



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 8 to 10
About the Author: MediaSmarts
Duration: 1— 1 1/2 hours

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Thinking about Hate



This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & CREATE: A Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.

Overview

In this lesson, students develop their critical thinking skills by learning to recognize various types of bad faith arguments, including those that are used by hate mongers to spread misinformation and fuel hatred and intolerance.

Learning Outcomes

The students will:

- understand the importance of questioning any sort of information that is intended to persuade us
- learn to recognize bad faith arguments used by hate groups
- become aware of both the blatant and subtle ways in which hatred is promoted in society
- strengthen their own writing and debating skills.

Preparation and Materials

- Review and prepare to project the slideshow ['Oumuamua: Asteroid or Alien?](#)
- Make copies of the handout *Dishonest Arguments*
- Make copies of the assignment sheet *Dishonest Debate*
- Review the teacher backgrounder [Complicated Conversations in the Classroom](#)
- *Optional:* Send home the parent tip sheet [Talking to Kids About Hate Online](#)
- *Optional:* Review the MediaSmarts articles on [Online Hate](#) and [Identifying Consensus](#)



Procedure

Recognizing Dishonest Arguments

Start by projecting slides one and two of the *'Oumuamua: Asteroid or Alien?* slideshow. While projecting **slide two**, highlight the reasons why some astronomers have argued that 'Oumuamua (pronounced *ooh-moo-ah-moo-a*) might be an alien spaceship, or part of one:

- It has an unusual shape
- It took a path that can't be explained with gravity
- It sped up as it moved, which asteroids don't do
- It moved like a comet but without a comet tail
- It moved faster than any space object ever recorded
- It got ten times brighter when it rotated

Ask students to write down how likely they think it is that 'Oumuamua is an alien spaceship, from a score of 1 (not at all likely) to 10 (almost certain) and note what convinced (or failed to convince) them.

Once all the students have written down what they think, project **slide three** and go through the new information:

- Many asteroids and even moons have unusual shapes
- Not all comets have tails
- There are many possible explanations for why it might have sped up or had an unusual orbit
- Smooth rocks can be ten times more reflective than rough ones
- Almost no astronomers believe it is a spaceship or made by aliens
- The main astronomer who says it was is part of a project pushing to build interstellar spaceships

Now ask: How does this new information change how they think about the story?

Tell students to think back to the argument made in slide 2 (you may wish to switch back to that slide to refresh their memories) and ask them whether they feel it gave them a fair and honest view of the evidence.

Explain to them that this was an example of a *dishonest argument*. Dishonest arguments can be very convincing because they “lie with the truth”: all of the points on slide two were true, but because of the way they were presented (or because other facts were left out) they gave a distorted idea of how strong the argument was.

Distribute the handout *Three Kinds of Dishonest Arguments* and go through it with the class. After explaining each type of argument, ask students if anyone can think of another example they might have seen. (If nobody has an example for a particular kind of argument just move on.)

Ask students if they can identify one each of the three kinds of dishonest arguments in the argument made in slide 2.



Project **slide four** and go through the three kinds of dishonest arguments with the class:

Arguments that are dishonest about the facts: For instance, including only the facts that support the idea that 'Oumuamua was an alien spaceship and not the ones that give other explanations was a *cherry-picking argument*.

Arguments that are dishonest about the issue: Even if there are things about 'Oumuamua that are hard to explain, those aren't by themselves evidence that it was made by aliens. As well, only a small number of astronomers think it might be an alien spaceship: the *consensus* among astronomers is that it isn't. (Two different examples of the *fake doubt* argument.)

Arguments that are dishonest about the arguer: The fact that the main author arguing 'Oumuamua isn't natural is part of a project pushing to build interstellar spaceships shows that he has reason to want people to believe it was made by aliens, and that he's not just *asking questions*. (The fact that someone has a reason to support one side or another of an issue doesn't disqualify them, but if they hide that from you, it's a bad sign.)

Now ask students if they have seen these kinds of dishonest arguments in other places. After they've given any examples they may have, mention that hate groups often use dishonest arguments. That's partially because they want to hide the real arguments they're making; it's also because those arguments don't make any sense if you're honest and include all the facts.

Show **slide 5** and explain that hate groups send out messages at three levels: ones that seem basically reasonable but a bit edgy or controversial to get more *sympathizers*, ones that are more extreme to turn sympathizers into *members* of their group or movement, and ones that give their true beliefs to turn members into *activists* who are willing to do violent or illegal things.

Dishonest arguments help them do that because:

- They can fool people into believing hateful and prejudiced things
- They let the group seem more reasonable to possible sympathizers because they can hide their actual position and their motivation
- They make other people waste their time arguing with the fake arguments
- They can lead people into getting more involved in hate groups or movements

Sometimes messages aimed at a lower level of the pyramid include something that only people at the higher level will recognize. That's called dog-whistling because it's like blowing a whistle that only dogs can hear. That way if someone who's already higher up the pyramid sees something aimed at people lower down it'll feel like they have special knowledge others don't, like they're part of an "inside joke." For example, hate groups will use the word "globalist" to refer to Jewish people so that people won't see that their message is *antisemitic* (hateful towards Jewish people) but their members know what they mean.

Tell students that you are going to show them one example of each kind of dishonest argument made by a real hate group or movement.

Show **slide 6** and ask students which dishonest argument it's an example of. When they have made at least one suggestion, tell them that this was one of a series of fake ads that were spread by a group opposed to U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election. The groups was a *misogynist* hate group (strongly prejudiced against women). The idea was to make it look like Clinton was going to draft women into the military if she won. (The U.S. does not currently have a draft for men or women.)



If nobody named *straw man argument*, ask again what kind of dishonest argument they think it is. Explain that this is an example of a straw man argument: the idea was to make people think Clinton was in favour of drafting women to serve in the military, which she was not. (The U.S. does not currently have a draft for men or women.) This post is also an example of the “just asking questions” argument: “Alisha” pretends that she is a neutral observer who only turned against Clinton when she learned about this policy, but a look at her account shows that it was created the day this tweet was posted and almost all of her tweets are on this topic

Show **slide 7** and ask students which dishonest argument it’s an example of. When they have made at least one suggestion, ask them what might they think might have been *left out* of that graphics.

Show **slide 8** and reveal that while the numbers in the original graph are not *wrong*, they are dishonest because of what they leave out: that because there are more White people than any other group in the U.S., the number of that group will always be higher; that by far the largest number of violent crimes against White people were committed by other White people; and that the percentage of violent crimes committed against White people by non-White people is exactly what the proportion of the population would suggest (63% of the U.S. population is White, and 63% of violent crimes against White people were committed by other White people).

Tell students that for a young man who did an online search for “Black on White crime,” this example of *cherry picking* was the first step on a path that led to committing mass murder in a Black church. (You can also mention that this is also an example of a *straw man* argument: the issue most people are concerned about is not violent crime against Black people by White people in general, but specifically killings of Black people by *police*—which occur at much higher rates than among White people.)

Show **slide 9** and ask students which dishonest argument this site is an example of. (The name of the site has been obscured to avoid giving it publicity.) Once students have made at least one suggestion, point out that this is an extreme example of the *fake doubt* argument called *denialism*: not only is it claiming that there is doubt about a historical event that absolutely did happen, by questioning the Holocaust in particular they are promoting hatred against Jewish people. There are also examples of *fake choice* (suggesting that the lack of photos of German “murder vans” is reason to question the reality of the Holocaust, when there are many other possible explanations), the *just asking questions* argument (the site says its aim is to “promote intellectual freedom” when its purpose is clearly to suggest the Holocaust did not happen) and *persecuted genius* (the authors position themselves as outsiders and underdogs by claiming they “contest the orthodox Holocaust narrative.”)

Assessment/Evaluation Task: Dishonest Debate

Distribute the assignment sheet *Dishonest Debate* and explain to students that they are going to argue a point using at least three kinds of dishonest arguments (one of each type) about one of the topics listed. If you choose, you may have students work in pairs, arguing opposite sides of each topic, and present their arguments to the class, or simply do the assignment individually in writing. Depending on how you choose to have them complete the assignment you may grade them on their understanding and application of the dishonest arguments covered in the lesson, the creativity of their arguments, the overall quality of their writing, and the delivery of their presentation to the class.



Three Kinds of Dishonest Arguments

A dishonest argument is a way of “lying with the truth.” It doesn’t include things that are actually lies, but it selects or presents things in a way that gives you a false idea of how strong the argument is.

Dishonest arguments are a sign that someone isn’t *really* interested in discussing an issue with you, so it’s probably a waste of time debating them. It can also be a sign that they’re trying to manipulate you into believing something without being open about their real position.

Here are the three most common kinds of dishonest arguments and three specific examples of each one.

Arguments that are dishonest about the facts: These fool you by giving you a false impression of what the facts are on the issue.

The Cherrypicking Argument

Giving only the facts that support one side of the argument, and leaving out the others.

Example: “This cereal is the perfect breakfast. It has a dozen vitamins and minerals.” (And also a day’s worth of sugar.)

The Iceberg Argument

Excusing a lack of evidence by that what *has* been recorded suggests there must be much more that has not.

Example: “Five people were charged with running restaurants without a license last year. When you add all the people they *didn’t* catch we can see this is a big problem.” (Some things are genuinely under-reported. But if you don’t have a good reason to believe that’s the case, assume the facts that you have are accurate.)

The Naming Your Terms Argument

Using a name or term that requires the other person to accept your point of view or interpretation of the issue. This technique is also used to get people to Google words or phrases that will be more likely to support your side.

Example: “We need to do something about all the wildlife in cities, especially raccoons. These little trash pandas are responsible for knocking over more garbage cans than anything else. If you don’t believe me, Google ‘trash panda’ and ‘garbage can.’” (Searches for that term are a lot more likely to get results that are negative about raccoons, and adding “garbage can” means you’re more likely to see examples of raccoons causing problems.)

Arguments that are dishonest about the arguer: These fool you by hiding or misrepresenting something about the person making the argument.

The “Just Asking Questions” Argument.

Pretending that you’re just playing “devil’s advocate” when you really support one side of the argument, or hiding a personal reason why you might support one side over another. It can also mean being skeptical about something that doesn’t affect you but does affect others: for example, it’s easy to question whether how bad racism is if you’ve never experienced it.



Example: "Before I start my math homework I think we should think about whether I really need math to succeed in life." (You obviously have a motivation to not want to do your homework!)

"The Sock Monkey Bar and Grille is the best restaurant in town." (Did I mention my brother owns it?)

The Moving Target Argument

Making an argument, then if people react badly pretending that you had been making a less extreme one.

Example:

A: "We shouldn't let women be firefighters." B: "What? That's sexist." C: "I don't mean that *no* women should be firefighters, but we should make them show they're strong enough for the job before we hire them." (They'll keep moving the target until they find something you decide isn't worth the trouble of arguing against.)

The Persecuted Genius

Treating that the fact that most experts in the field think you're wrong as evidence that you must be right, because why else would they try to keep you quiet?

Example: "*Canadian Geographic* won't publish my theory that the city of Flin Flon was only put on maps as a secret message to aliens. They must be afraid I'm getting too close!" (Theories that go against the consensus in fields like science and history *have* turned out to be true—for example, at first scientists didn't agree that the dinosaurs were killed by an asteroid, and historians used to believe that only men went on Viking raids—but in both cases nobody tried to 'silence' the people promoting those theories, and the consensus changed when new evidence was presented.)

Arguments that are dishonest about the issue: These try to fool you by giving a misleading picture of the debate around the issue.

The Fake Doubt Argument

Pretending that there is not a *consensus* (a theory that most experts in a field agree is most likely correct) on the topic when there is. Sometimes there really isn't a consensus, but if there is then an argument that goes against it needs a lot of extra evidence to be convincing. If you think someone might be using this argument, ask these questions:

- How many experts are there on each side?
- How many of those experts have relevant credentials? (Doctors, scientists and other experts don't necessarily know more than the average person outside their own topic. Be suspicious when someone is used as an authority on a topic they're not a real expert on.)
- Is there an established consensus? (To find out, look for an article on the topic in an encyclopedia like Wikipedia or Encyclopedia Britannica.)
- Does one side have a motive to make you think there's doubt when there isn't? (Tobacco companies funded research for years on *other* possible causes of lung cancer to make it look like there was still doubt.)



- Where has evidence on either side appeared? (Scientific and academic journals are the best evidence: check their Wikipedia article to make sure they have a good track record. Newspapers will sometimes print “both sides” of a story even if it doesn’t really have both sides, so being quoted in a news article isn’t good evidence there isn’t consensus.)

Example: "Whether or not Flin Flon exists is still under debate. Not every map has Flin Flon on it." (All cartographers agree that Flin Flon does exist. It's not on every map because it only has about 6,000 people.)

The Fake Choice Argument

Acting like there are only ever two possible answers to any question. This can mean acting like any evidence against the current consensus is automatically evidence for your argument, or claiming that there's only one argument someone could be making if they disagree with you.

Example: "They say Flin Flon is in Manitoba, but some maps say it's in Saskatchewan. That shows that it doesn't really exist." (There are lots of other possible explanations. In this case, it's that the border between the two provinces runs down the middle of the town.)

"Either you support my Flin Flon theory or you want the aliens to invade us." (There are almost always more than two possible positions you can take on an issue. You could, for instance, be against the Flin Flon theory because you don't believe its' true.)

The Straw Man Argument

A cousin to the moving target argument, this is when you argue against a position that the other person isn't actually taking.

Example: "It's absurd to argue that racoons shouldn't vote because they couldn't fill out the ballots. Their little paws can handle a pencil just as well as we can." (Nobody says this is why raccoons should not be able to vote.)

Give an example of an argument that is dishonest about the facts in the 'Oumuamua story:

Give an example of an argument that is dishonest about the arguer in the 'Oumuamua story:



Give an example of an argument that is dishonest about the issue in the 'Oumuamua story:

What dishonest arguments can you find in the "Draft our Daughters" post?

What dishonest arguments can you find in the "Violent Crime Incidents" post?

What dishonest arguments can you find on the "Welcome" site?



Dishonest Debate

For this assignment, you will write a paragraph arguing in favour of or against one of the topics below. Your argument must use three of the dishonest arguments we have learned about in class: one example of an argument that is dishonest about the facts, one example of an argument that is dishonest about the issue, and one argument that is dishonest about the arguer. (You may invent a fake identity for yourself as author to make the third type of dishonest argument if you need to.)

Topics

- Cats are better than dogs
- Homework should be banned
- Weekends should be three days long
- It should be illegal to put pineapple on pizza
- Aliens are living amongst us
- Humanity should settle other planets
- Students should be allowed to use their phones in class
- Companies should not be allowed to sell bottled water
- Students should not have to do gym class
- Students should study video games in class
- Movies should not have musical numbers
- People should give money at Christmas (or other gift-giving holidays) instead of presents
- The voting age should be lowered to 16
- Junk food should not be sold in schools
- Animals should have human rights

(If you would like to write on a topic not on this list, please check with me first.)

