



S.I.F.T.-ing Through the C.R.A.A.P.: Teaching Lateral Reading to Address Social Media Misinformation

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Abstract

Media literacy is becoming an increasingly important skill, and instructors should explore more engaging ways to teach students to be skeptical of the media they encounter. More importantly, they should focus on teaching students how to be active media users rather than passive ones. The following activity employs the S.I.F.T. and C.R.A.A.P. methods to encourage students to reflect on their own biases and feelings when they see information on social media. It also guides students to use lateral reading skills to assess the accuracy of social media posts. This in-class activity's goal is to help students develop media literacy skills that they can apply outside the classroom, such as evaluating content in their own social media feeds. By participating in deeper conversations through this activity, students can engage in self-reflection about social media algorithms and how they influence their perceptions in the moment they encounter persuasive online content. The activity challenges students to move from passive to active and self-reflective media consumers. It also provides instructors with the opportunity to teach real-world applications of media literacy skills that students can use beyond class, and it encourages more meaningful discussions about students' personal media literacy practices when they go on the internet.

It has been estimated that half of American adults get their news from social media rather than going directly to primary sources (Mitchell *et al.*, 2016). However, social media is also considered a primary avenue for spreading false or misleading information (Westerman *et al.*, 2013). Rather than developing a deeper understanding of current events or topics, people feel well-informed based on passively receiving information from their peers and social networks (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2017). This can make people less

likely to identify misinformation (Lee *et al.*, 2023). Social media platforms are also viewed to be valuable sources of information due to their public accessibility (Hausmann *et al.*, 2017) and have been viewed as trustworthy sources of information by users (Bantimaroudis *et al.*, 2020; Mitchell *et al.*, 2019). With this in mind, more significant calls have been made to promote media literacy within the classroom (Martens & Hobbs, 2015).

As media literacy is becoming a more sought-after

Keywords: Media Literacy, Social Media, Misinformation, Emotional Awareness, Lateral Reading

ter skill to be taught in the classroom and promoted in communities (Potter, 2011; Martens & Hobbs, 2015), instructors should consider how students at any grade level engage with media. Media literacy enables individuals to “access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act” when engaging with media by empowering individuals to think critically about information (N.A.M.L.E., 2023). One such way is to apply *lateral reading*, which is a strategy that professional fact-checkers employ by opening up a series of online tabs and checking other sources to vet and verify the credibility of the author(s), the accuracy of the information, and looking for other sources to understand the context of the information (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017). Applying lateral reading strategies allows students to engage with information while finding other sources to verify it. However, media literacy should not just be a strictly cognitive approach, but also consider one’s emotions.

Emotions can provide valuable insight for audiences when they reflect on how their emotions can make them more aware of themselves (Oatley, 1992; Opdahl, 2002). When applied to media literacy, students become more aware and reflective of their emotions and biases and their impact on information processing. The Media Literacy Theory of Change explains that media literacy has logical and emotional components that people use to make daily decisions around media use (Austin & Domgaard, 2024). By reflecting on their emotions and applying logic, individuals can think more critically about the source of information and its content. Austin and Domgaard (2024) note that media literacy can facilitate more reflective thinking about our beliefs and attitudes, leading to self-efficacy in evaluating information and making more evidence-based decisions. Therefore, media literacy education can be innovated by considering both the logical and emotional sides of information processing and its effects. This can help students become more aware of personal factors influencing information processing. By including self-reflection and having people become more aware of their emotions and biases when applying media literacy skills, people can think differently about the information they consume daily.

In order to apply both logical and emotional understanding with media literacy, instructors should apply media literacy and lateral reading skills while encouraging students to be self-reflective about the media they engage with and their biases. The following activity’s goal is to provide a pragmatic approach

and a discussion-based model for teaching media literacy skills, where students can become more reflective of the media they choose to engage with, and help students accomplish four primary course objectives. First, students will evaluate their biases and emotions about social media content while reflecting on how those factors could influence how they process information. Second, students will investigate factors that could impact how they encounter information that appeals to their biases and emotions. Third, students will apply media literacy strategies, such as lateral reading, to verify the accuracy of information. Finally, students will evaluate said media literacy strategies and their effectiveness in their everyday lives, which should lead them to take more active approaches to media consumption.

To accomplish these learning outcomes, the following activity shows students how professional fact-checkers verify the information by learning about and applying lateral reading skills. Students must break into groups and find one social media post from their preferred platform that is making a claim. Once students have selected their social media post, they will follow the S.I.F.T. method and apply lateral reading skills to analyze and evaluate the accuracy of the post. The S.I.F.T. method encourages media users to evaluate online information by having media users 1) STOP and reflect on their response and emotions about the information and content, 2) INVESTIGATE the source and the claims from the source, 3) FIND better cover by checking other sources, and 4) TRACE claims, where the quotes came from, and the context of the information (Caulfield, 2021). Students will also use the C.R.A.A.P. (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose) test to evaluate sources during the activity’s INVESTIGATE and FIND stage and to guide the in-class discussion. The C.R.A.A.P. test is used to assist individuals in determining the credibility of sources of information (Blakeslee, 2004; Esparrago-Kalidas, 2021). During the activity, students should compare and contrast multiple articles to understand the context, credibility, and accuracy of the overall topic around the social media post. The structure of the following activity encourages students to follow through and engage in class discussion using the S.I.F.T. method to guide engagement, lateral reading, and class discussion.

This activity challenges students to be less passive in the information they engage with and become more active and self-reflective media consumers. Stu-

dents should debrief by discussing how to apply media literacy strategies and how becoming more aware of algorithms, their emotions, and biases may affect how they interpret the information. While the activity’s objectives should lead students to apply media literacy strategies and become more self-reflective, instructors should continue discussions about applying media literacy skills, so that students start to adopt these behaviors as a routine, as media literacy is not just a single activity, but a continued process of growth.

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Appendix

The purpose of the assignment is for you to apply lateral reading skills to verify information in an everyday or mundane situation, such as watching random videos on social media. Students will need to break into groups of 2-3 and find 1 TikTok video, a Facebook post, a Tweet, or an Instagram post. This video should be making a claim. Once you find that video, you will use the S.I.F.T. method, the C.R.A.A.P. method, and other lateral reading skills to verify the information claimed in the video to determine if it is accurate, inaccurate, or missing important pieces of context.

Find one Social Media post from either TIK-TOK, Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram and explain what the video is trying to claim:

STOP: Reflection on self

1. Why did you and your partner choose this social media post? What attracted you to evaluate this one and not others?
2. After you watched the social media, what was your initial reaction? How did you feel while watching the video? Did you laugh? Were you sad? Were you angry?
3. Make a list of things that make up the lens through which you view and interpret information. What sort of things can influence your perception of the social media post? Did the source of the content say anything that appealed to you? What are your biases related to the content of the social media post?
4. At the same time, how could the algorithm impact your views on the video? Why do you think you received this post on your feed?

Investigate & Find Better Coverage:

1. Now, use the Internet to look up other sources to understand the claim more deeply. Search for keywords made in the video, evaluate the information from two new sources, and compare and contrast the information. Evaluate the sources using the CRAAP test to help with the investigation stage of the S.I.F.T. method.
 - a. What were these two sources?
 - b. **Currency:** When were these articles published? Are they the most up-to-date?
 - c. **Relevance:** Is the article's information relevant to the social media post?
 - d. **Authority:** Who are the authors/organizations that published the articles? What are the au-

thor's credentials or organizational affiliations? Do they cite other sources, and what are their credentials?

- e. **Accuracy:** Evaluate the two sources and then the articles to the social media post.
 1. Where does the content of the information come from? Is the source they are using a Primary or Secondary Source? Are the two sources presenting evidence, and can you determine if the evidence is being presented accurately?
 2. Does the social media post cite its sources? If so, find them and evaluate them. Are those sources credible? Why or why not? If it is credible, is the social media accurately representing the information? How?
- f. **Purpose:**
 1. What is the purpose of the social media post? Is it to inform, teach, sell, entertain, persuade, etc.? Why? Does the point of view appear objective and impartial?
 2. What is the purpose of each article? Is it to inform, teach, sell, entertain, persuade, etc.? Why? Does the point of view appear objective and impartial?

Trace the original Findings:

1. Let us search the claims. Track the source and evaluate if the social media post is accurate in how they reported it.
 - a. What is the context of the source?
 - b. Is the social media post citing a secondary source? If so, try to find the primary source and evaluate that source and how the primary source, the secondary source, and the social media post are similar or different.

Results:

1. After laterally reading about the topic, is the social media post accurate? Why or why not?
2. How does the social media post differ between the two sources of information you found and the source of information from the social media post?