careful, though, because opinions and bias are inevitable, and sources sometimes represent or serve certain interest groups. One way to see these biases is to ask yourself: ‘Who do I sympathize with and admire in this text?’ Then ask yourself: ‘How does the author’s word choice set me up to admire and sympathize with some people and positions?’ As you listen, keep your ears open to any specific words that catch your attention.” Prompts like those in Figure 3.2 can help to move the conversation forward.

**FIGURE 3.2** Planning your read-aloud so that you’re addressing both what you’ll say and the content of the kids’ conversations can result in deeply analytical experiences.



**FIGURE 3.1** When planning a read-aloud, record your stopping points, critical lens prompts, and tips in advance.



**Turn and Talk:** Invite partners to briefly talk with each other to share their thinking about the prompt given before reading. Say: “Now that we’ve read the title, subtitle, and the caption to the central image, turn and talk to your partner. What words in the title, subtitle and caption suggest that this might not be a totally neutral article?”

**Teacher Summation (and Elevation) of Partner Talk:** Share a few summaries of the comments you heard during the turn-and-talk. Use this opportunity to tuck in academic language or interpretive insights. Explain: “Historians, I heard many of you say that the article seems overwhelmingly positive about the Chinese Exclusion Convention—about excluding Chinese people. You pointed to words and phrases, such as *most brilliant*, *strong*, and *eloquent*, and you determined that the writer seems to want us to feel good about the event. When we read news articles, we’ll want to pay careful attention to not just *what* events are described but also *how* the events are described and how specific word choice shows not just implicit but explicit bias.”

**Feedback:** Give feedback, perhaps in the form of a tip as the students talk, to help them move their thinking forward. You might say: “I want to compliment you on noticing moments when the author’s word choice gives off a feeling, or connotation, about the events he describes. I want to suggest that you can also pay close attention to the techniques the author uses to accomplish this task. How does he use specific craft techniques to emphasize the positive connotations of the convention? Think back to your study of poetry, narrative, and argument writing—what writing moves might the author be using? We can often reread sections with craft in mind to better understand a writer’s perspective or purpose.”

Repeat this structure throughout your reading, giving students a chance to apply feedback. When you want to offer them a new challenge, give students another analytical lens to continue to raise the level.

## Lesson: Using Shared Reading

You can also use analytical reading prompts with shared reading. Unlike read-aloud, in shared reading, students have access to a print or digital copy of an excerpt of the text, which is helpful in engaging students in full-group discussion of close reading strategies, in targeted rereading, and in thoughtful annotation. Usually the text has already been introduced, and shared reading is a rereading process, where students read closely with critical lenses.

A shared reading lesson for our unit on the Chinese Exclusion Act might go like this:

**CONNECT:** Remind students of a text you’ve introduced that you’ll return to. You might say: “Historians, we’re going to go back to a text that we looked at briefly the other day. It’s the piece from 1892, in the *Dalles Daily Chronicle*, which is an Oregon newspaper. Today I want to suggest that when you reread, you often notice a lot of details that didn’t stick out in a first reading—and that if you reread and annotate at the same time, it can help you go even deeper. Marking up a text helps us notice smaller details, word choice, and other language that we might have skipped over in our first read. Watch as I get started rereading, and this time I’m going to underline and annotate as I read, noticing word choice and craft techniques that stand out. You have a copy of the text, some pens, and some sticky notes: you can begin to annotate what you’re struck by as well.”

**TEACH AND ENGAGE:** Demonstrate how you reread, rethink, and annotate, making notes on the page as you go. (See Figure 3.3 for an example of what an annotated piece might look like.) Explain: “I’m going to go back to the titles and subtitles to get started, as often those give a strong indication of the author’s stance. Let’s see . . . the title of this article is ‘A Celestial Horde: Hiding in Sequestered Nooks, Ready for the Break—Only One More River to Cross.’ And we know in this article the author suggests that Chinese immigrants are massed in Canada, waiting to cross over into the US. So, for me, what stands out is this use of the word *horde*. That’s a word I associate with armies, and invasions like that of Genghis Khan and his horde. And those words *sequestered nooks*, which suggest secrecy, and that phrase *ready for the break*, as if this ‘horde’ is massing, just waiting to pounce. It all builds a mood of something ominous, which definitely suggests an anti-Chinese bias.

“Did you see how I zoomed in on specific words and phrases that stood out to me in rereading, and I underlined and circled them, and then jotted a note in the margins so that I would hold onto my thinking? Then as I keep reading and annotating, I can see how it all begins to add up.”



### CONDUCTING A READ-ALoud

Watch Pablo’s sample analytical read-aloud.

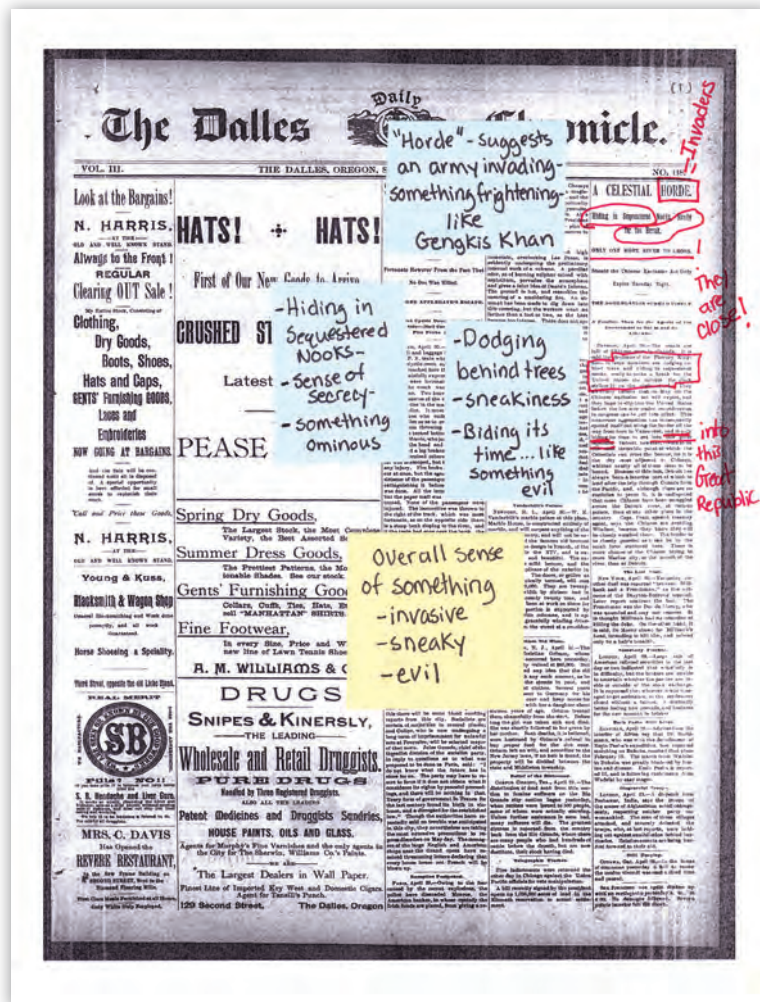


<http://hein.pub/CivicallyEngagedClassroom>



Engage students in going on with this work of rereading, annotating, and rethinking for bias. Then say: “Let’s go on, and as you read, try out this annotating—circle, underline, jot—doing your best to read more deeply, more alert to details and word choice that suggest underlying bias. Then take a look at what you’ve annotated, and compare with a partner.”

**LAUNCH INDEPENDENT WORK TIME:** Let your students know that it’s not just going to be this article that you dove into together that will use language suggestive of bias. Whether reading in print or digitally, students should annotate as they read, alert to word choice that reveals bias. You might also invite students to bring in current news articles that are worthy of this same level of close, critical reading.



**FIGURE 3.3** Here you can see a marked-up section of a text that has been annotated in a shared reading experience. Using a document camera or other device, as well as showing student examples when kids are midway through the work, gives them models to help them strengthen their own work.



## Using Partnerships and Study Groups/Club Work

Partnerships and study groups/clubs are key to close reading: as kids read the same text, they can compare their interpretations and help each other with comprehension—lifelong study skills. Ensure that the groups remain small: when kids have only a partner or a group of three friends reading the same text, they are more likely to remain focused on their reading and discussion.

Returning to our Chinese Exclusion Act example, a teacher might introduce a choice of a third, longer text to students and have them pair off to read and practice the analytical lenses they’ve been using in the full-group context. The teacher might say: “Now let’s read a longer text with our partners. I’ve provided a few for you to choose among. As you get ready to read, please make a plan: Consider, first, how much you will read before you stop and, second, whether you’d like to discuss and then note-take, or the other way around. Quick, make your plan. [Pause] As you read, I will be coming around to look at your annotations of this new source and to listen in on your conversations about the material. I’ll pay particular attention to how you apply the close reading lenses we’ve been practicing so I can give you feedback. I’m really interested in what you notice, what you see in these texts. With the news today full of bias as well, it’s so important to become skilled at this work.”

## Make Reading Across Multiple Sources the Norm

Both the news and the history that we read, listen to, and watch rely on language to convey experiences we likely didn’t witness, in contexts we’ve likely never seen, in times when we were likely not present. We’re also accessing these events through intermediaries—authors or reporters who are themselves interpreting events, so it goes without saying that we have to be cautious with how we interpret what we read. In the section above we discussed the importance of reading closely and collaboratively in order to weigh our interpretations with those of other trusted people; in this section you’ll find some ideas for teaching students the importance of reading around a topic and paying particular attention to how ostensibly objective sources might suggest very different connotations about the very same event.

## Comparing Headlines

One powerful way to highlight how objective sources of information can still dramatically differ in the way they portray events is to compare headlines and front-page photos on the same topic from different news outlets. You might find your own headlines or turn to Newseum’s “Today’s Front Pages” feature, which shows

### Newseum’s “Today’s Front Pages” Feature

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-front-pages-key  
-moments-history](https://newseum.org/curated-stack/archived-todays-front-pages-key-moments-history)



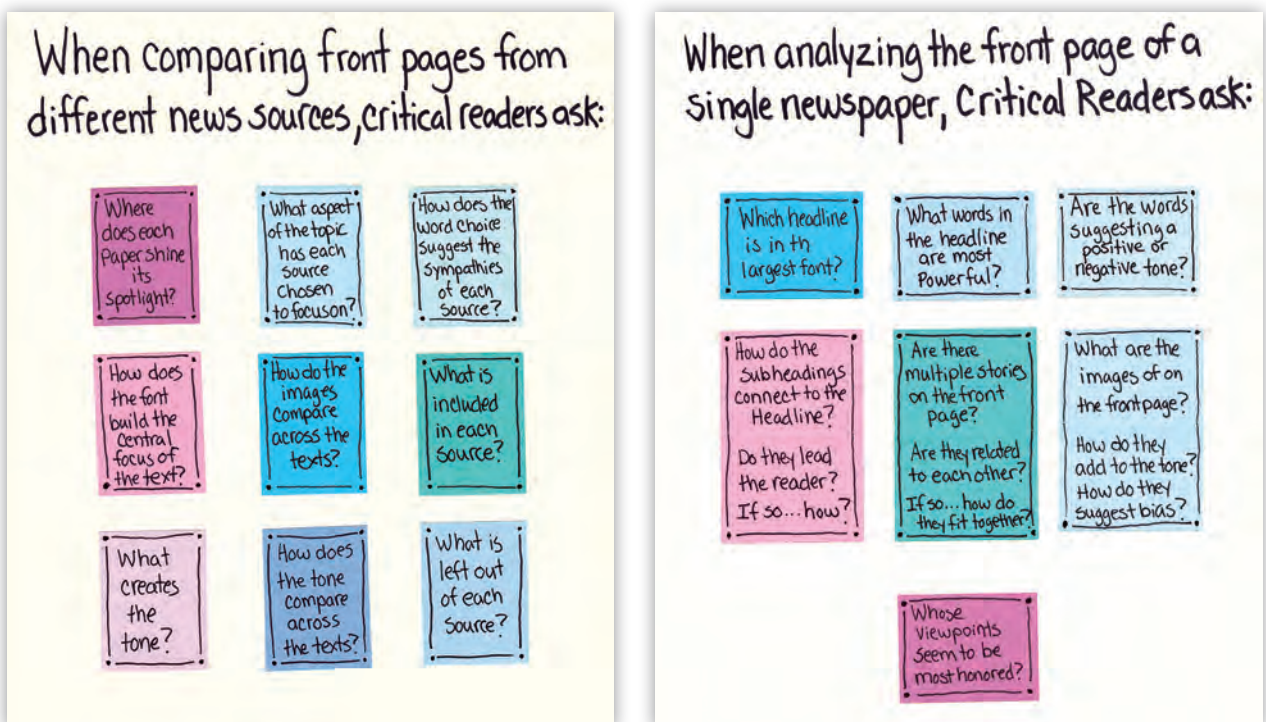
how papers in different parts of the country and the world might report on the same stories—you can also turn to archived pages. The site is free, but you do need to create a login.

Before the lesson, find the front pages of three different newspapers for the same day, addressing the same topic. Note that including international newspapers will give you a wider range of perspectives.

Begin your work with students with a close read of a single newspaper front page. Lead the students to analyze for word choice in the headline by asking them: “Are there any words in the headline that suggest a feeling or tone, rather than strictly facts? What words in the headline suggest the opinion, or stance, or bias of the editors? How might the image(s) on the page convey a point of view?” At this point, layer on the second front page and ask the students: “How does this one compare to the first? Does this headline seem to have the same tone or something slightly different?” (Figure 3.4 includes additional useful prompts.) You might also say to the students, “These two newspapers deal with the same event, but do they focus on the same parts of that big event? What do these headlines choose to focus on?” Then, you might add in the third text, and ask how it relates to the first two.

This type of exercise will help your readers to be more cautious about the news. They’ll see that even a reputable source will take an angle on an event and that those angles will affect their reader in subtle ways. As informed readers, it’s our job to be aware of these angles, and to try, whenever possible, to triangulate meaning by reading more than one source about an event or issue.

**FIGURE 3.4** Tools like this will help students refine their comparing and contrasting skills as they juxtapose sources.



## » YOUNG CITIZENS IN ACTION «

In the fall of 2011, Pablo’s seventh-grade class at School of the Future was entranced by the Occupy Wall Street protests that had sprung up in Zuccotti Park. The kids had watched the tent city grow on television and wondered what could have motivated so many people to leave the comfort of their homes to camp out in the center of Manhattan with a thousand other strangers. The class read numerous articles about the protests and watched news coverage, which ranged from glowing support, to condescension, to outright accusations of criminality. Confused by conflicting sources of information, the students asked if they could go to the protests themselves and find out firsthand what had motivated people to join them.

With digital cameras, cell phones, and notebooks in hand, Pablo’s students paired off and wound their way through Zuccotti Park on a mission to interview as many protestors as possible and record their conversations. Students witnessed the “human microphone” as announcements were spread throughout the park using only the power of the human voice magnified by hundreds of people. They collected stickers, posters, flyers, and other artifacts to analyze back in class. Most importantly, they took videos of the individuals who made up the Occupy movement. The students interviewed a diverse range of subjects—young and old, middle class and homeless—who shared their personal stories.

Over the next two days, the class pored through their artifacts and raw footage and then created mini-documentaries to answer the question, “What caused the Occupy Wall Street Protests?” While internet research and news articles offered these students the background information they needed to grasp the larger context of the Occupy Wall Street protests, it was the direct interviewing of the individuals taking part that allowed students to develop their own interpretation of events. The students learned firsthand the difference between secondary and primary sources.

### Reading a Range of News Coverage

Today, we have an array of online tools that can help us to introduce our students to a range of news coverage and help them to practice analytical reading, including:

- **Newsela** ([newsela.com](http://newsela.com)) provides news stories daily, to classrooms, at five different reading levels. Newsela is great for getting kids to read about current events every day and for putting more nonfiction into kids’ hands. The texts are preselected for kids, with a focus on engagement. When you’re using Newsela, you should also be aware that when the reading level is reduced, the

complexity of the topic can also be reduced in ways that become problematic, and that the site's comprehension questions promote restating—not critiquing—the author's main point.

- **Newseum** ([www.newseumED.org](http://www.newseumED.org)) aims to promote cross-text reading and critical reading of multiple sources. It provides same-day front pages for newspapers around the world and around the country. The levels of the text vary mostly by the intended audience, with the *New York Post* having an easier reading level than the *New York Times*, for example. Newseum also archives front pages for significant days in history.
- **Google News** ([www.news.google.com](http://www.news.google.com)) can also offer contrasting coverage of an issue. Input any event, narrow the date range if you choose, and then see what media from all over the world have to say about it.
- **Allsides** ([www.allsides.com](http://www.allsides.com)) argues that all news carries some bias. They strive to provide sources from across the political spectrum. The texts can be at a high reading level.
- **Google Scholar** ([www.scholar.google.com](http://www.scholar.google.com)) searches for academic texts on a topic, and it also provides any text that has cited that source since it was written. You can trace the influence, then, of texts and voices.

Another way to practice this work could be to take a newsworthy event and then compare and contrast the ways that international news sources treat the event. For example, when we compared the coverage of Fidel Castro's death in an American newspaper ("Fidel Castro, Cuban Revolutionary Who Defied the US, Dies at 90," *The New York Times*, November 26, 2016) and a French newspaper ("Mort de Fidel Castro," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 26, 2016), the portrayals of Castro varied greatly: while the *Times* called Castro "the fiery apostle of revolution," *Le Monde* painted him as David to North America's Goliath.

## Teach Students to Read with Healthy Skepticism

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At the beginning of this chapter we noted the danger of instilling a sense of cynical detachment; that is the opposite of civic engagement. We are not in the business of creating cynics here. We don't want our students to throw up their hands in frustration and simply wave off all nonfiction and journalism as suspect or corrupt. Rather, we want our students to have a highly tuned radar for bias so that they are cautious with their media consumption. The lesson starters below offer suggestions for how to walk that line so that our students approach their reading with an appropriate wariness rather than a crippling distrust.

## Lesson: Weighing and Evaluating Evidence within a Text

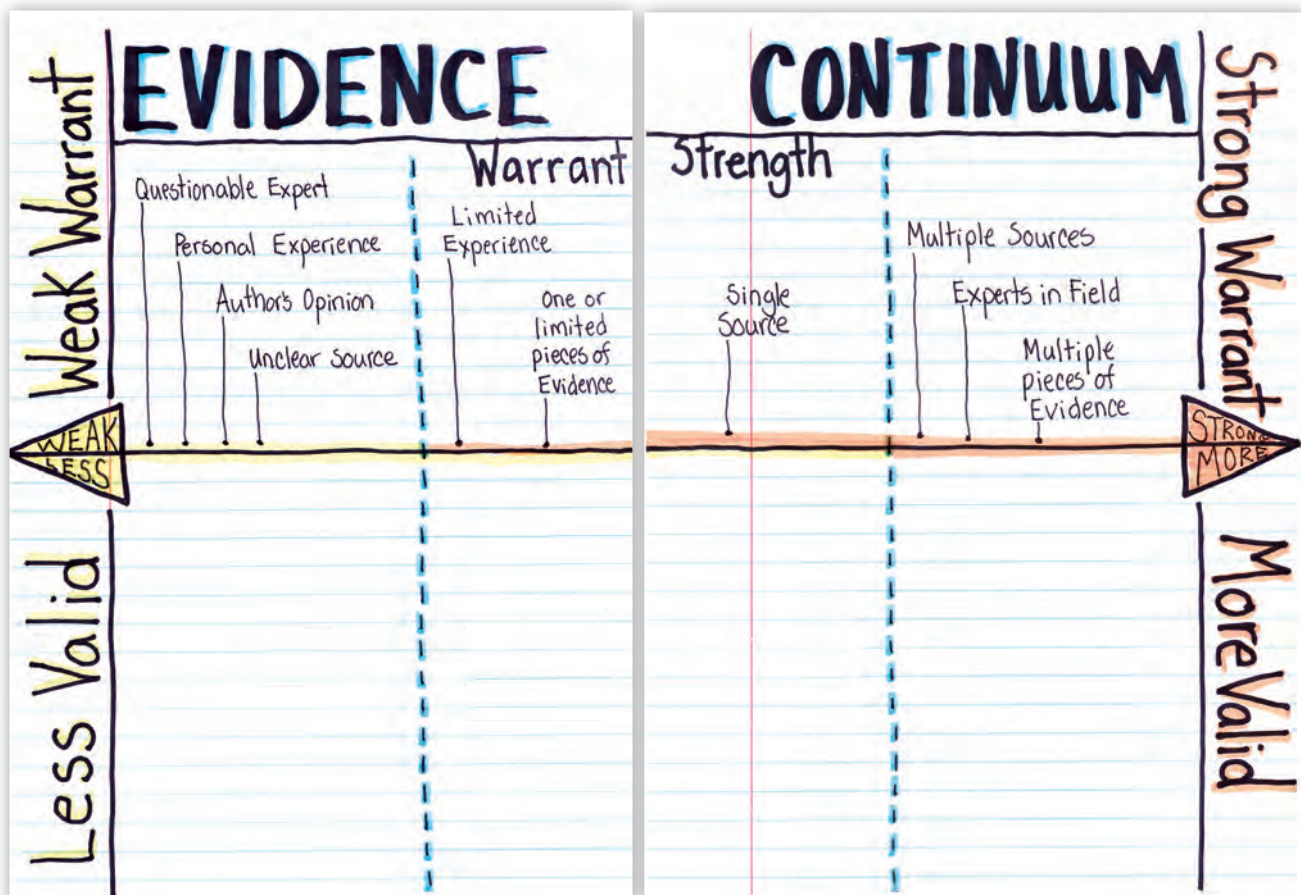
**CONNECT:** When we read Op-eds we should be careful to evaluate the evidence they use to see if their points are well supported. Explain: “Critical readers not only read around texts and compare sources—they also reread an author’s evidence closely, weighing and evaluating the strength of that evidence and the reasoning the author uses to unpack the evidence, rather than simply accepting the statements of the author. We can practice this skill by reading Op-eds—essays (not news stories) in newspapers that express opinions of their writers.”

**TEACH:** Return to a text you introduced in read-aloud, or choose a related text. Your text might be related to your unit of study or, if you are simply looking for a strong text that will help you to model evaluating evidence, you might consider using an excerpt from Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi’s *Stamped* (2020), or an excerpt from Jay Z and Molly Crabapple’s *New York Times* video, “A History of the War on Drugs” (2016). Model for students how you analyze multiple points in the text to identify those that are strongly supported and those that are less strongly supported. The goal here is to show kids that it’s not only that some texts overall are more strongly supported: some *ideas* within a text are also more strongly supported. A continuum like the one shown in Figure 3.5 may help the students rank how well an idea is supported within a text.

**ENGAGE:** Going on with the same text, invite students to weigh and evaluate evidence for a second point, or turn to a second text and suggest that students evaluate the evidence of part of that text.



**LAUNCH INDEPENDENT WORK TIME:** If you are focusing on a shared text that you have introduced in the read-aloud, you might let kids continue with parts of this text, perhaps with different partnerships evaluating different points and then coming together in small groups to compare their analyses. If kids are researching in study groups, they could go off to their own research and apply this work to the text they choose to read and/or reread.



**FIGURE 3.5** A “Fairness Continuum” can help researchers track the range of their sources.



## Lesson: Interpreting Numbers, Statistics, and Embedded Charts with Careful, Cautious Attentiveness

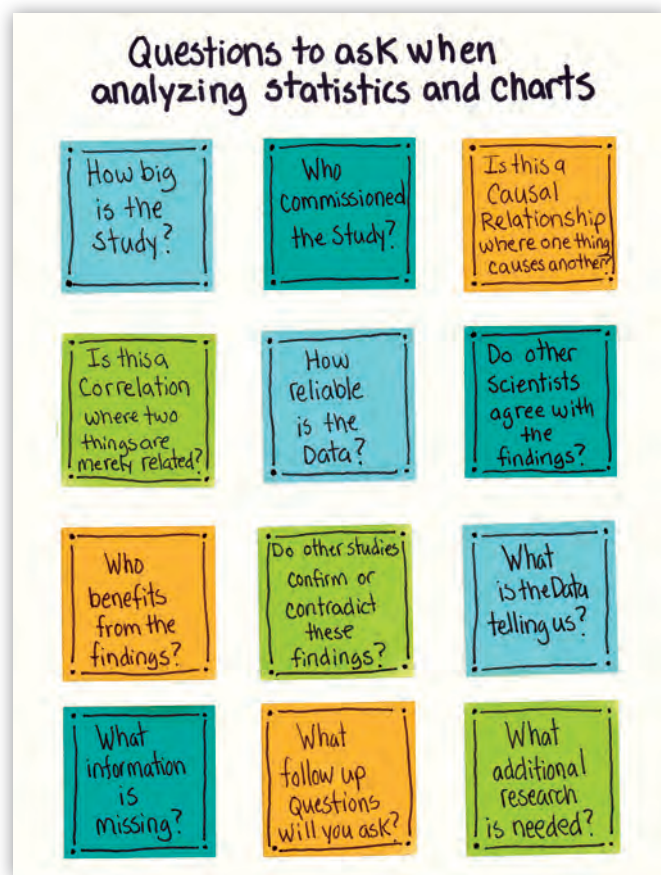
**CONNECT:** Let kids know that often our brains are seduced by numbers, statistics, and elaborate charts. Often we find them authoritative and even slightly intimidating, and so we sort of skip over them when we encounter them in a text, assuming that they are valid, and the author’s interpretation of the data they present is valid. Other times they seem self-explanatory, and we take for granted that they are fair and accurate. Explain: “Often, when readers encounter statistics, numbers, and complicated charts in a text, they assume that the author will explain these accurately and fairly. Yet sometimes these numbers are represented in ways that distort their meaning. Critical readers, then, attend carefully to embedded numbers, statistics, and charts, paying attention to things like scale, representation, and author interpretation.”

**TEACH:** Show a few news articles that include dramatic numbers. Choose one article, and show students how you analyze the numbers, statistics, or charts as you read—not only thinking aloud as you determine what the information is trying to convey but also considering whether the information is trustworthy or whether it has been distorted.

**ENGAGE:** Working in pairs or groups of three, ask students to consider the use of data in another article. Provide thinking prompts like those in Figure 3.6 to help students as they work.

### LAUNCH INDEPENDENT WORK

**TIME:** Have your students return to their research with this lens as a tool in their toolkit, encouraging them to pause when they get to embedded math-related arguments and to read extra-critically.



**FIGURE 3.6** Students often see numbers and statistics and assume that they represent a hard truth. Use these questions to help them read the numbers critically.

## Teach Students to Be Wary of Persuasive Techniques and Logical Fallacies

From the country's first snake oil huckster handing out pamphlets, to Madison Avenue advertising agencies, to modern-day internet ads targeted to our tastes, we've been immersed in a consumer culture that thrives on persuasion, on the selling of something that we may neither want nor need. We can teach our students to recognize when they're being sold on something and to differentiate between reasoned, rational argumentation in which valid points are supported with evidence, and manipulative emotional appeals designed to tug on our basest feelings.

The experience that students have with modern media primes them for thoughtful work analyzing common persuasive techniques. Some of the most pervasive persuasive techniques have their roots in propaganda, so we will begin with those techniques first named by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in their seminal work, *The Fine Art of Propaganda* (1971). We suggest that you build centers in which partners work with a series of cards that include some of the most common persuasive techniques and logical fallacies that are often used deliberately, and sometimes slipped into inadvertently, in implicit and explicit arguments.

See the online resources for printable descriptions of common logical fallacies.

### Centers: Persuasive Techniques and Logical Fallacies

1. Unpack your techniques and fallacies cards and review them with a partner.
2. Choose a video text to analyze.
  - a. *The Simpsons*: "The Bear Patrol and Lisa's Tiger-Repelling Rock"
  - b. Direct TV Commercial: "Don't Attend Your Own Funeral" (2014)
  - c. The O'Reilly Factor: "The Bill O'Reilly and Geraldo Rivero Bust Up" (2007)
  - d. Campaign Ad: Dale Peterson (running for Alabama Agriculture Commissioner) (2010)
  - e. Café Scene from *Inception* (2010)
  - f. *Sesame Street*: "Ernie Has a Banana in His Ear"
3. Read closely, and reread critically, alert to possible persuasive techniques and logical fallacies. Jot down the ones you notice, and then compare with your partner, talking about how these were used in the text.

## Lesson: Questioning Representation and Marginalization from the Start

**CONNECT:** Show students a political cartoon or propaganda poster, such as a WWII poster that overtly demonizes or heroizes, an image of Rosie the Riveter, or German propaganda posters from WWII. Remind students that no text is neutral—but that some texts are more obvious and some are more subtle in how they affirm stereotypes or demonize groups or individuals. Explain: “Researchers also actively question representation in the texts they read. They notice who is included and who is marginalized, distorted, or invisible. When we realize who is seen and who is not, we can seek out texts and sources that include underrepresented voices.”

**TEACH:** Demonstrate how you read a bit of the text, noticing how people and events are described and asking: “How does this text make me feel about this event/person/perspective? How does it accomplish this task?” Also ask, “Who is marginalized, distorted, or invisible?”

**ENGAGE:** Invite students to try this work out in a new part of that same text or in a parallel text. Coach them to ask these same questions.

**LAUNCH INDEPENDENT WORK TIME:** Send students back to their text sets, suggesting they apply these lenses to texts they’ve already read and to the ones they’ll read next. Ask students to revisit texts they have read before with this new lens, rethinking how fair and representative those texts are and perhaps annotating or coding these to note representation. From there, encourage them to continue researching, remaining alert to representation as they read.

## Teach Students to Weigh Sources and Their Credibility

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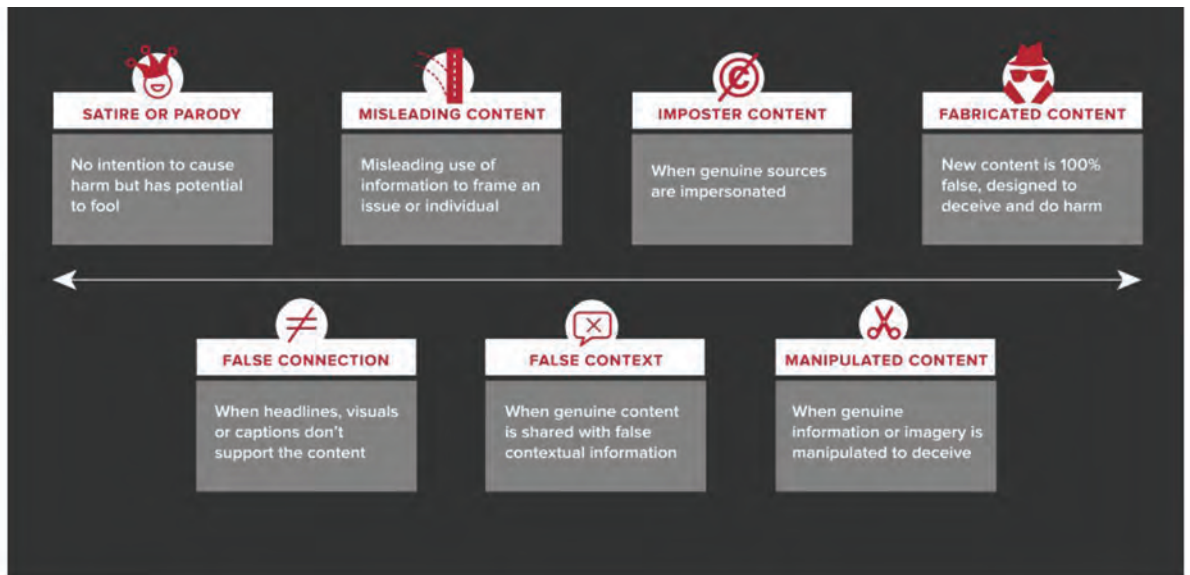
In the previous chapter we discussed how to create initial text sets to help your students develop background knowledge around contested issues. As your students delve deeper into these issues, you'll want to include texts that are flawed, or biased. For years, we shunned these texts, offering only well-researched, thoughtful texts in our text sets. Of course, we want most of the texts in a text set to be trustworthy, but the problem with not including flawed texts in the work of school is that then we don't prepare kids for what they'll encounter outside of school. Our media landscape these days is littered with untrustworthy news sources. We have a duty to teach our kids how to consume the media around them responsibly and to be wary of the information that streams through their news feeds and inboxes. So now we're strategic about layering in texts that are overtly biased or distorted in their presentation of information so that students can practice critical interpretation skills. We can't leave the hard work for kids to encounter outside of school and only do the work inside that is safe and easy. Our young citizens must be ready to sniff out texts that are satirical, manipulative, or distorted—or are outright fabrications.

Of course, we have to be very careful about how we add in these troubling texts. If we add them to our curated set from the beginning, students are very likely to assume that they are perfectly fine as sources for two reasons: 1) the students aren't very trained in evaluating their sources yet, and 2) the texts come from you, their trusted teacher! Instead of sneaking them in from the beginning, we advise that you explicitly teach a lesson on sniffing out flawed, biased, and untrustworthy texts (see "Investigating the Possibility of Untrustworthy News" on page 97) and then inform the students that you added new texts to their sets today, a certain number of which are deeply flawed. You might say something like: "Students, today I've added five new sources to your text sets, two of which are of dubious quality. While you research today, be on guard that you don't cite from one of these inadequate texts! We'll discuss the offending texts at the end, during our class share." This way your students will have ample warning, and you'll be able to coach them into critical reading habits.

If you are teaching a longer unit and have ample time to dig into media literacy, you may want to devote some class time to unpacking the phrase *fake news*. In a quick but illuminating video entitled, "A Brief History of 'Fake News,'" the BBC refers to the phrase as a catch-all that includes everything from misinformation to conspiracy theories to political spin. The term has also been used as a way to dismiss information that one simply disagrees with. We suggest that you avoid using the

phrase *fake news*, instead focusing, as the video suggests, on teaching your students how to differentiate “facts, opinion, speculation and outright fiction” (BBC 2018). The lessons that follow offer some suggestions on how to do this.

Figure 3.7 shows a chart created by Claire Wardle at First Draft Media, which can serve as a helpful tool in identifying different types of mis- and disinformation. Once you’ve introduced these and invited students to be extra alert to signs of these types of disinformation, it’s also worth it to teach students to pay attention to when something just feels murky or off.



**FIGURE 3.7** Help students to identify different ways in which information can be intentionally or unintentionally misleading.

See the online resources for a printable version of this list.

### Sites to Help You Teach Students How Misinformation Is Created and Spread

**Operation Infektion**—illuminating and troubling *New York Times* documentary on how Russia manipulates our public opinion through the sowing of misinformation and has been doing it for decades.

[www.nytimes.com/2018/11/12/opinion/russia-meddling-disinformation-fake-news-elections.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/12/opinion/russia-meddling-disinformation-fake-news-elections.html)



**Factitious**—game developed by American University that tests students' ability to spot fake news.

<http://factitious.augamestudio.com>



**Bad News**—simple game developed by researchers at the University of Cambridge that simulates the spread of fake news.

<https://getbadnews.com/#intro>



**Media Literacy Booster Pack**—feature from the Newseum that provides lesson plans, activities, and resources for teaching topics, such as differentiating fact and opinion, identifying fake news, detecting propaganda, and recognizing bias.

<https://newseumed.org/edcollection/media-literacy-booster-pack>



**The Center for Information Technology and Society (CITS) at UC Santa Barbara**—an explanation of how untrustworthy news is spread.

[www.cits.ucsb.edu/fake-news/spread](http://www.cits.ucsb.edu/fake-news/spread)



**News Literacy Project**—organization that provides activities, quizzes, and lessons to promote news literacy and that offers professional development for teachers interested in infusing more media literacy in their curricula.

<https://newslit.org>





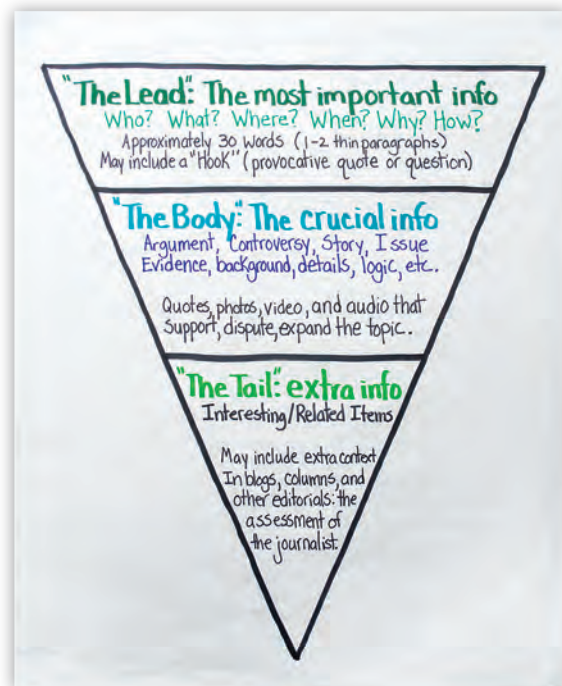
## Lesson: Investigating the Possibility of Untrustworthy News

**CONNECT:** Show students a journalist’s “triangle” (see Figure 3.8) that introduces the concepts of *Who*, *What*, *Where*, *When*, *Why*, and *How*. Then, introduce a news report, print or digital, that follows this format. (See Figure 3.8.) Explain: “Just as journalists often use the 5Ws and an H to be sure to include important information for their audience, so readers can use these same lenses to question whether a piece of journalism seems trustworthy. When any of these elements seem murky, it might be that the news is distorted or untrustworthy.”

**TEACH AND ENGAGE:** If you want a light touch to introduce this work, you can turn to the parodic article, “Litany of Lies” (ClickHole 2014), and demonstrate how the text doesn’t refer to the school or district, or give any information that would help a reader confirm the story. Then, move on to a problematic text on a high-interest topic. You can find the biggest fake news stories of 2018, for instance, at [www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-fake-news-hits-2018](http://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-fake-news-hits-2018).

Show how you apply the protocol of the 5Ws and an H to reconsider murky or missing information. You might demonstrate using one or two of the Ws, asking kids to do the rest, or you might reread the text, with students noticing any of the 5Ws and an H that seem unclear.

**LAUNCH INDEPENDENT WORK TIME:** Suggest that students review their texts and apply this same protocol to their research as needed. You may want to deliberately introduce a few untrustworthy texts into the students’ text sets and caution students to look out for them as they read. Most importantly, suggest that they carry this critical lens with them to all of their consumption of media.



**FIGURE 3.8** The inverted triangle for drafting news reports—the parts journalists include—can also be lenses that help readers question the fullness and clarity of journalistic reporting.

## Lesson: Reading Around a Text

**CONNECT:** Suggest that when readers are suspicious, they can turn to outside sources to affirm their suspicions or confirm a source. Explain: “The world of internet research is full of flawed sources. Often, when we get a feeling that something might be off about a text, or it seems important to confirm something in a text, we can turn to outside sources, especially ones that engage in public fact-checking.”

**TEACH:** Return to a text that you and the class have already noted as something that might not be trustworthy. Demonstrate how to go back into the text in question and pull out some key search terms, such as the event, character names, place, and/or author, and combine those with the name of a reputable news source to get another reporting of the event. Here you may note that, while no news source is perfect, there are a few that regularly win prestigious awards for excellence in journalism, such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. These sources are often a good starting point for verifying information.

**ENGAGE:** Invite students to try checking the text in question, using another source. Either pull one up yourself and invite students to notice inconsistencies in what was reported, and/or invite students to combine search terms with a different source and notice how the event was reported. Then extend this work by suggesting that you can also research authors in order to investigate the groups and agendas they may be affiliated with.

**LAUNCH INDEPENDENT WORK TIME:** Suggest that as students go off to research, they consider finding another source on a particular moment or event. Remind them that they can also investigate authors and their public agendas. As they do so, encourage them to be alert to journalistic sources that fact-check and revise publicly and that are recognized by established organizations for strong journalism.

## Lesson: Considering the Effects of Master Narratives

**CONNECT:** If you're introducing your students to the concept of master narratives, you might want to begin by watching the jarring Schoolhouse Rock's *Elbow Room*, with its overt celebration of a master narrative of Manifest Destiny. Then explain: "A master narrative gives an account of events that shows a dominant group's perspective, often justifying that group's dominance. It does not reflect the perspective of those who are not in power. For instance, the master narrative of Manifest Destiny—the belief that it was destiny that settlers expand westward—justified (in the settlers' minds) the genocide of Indigenous Peoples. Master narratives of the superiority of some and the inferiority of others not only constitute a perceived justification for oppression but also rewrite history to favor some groups and erase others. Master narratives can be less dramatic, and less obvious, but their impact can be significant because they are so ingrained in society that they are not questioned."

**TEACH:** Chances are, if you open any US history textbook to the chapter on the Pilgrims or the Founding Fathers, you'll get a strong sense of the master narrative that a small group of idealistic white men founded this country and made it what it is today. If you have any of these kinds of textbooks in your closet, get one out: now is the moment to find an excerpt to share. (One example is a feature in a US history textbook, *The Pilgrims Before the Mayflower*, extolling the virtues of the Pilgrims and titled "They Never Gave Up.") You might demonstrate finding one master narrative in a text and leave others for students to find.

**ENGAGE:** If you stay with the same text, you can invite students to suggest other possible master narratives. Or you can move to a second text. Chart some of the master narratives that emerge. We've found a particularly compelling text to be JayZ and Molly Crabapple's video documentary *A History of the War on Drugs* (2016), which explicitly dismantles racist master narratives propagated deliberately in the War on Drugs.

**LAUNCH INDEPENDENT WORK TIME:** When kids go off to work, you might suggest that they read, alert to some of the master narratives that emerged in the minilesson (if you studied a content-related text). Or, suggest that their partnership or study group revisit their research briefly, charting some of the master narratives that emerge. Then they can read on, alert to the presence of these master narratives.

## Lesson: Center Counternarratives

**CONNECT:** If US history textbooks mostly align with a master narrative that this nation was honorably founded on the ideals of a few enlightened white men from the British colonies, then the Broadway hit *Hamilton* subverts that master narrative at almost every level: people of color are cast in most of the roles, women fight on the battlefield alongside men, and two of the most important characters (Hamilton and Lafayette) are celebrated as immigrants. You might play a video of the cast’s 2016 performance at the Tony awards, asking kids to ponder what this show suggests about who has peopled and made America “great.” Explain: “In history, popular culture, and literature, there are not only master narratives but also counternarratives, which show the perspectives of those who have been oppressed by the master narrative. By seeking out and studying counternarratives, we can gather a fuller understanding of an event, movement, or time period.”

**TEACH AND ENGAGE:** Here is where you want to emphasize and highlight voices who have been underrepresented and voices who offer counternarratives that suggest possibility, especially to kids in your class. You might turn to teen activists such as the Parkland kids, whose speeches and activism have disrupted a master narrative of teens as children and victims, or to any of the Climate Warriors, such as Autumn Peltier, who have led the world in activism. Or you might return to your content, bringing out the counternarratives that are often submerged there.

Some texts that can be helpful in offering explicit counternarratives:

- *Stamped: Racism, Anti-Racism, and You*, by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi (2020)
- *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States for Young People*, by Debbie Reese, Jean Mendoza, and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2019)
- *A Queer History of the United States for Young People*, by Michael Bronski and Richie Chevat (2019)
- *A Young People’s History of the United States* by Rebecca Stefoff and Howard Zinn (2009)
- *An African American and Latinx History of the United States*, by Paul Ortiz (2018)
- *Home of the Brave: 15 Immigrants who Shaped U.S. History*, by Brooke Khan and Iratxe López de Munáin. (2019)
- *American Trailblazers: 50 Remarkable People who Shaped U.S. History*, by Lisa Trusiani (2019)
- *Vice Magazine*, including “Vice Profiles”.

**LAUNCH INDEPENDENT WORK TIME:** At this point you can send kids off to actively seek counternarratives that relate to the research they’ve done so far, or you can send them off to go on with their research, alert to the possibility of counternarratives.

## Involve Families and Communities

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One of the most immediate ways to involve families and communities in helping to raise children who question sources and seek alternative voices is to actively seek the perspectives of family members and community members. Invite students often to interview family members for their perspectives on the topics students are studying and the texts they are reading. Ask family and community members to suggest voices and texts that will deepen and broaden students' perspectives.

No single teacher can ever know as many texts and histories and voices as those that will be known and celebrated by our students' families and communities. This will be especially true when we teach multiliterate students. Then our own language barriers may prevent us from accessing texts that our students can access. Ask for help from families, colleagues, and students.

When you have curriculum night, or parent–teacher conferences, it can also be helpful to share ideas for magazine subscriptions and magazines that are found at the local library or online. Giving kids access to *Latinitas* or *Teen Ink* or *Sesi* can help kids to find themselves in print communities and to develop a personal reading life and sense of identity they bring to their school selves.

## Be Ready for Anything

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Expect this work to be difficult for your students as they're unlikely to have had much experience directly critiquing sources of information. At this point in their academic lives, your students have largely expected that the texts given to them are simply "true," and the idea that people will have varying angles on what's true is complex and disconcerting. Students will need lots of practice with analyzing sources. Try to introduce sources in pairs, so that through comparison and contrast students can see where texts overlap and differ, then introduce a third text and ask which one does it align with more and why. Getting into the practice of triangulating meaning from multiple sources is a key habit for critical readers and engaged citizens.

In a similar vein, you may find that students find it difficult to hear bias during your strategic read alouds because they are unaccustomed to questioning sources. You may want to begin your first read through a text with emotional language rather than academic language in your prompt. For example, instead of "listen for bias," you may start by asking, "How does this text make you feel?" Priming the students with social and emotional prompts generally leads to greater success when you follow up with a thorough, academic, second read.

As with much of this book, there is a risk of conflict when pointing out the bias or slant of different news publications or political advertisements. You'll want to

make sure that you frame your work as universally as possible. Show that publications and political campaigns across the political spectrum use the same techniques to sway their audiences.

## Practice What You Teach

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It's easy to look at a news story that has been debunked and wonder how anyone could have fallen for it, but the truth is that no one is immune to propaganda. The questions below might help you recall anecdotes to help you remember what it feels like to learn the lessons this chapter teaches and, perhaps, to share your own experiences with your students, to let them know that their own learning curves in this work are to be expected.

- When were you surprised by disparate coverage of an event?
- When have you realized that one of your trusted sources of media actually had biased coverage of an event?
- When were you duped, or confused by a source?
- When have you inadvertently “liked” or shared a post in your social media account that you later realized was disinformation, or untrustworthy?
- When have you seen studies, charts, infographics that paint a persuasive picture, but are actually flawed?
- When have you seen egregious examples of propaganda techniques in advertising, either for products or political campaigns?

We have all had lapses in our news literacy and acknowledging it can help us—and our students—realize the importance of vigilant reading. As civically engaged educators, we can learn from our own mistakes and even help our students to learn from them as well.