



## Teaching with Checkology During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This guide is an outline of suggested lessons, activities and supporting questions for teachers adopting the News Literacy Project’s [Checkology® virtual classroom](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is an overwhelming amount of information about the virus, and helping students meaningfully evaluate everything they’re encountering online – especially potential pieces of misinformation – is essential.

This guide provides you with a roadmap for using Checkology to teach students key skills for evaluating information, identifying misinformation and recognizing quality journalism from standards-based news organizations. Many of the supporting questions and suggested blending activities are designed to help you guide students as they apply these skills to news and other information they encounter about the outbreak.

When setting up your class in Checkology, look for the “Covid-19” experience in your teacher dashboard. For more information, visit the [“Checkology Experiences”](#) section of our online [Teacher Guide](#) or watch the [Premium account setup tutorial](#).

### Essential Question: How can I be reliably informed about COVID-19?

**Activity:** Individually or in groups, have students curate a list of credible sources of information, including health and government officials, medical experts, standards-based news organizations and individual journalists on social media. (Their lists should be comprehensive without being overwhelming or more than most people could keep up with on a daily basis.) Have students submit their lists using a spreadsheet, then combine the student lists and add a column where you can note duplicate submissions so that students can see which sources most often selected by the group. Ask students to continue working on the master list throughout your news literacy unit by suggesting additions, adding comments or by flagging problematic sources.

If you would be willing to share your list, please send us a link or a copy at [edteam@newslit.org](mailto:edteam@newslit.org).

For support with your implementation, or with the Checkology platform itself, contact [support@checkology.org](mailto:support@checkology.org).

Lesson	Objectives	Application
<b>Info Zones</b>	Students will learn to determine the primary purpose of information and use this to differentiate between different kinds of information.	Help students practice “zoning information” using timely examples of information about COVID-19. Be sure to discuss the differences students notice between the different zones using these supporting questions:

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	<p><b>COVID-19 connection:</b> Understanding the differences between news, opinion and raw information, and knowing how to identify propaganda, are crucial skills during this global crisis. It is a foundational part of being informed.</p>	<p><b>Discuss:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do these different types of information affect your understanding of the pandemic?</li> <li>• Is one type or “zone” of information more useful than others?</li> <li>• What are the advantages and drawbacks of raw information about the virus?</li> <li>• How are companies using COVID-19 in their advertising?</li> <li>• Should satire sites like The Onion or The Babylon Bee avoid publishing stories about the pandemic to ensure no one takes their stories seriously?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Misinformation</b></p>	<p>Students will be able to identify five distinct types of misinformation and explain how understanding the differences between them helps them to recognize and debunk viral falsehoods.</p> <p><b>COVID-19 connection:</b> In a crisis, avoiding misinformation can be a matter of life and death. False cures, out-of-context images, conspiracy theories, fabrications intended as jokes and other viral rumors can have very real consequences in people’s lives. Helping students realize the impact of misinformation, and their responsibility to stop its spread — especially during a public health crisis — is a vital part of teaching about the pandemic.</p>	<p>Review examples of misinformation about the new coronavirus with students using one or more of the sources below. As you do, prompt students to identify which type of misinformation each one is, setting aside any particularly difficult examples for further discussion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">“Here’s A Running List Of The Latest Hoaxes Spreading About The Coronavirus”</a> (Jane Lytvynenko, BuzzFeed News).</li> <li>• <a href="#">Lead Stories</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">PolitiFact</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Snopes</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">AFP Fact Check</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Discuss:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How dangerous is misinformation about COVID-19?</li> <li>• Why do people share misinformation?</li> <li>• How can you work to stop the spread of viral misinformation?</li> <li>• Should anyone be allowed to post anything they like on social media platforms? Why or why not?</li> <li>• Should social media platforms take further steps to stop the spread of falsehoods online?</li> </ul>

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<p><b>Arguments and Evidence</b></p>	<p>Students will learn to evaluate arguments that are supported by evidence and be able to recognize five common logical fallacies.</p> <p><b>COVID-19 connection:</b> Like all major events, the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked speculation and debate online. It's vital to help students understand the role of opinion journalism and reasoned debate in our society, and to help them evaluate the quality of the arguments they encounter.</p>	<p>Ask students to collect examples of opinions about the new coronavirus pandemic they see posted online, and to go out of their way to find opinions from people they disagree with. Then have them use what they learned in this lesson to evaluate the quality of each, including any evidence that is provided as support and the use of sound reasoning (which includes an avoidance of logical fallacies).</p> <p>You might also have students go on a COVID-19 logical fallacies "scavenger hunt" online, collecting examples of all five of the fallacies we introduce in the lesson. Is the author or creator of the post using logical fallacies to confuse or mislead?</p> <p><b>Discuss:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does quality opinion journalism look like?</li> <li>• What role do columnists and other professional opinion commentators play in our society?</li> <li>• Should people seek out quality opinions they disagree with? Why or why not?</li> <li>• Are opinion pieces helping to make this uncertain and time easier to understand or adding to the confusion?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Understanding Bias</b></p>	<p>Students can differentiate between different types of potential bias in news reporting and summarize the various forms those biases can take in coverage.</p> <p><b>COVID-19 connection:</b> Identifying fair, accurate news coverage is vital during a crisis like this. Also, cynicism about news media — the belief that all sources of news are intentionally skewing coverage — is extremely common today, especially among</p>	<p>The current crisis has unleashed a tsunami of information. Using the types detailed in this lesson, have students examine information from a variety of news sources and determine which standards-based news organizations outlets are aspiring to be as unbiased — or as fair and as accurate — in their reporting as possible, and which students believe are overtly biased. If you created the list of credible sources suggested at the top of this guide, consider adding some of the news organizations students agree are least biased.</p>

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	<p>teens. This kind of blanket distrust of mainstream news sources can put students at a serious disadvantage as they work to stay informed.</p>	
<p><b>Practicing Quality Journalism</b></p>	<p>Students can understand and apply seven core standards of quality journalism in a simulated breaking news event.</p> <p><b>COVID-19 connection:</b> Identifying quality sources of news requires a working knowledge of the standards of quality journalism. While many of those standards, such as the minimization of bias, are aspirational and highly subjective, it's still important for young people to have an understanding of what those aspirations and guidelines are so they can recognize them in practice and respond to coverage they feel is problematic. This is more important than ever during a global health crisis. Additionally, this lesson teaches students about different types of sources in news reporting — including officials, experts and eyewitnesses. This will help students better understand and evaluate the credibility of the fast-moving developments in this outbreak.</p>	<p>Collect five news reports about the same aspect of the pandemic from the same news cycle, then have students rate each one according to the seven standards of quality journalism they learned to apply in this lesson.</p> <p><b>Discuss:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are some sources of news that clearly have high standards? What are some sources of news that clearly do not? (Explain your responses by citing specifics.)</li> <li>• If a standard or guideline in journalism is impossible to achieve, is it still worth pursuing?</li> <li>• What does it mean for a news report to be “fair”?</li> <li>• Are corrections a sign of credibility? Why or why not?</li> <li>• What are the advantages and drawbacks of official sources? What about eyewitness sources?</li> <li>• Why is important for newsrooms to be independent?</li> <li>• What kinds of background and context are journalists providing to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic? Why is this context important?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Democracy’s Watchdog</b></p>	<p>Students learn about the watchdog role a free press plays in a democracy and the ways that the protections of free expression provided by the First Amendment have</p>	<p>Challenge students to find examples of watchdog journalism related to the pandemic. You might assign teams of students to find investigative reporting about an issue or ask each student to find one national, one regional and one local watchdog example.</p>

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	<p>been interpreted by the Supreme Court in several landmark cases.</p> <p><b>COVID-19 connection:</b> Free expression has limits and also comes with responsibilities. This lesson helps draw key questions about the advantages and disadvantages of free speech into focus for students. For example, some people in China used social media to get around government censors and make important information available to the world, while other people are using social media to spread misinformation and sow confusion.</p>	<p>Then have students brainstorm a list of questions about the current outbreak that deserve answers from public officials.</p> <p><b>Discuss:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What role do journalists play to ensure the public is informed about how COVID-19 started and spread around the world?</li> <li>• If you were an investigative journalist focusing on the pandemic, what would you be looking into? What information would you be trying to get?</li> <li>• Do First Amendment protections of free speech for Americans apply on social media? Why or why not?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Press Freedoms Around the World</b></p>	<p>Students can explain the four main factors that determine press freedom and compare the ways that different countries protect — or restrict — journalists.</p> <p><b>COVID-19 connection:</b> The current outbreak is the dominant news story in every country around the world. This is a unique chance for you to engage the topic of press freedoms and to analyze coverage from around the world.</p>	<p>Have students use Checkology’s interactive press freedom map, then compare the data there with data about the spread of the new coronavirus (e.g., like <a href="#">this interactive map</a> from John’s Hopkins University). You could also compare the Checkology map to headlines from around the world using the Newseum’s daily collection of newspaper <a href="#">front pages</a>.</p> <p><b>Discuss:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does a country’s level of press freedom have a concrete impact on its health outcomes?</li> <li>• Does the U.S. have the highest level of press protections in the world?</li> <li>• What factors make a press “free”?</li> <li>• Can news organizations publish anything they like without fear of repercussions?</li> <li>• Why is it important for news organizations and journalists to be protected from being sued for accurate coverage?</li> <li>• Why is it important for news organizations and journalists to be protected from being sued for honest mistakes?</li> </ul>

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<p><b>What is News?</b></p>	<p>Students can explain what newsworthiness is and name the four major factors that determine it. Students develop their own sense of news judgment by evaluating the newsworthiness of a series of examples.</p> <p><b>COVID-19 connection:</b> With fear and uncertainty running high right now, some media outlets – including some news organizations – will publish sensational, “clickbait” stories to capitalize on the intense public interest. Teaching students what sound news judgment is empowers them to enter into discussions about which stories need more coverage or exposure, and which are getting too much attention.</p>	<p>Have students track COVID-19 pandemic coverage in their local news outlets and discuss which stories are getting the most coverage at the local level as opposed to the national level. How are they different? You might also have students use <a href="#">Google Trends coronavirus dashboard</a> to explore questions people are asking, then try to determine how many commonly researched questions news coverage in that region answers. Finally, you could have students use “<a href="#">Today’s Front Pages</a>” from the Newseum to analyze which types of stories are getting featured on front pages around the world, and how those top stories differ.</p> <p><b>Discuss:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the most important aspects of the pandemic also the most interesting?</li> <li>• How can news outlets get people to take the outbreak seriously without straying into sensationalism and clickbait?</li> <li>• If you were the decision-maker at a news outlet in your community, what would be your top story today?</li> </ul>

Enrichment	Objectives	Application
<p><b>The Check Center</b></p>	<p>Students learn how to verify the credibility and authenticity of different types of information they encounter in their daily lives. Students can successfully complete one or more fact-checking challenges that require multiple verification skills.</p>	<p><b>QuickCheck:</b> Where students check a piece of information they found online.</p> <p><b>Toolbox:</b> Where students watch tutorials on digital verification tips and skills.</p> <p><b>Missions:</b> Students investigate a real-world piece of information presented by NLP and answer questions about it.</p>

	<p><b>COVID-19 connection:</b> This area of the platform can be used in several compelling ways. However, in the context of the flood of misinformation surrounding this outbreak, please consider underscoring <b>lateral reading</b> as an essential first step in verifying online content. Their primary tool for dealing with questionable photos and videos online is <b>reverse image search</b>. After reviewing skills and tools, students can use the Quick Check to examine a piece of information in more detail to verify it.</p>	<p>Examine this Twitter thread about a person who was hoarding hand sanitizer and how the journalist was able to locate the storage unit where his supply was being stored:  <a href="https://twitter.com/EmilyGorcenski/status/1239306776153071618?s=20">https://twitter.com/EmilyGorcenski/status/1239306776153071618?s=20</a></p>
<p><b>Newsroom to Classroom Program</b></p>	<p>Invite a journalist to speak to your class via videoconference about a topic in news literacy.</p>	<p>Ask a journalist to speak about news judgment in the time of the coronavirus pandemic, about debunking misinformation and more.</p>
<p><b>The Sift</b></p>	<p>The Sift is NLP’s weekly e-mail newsletter for educators that sorts through recent rumors, hoaxes and other misinformation to bring you the best teachable moments in news literacy.</p>	<p>Students may view past issues of The Sift at  <a href="https://newslit.org/educators/sift/">https://newslit.org/educators/sift/</a>.</p>