

Exploring conspiracy theories

Overview:

Students are tuned into conspiracy theories! So, let's take some time to look at a few critically. How can they effectively research these topics?

What do conspiracy theories – like Ronald Reagan replaced all the birds with drones in 1986 or ancient aliens – have to do with media literacy? A lot. A number of conspiracies are fairly harmless. But conspiracy theories and misinformation share the same basic principles. And a lot of conspiracy theories play on implicit or explicit prejudice and bias.

Summary:

Gather conspiracy theories students are aware of. Teach a few fact-checking skills and have students think through steps they can take to look into these topics in small groups. What approach could they use that would be helpful? What are not good methods of researching topics like conspiracy theories or misinformation they will (and have) encountered?

Learning objectives:

- Help students identify what is real and what is fake
- To highlight the importance of being critical while consuming information
- Learn practical fact-checking tips

Grade levels:

Grades 9-12



Steps:

Warm up:

The day before you do this activity, ask students what conspiracy theories they know of.

Part 1:

Discuss that conspiracy theories are (normally) low-stakes versions of misinformation. Some are harmless and some are not. Come up with a list from the day before or one you have compiled yourself. Are any of these harmful? Share some tips on researching and fact-checking. (below)

Part 2:

Have students get into small groups, and assign them a conspiracy theory.

What can they do to effectively research that topic? What questions should they ask while researching? Have them share three approaches or questions.

TIP: Research has found [simply googling the topic](#) will not help.

Part 3:

Have each group share a question or method they could use to do research? How will that help them get a handle on the theory they've been assigned? Talk through as a classroom.

Tips/skills:

- Use [lateral reading](#)
- Check the website or source. Is it credible? Are they biased? Is it a primary source? Is the date of a news article or source recent? Do they know what they are talking about? Why are they writing it? Are they looking for an emotional response?
- Use [search operators](#)
- If you found the information on social media, get off the platform you are on and look for other sources. You could be stuck in an algorithm that is feeding your confirmation bias.
- [The Sniff Test](#) (is it outlandish, sensational or trying to get an emotional response?)
- Be wary of data voids
- Use [click restraint](#)