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# Helping Students Navigate the News in an Age With "Alternative Facts": Distinguishing Between Real & Fake News

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# Helping Students Navigate the News in an Age With 'Alternative Facts' (Distinguishing Between Real & Fake News)


By Ethan Annis, Librarian  
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February 6, 2017

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**Donald J. Trump** 

@realDonaldTrump

 Follow

Any negative polls are fake news, just like the CNN, ABC, NBC polls in the election. Sorry, people want border security and extreme vetting.

4:01 AM - 6 Feb 2017

  29,402  126,314

"During his first week in office, Mr. Trump reiterated the unfounded charge that millions of people had voted illegally. When challenged on the evident falsehood, Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary, seemed to argue that Mr. Trump's belief that something was true qualified as evidence. The press secretary also declined to answer a straightforward question about the unemployment rate, suggesting that the number will henceforth be whatever the Trump administration wants it to be." (Source, NY Times, Feb 4, 2017, "Why Nobody Cares the President is Lying" by Charles Sykes)

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Jim O'Neill, one of President Trump's leading contenders to head the FDA "has argued that companies should not have to prove that their drugs work in clinical trials before selling them to consumers." (Source, NY Times, Feb 5, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2kavxyh>)



SIPRESS

*"My desire to be well-informed is currently  
at odds with my desire to remain sane."*

(By David Sipress,  
February 3, 2017  
New Yorker)

"The point of modern  
propaganda isn't only to  
misinform or push an agenda. It  
is to exhaust your critical  
thinking, to annihilate truth."  
Tweet by Garry Kasparov

(Source, NY Times, Feb 4, 2017, "Why Nobody Cares  
the President is Lying" by Charles Sykes)

This presentation will provide resources to fact check and tools to help make your critical thinking more robust.

# How to Spot Fake/Non News

## Overview

### Internal

- Headlines and titles can be misleading. Read the whole story or watch the whole video or read the entire transcript
- Parse/close read the source, transcripts are helpful
- Look for signs that it could be satire, such as absurd names
- Look for contradictions
- Look for ad hominem attacks
- Check the date. Is it consistent with the claim?
- Be aware of your biases

### External

- Go to the primary source if possible
- Examine the website of the source
- Check other sources such as the reliable newspapers; if it's a big story, it will be there too. (Some listed later)
- Check non-partisan fact check sites (Some listed later)
- Ask if it fits within the larger framework of reality
- Research the author, what else has the author written (be careful to avoid ad hominem attacks)



**Start with the internally  
verifiable**

# Satire

# Obama Signs Conservation Act To Preserve Nation's Last Remaining Area Of Common Ground:

WASHINGTON—Taking action to protect the rapidly dwindling vital resource, President Barack Obama signed an executive order Wednesday that would preserve the last remaining expanse of common ground in the nation. ... (June 13, 2016, The Onion)



# Contradictions (Internal)



*Free.*  
**CONTRADICTIONS**  
\$1.00

[During an interview on March 29, 2016 with Anderson Cooper, Donald Trump recommended selling countries our nuclear weapons rather than protecting them under America's nuclear umbrella. Here is an excerpt from the interview.]

Cooper: Saudi Arabia, nuclear weapons?

Trump: Saudi Arabia, absolutely.

Cooper: You would be fine with them having nuclear weapons?

Trump: No, not nuclear weapons...

[Having read the entire transcript of the interview, I'm not sure of Trump's position.]

(Retrieved Feb 4, 2017 from: <http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2016/03/29/full-rush-transcript-donald-trump-cnn-milwaukee-republican-presidential-town-hall/>)

# The Problem with Contradictions

- Because contradictory statements lead to absurdity it is best to treat them as absurd.
- This lack of information transfers the responsibility for interpretation from the speaker to the listener. But there appears to be information, so normally the listener's confirmation bias makes the listener think that the speaker shares her/his opinion. (See: Lynch, Michael P. "Truth, Politics and the Power of Contradiction." The New York Times 2016: 2. Opposing Viewpoints in Context. Web. 26 Jan. 2017.)
- Also at times a contradiction is a false dichotomy.

We need to learn to  
spot contradictions  
and treat them as  
absurd.



*"I had to stop watching the news—it was making  
my own problems seem insignificant."*

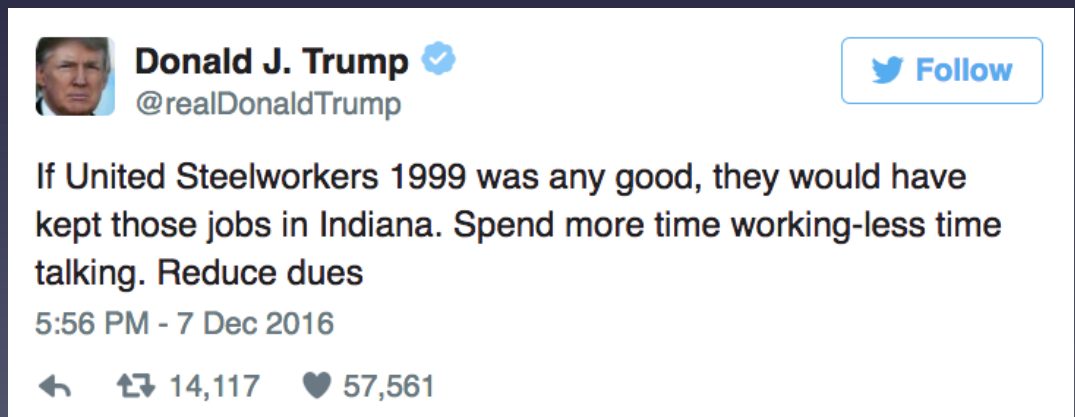
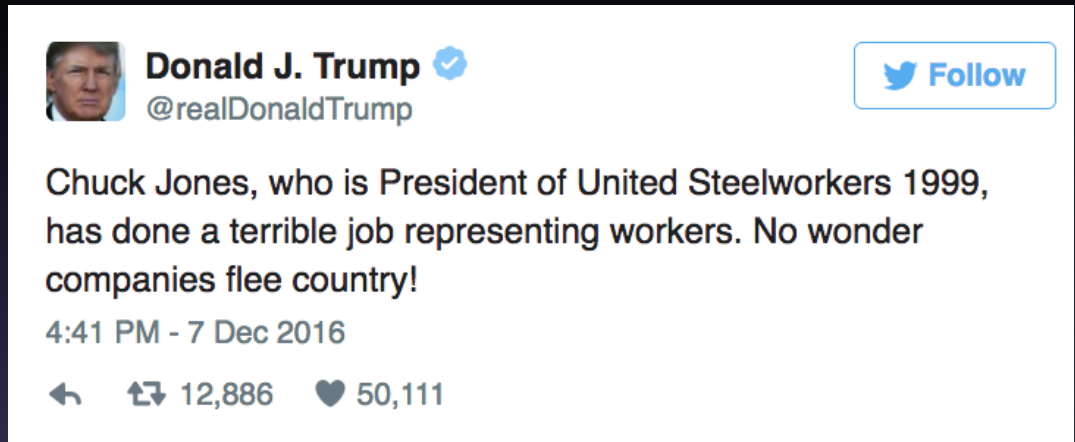


"Ad hominem"  
means toward a  
person but you can  
think of it as a  
fancy Latin word  
for "personal."

When someone runs out arguments about an issue, sometimes the person will turn to ad hominem attacks. These are not valid.

Chuck Jones said that Trump had misrepresented the number of jobs he saved at the Carrier plant in Indiana. (Trump had misrepresented the number of jobs by 37.5%.)

Trump responded with the following Tweets:



(Retrieved on Feb 4, 2017 from:  
<http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-greenhouse-trump-steelworker-tweet-20161208-story.html>)

# Remember to Check Dates



“Don’t believe everything you read on the Internet just because there’s a picture with a quote next to it.”

—Abraham Lincoln

# Parsing

Please read this carefully and then we will parse it:

"On crime, the murder rate has experienced its largest increase in 45 years. We are going to support the incredible men and women of law enforcement, and we are going to bring this terrible crime wave to an end. Highest in 45 years, the murder rate." Donald Trump, December 7, 2016

Teach students to parse statements:

First, what is meant by "murder rate" and "largest increase?"

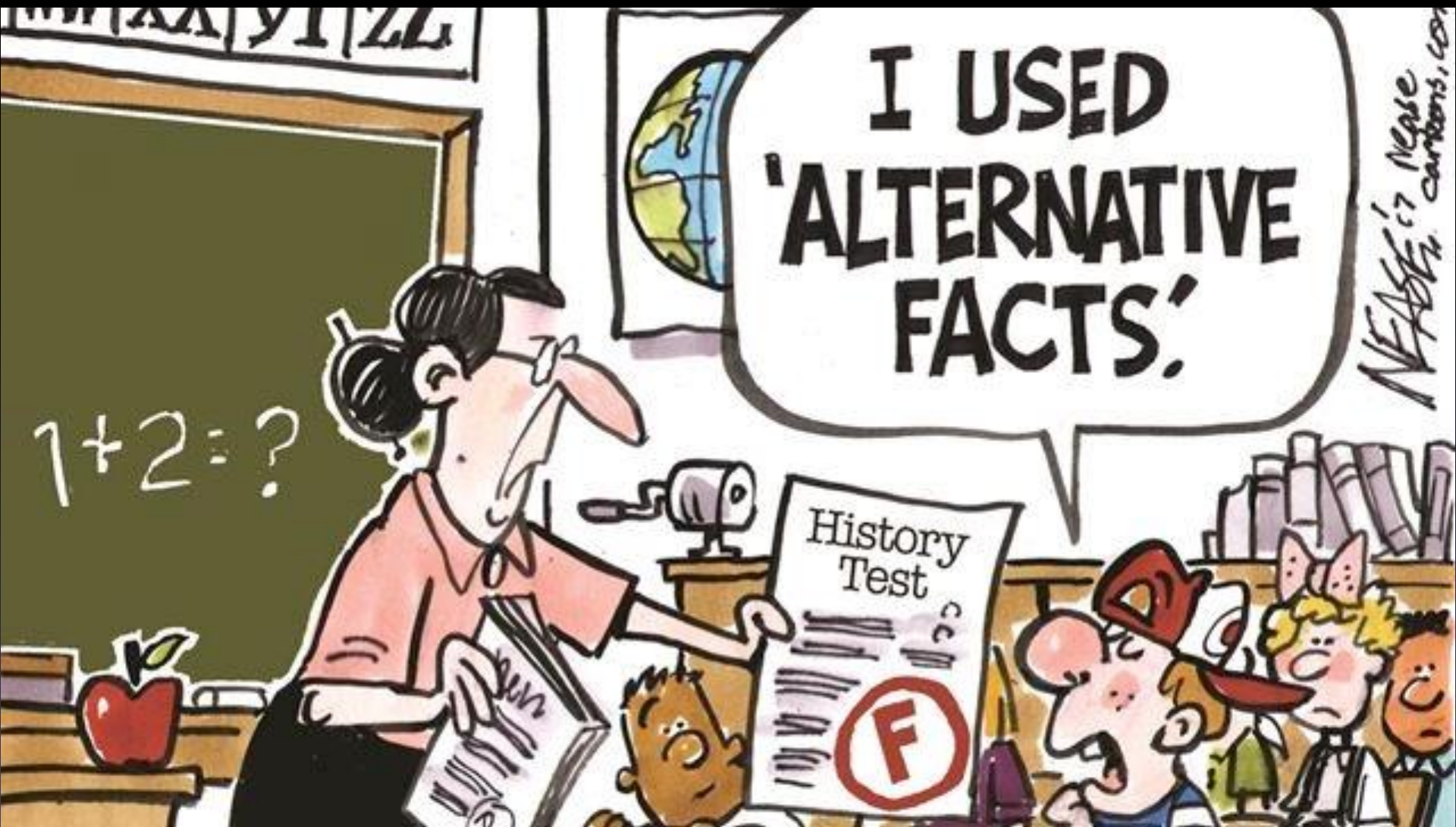
Again we encounter an absence of information.

Rates can be measured in many ways. It could mean an increase in absolute number or it could mean an increase in percentage or it could mean an increase in some other way.

Second, the last statement in the quote does not logically follow the first statement. The first statement is about increase. The last statement is about an absolute number. It's highly unlikely that both statements are true but again, we're not sure what "murder rate" means.

This could be taught in an English class or a math class or a logic class, etc. because it's about being able to follow an argument. In an English class you could teach the students to read closely and to use proper grammar. Also, you could teach them the difference between giving a speech and talking informally. In a math class you could teach students that any absolute increase when a rate is at or near a historic low yields a bigger percentage increase than when the same rate is at or near a historic high.

This is before we've fact checked. (Retrieved on Feb 4, 2017 from <http://www.factcheck.org/2016/12/groundhog-friday-16/>)



I USED  
'ALTERNATIVE  
FACTS'

1+2=?

History  
Test

F

NEASE'S MEASE  
CARICONS, CO.



# Moving to External

# Contradictions (External)

Trump said of protesters:

"I'd like to punch him in the face." (Feb 23, 2016)

"In the good old days they'd have ripped him out of that seat so fast." (Feb 27, 2016)


"Knock the crap out of him, would you? Seriously... I promise you I will pay the legal fees. I promise. I promise. (Feb 1, 2016)

(All from: Strangers In Their Own Land, p. 224)

On March 15, 2016, when asked by George Stephanopoulos if he promised to pay legal fees for his violent supporters, Donald Trump replied: "No, because I don't condone violence and I didn't say I was going to pay for the fees."

(Retrieved Feb 2, 2017, <https://grabien.com/story.php?id=51064>)



**Donald J. Trump** 

@realDonaldTrump

 Follow

If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view - NO FEDERAL FUNDS?

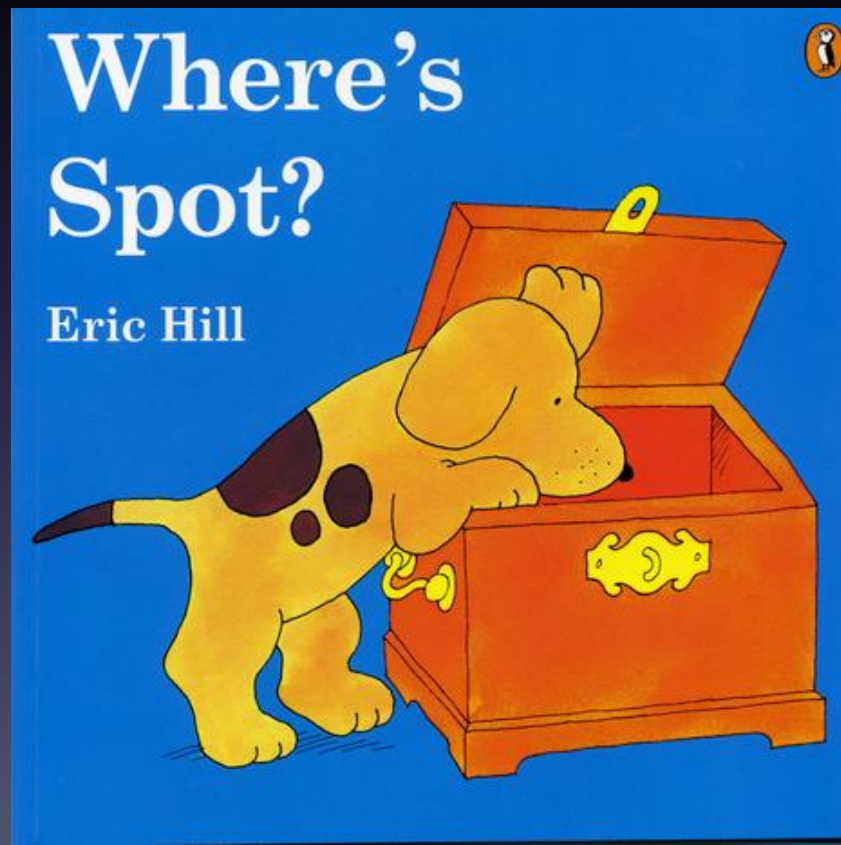
3:13 AM - 2 Feb 2017

  48,393  161,034

# Find the Source

If there is no source mentioned and you cannot find one, then there's a good chance it's fake news.

Some facts are  
easy to spot in  
the source



According to  
President Trump, his  
inauguration had the  
largest in-person  
audience in history.

# Here is a photo of Trump's inauguration and Obama's inauguration

Trump's Inauguration 2017

Obama's Inauguration 2009



Source: The Guardian, January 26, 2017





# Fact Check

Fact checking is helpful for less obvious discrepancies. Here are some reliable non-partisan sites:

[Factcheck.org](https://factcheck.org)

[politfact.com](https://politfact.com)

[washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/](https://washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/)

[snopes.com](https://snopes.com)

Returning to the statement we parsed earlier:

When checking the possible facts we learn that the murder rate in the US is close to the lowest it has been in 45 years but the percentage increase during the last year has been high.

(Retrieved on Feb 4, 2017 from <http://www.factcheck.org/2016/12/groundhog-friday-16/>)

See also: <http://www.factcheck.org/2016/10/trump-wrong-on-murder-rate/>)



# These reliable news sources help too:

New York Times([nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com))

Los Angeles Times ([latimes.com](https://www.latimes.com))

Chicago Tribune ([chicagotribune.com](https://www.chicagotribune.com))

Wall Street Journal ([wsj.com](https://www.wsj.com))

Cable News Network ([cnn.com](https://www.cnn.com))

The Guardian, US edition ([theguardian.com/us](https://www.theguardian.com/us))

Non-exhaustive List

# Using a reliable news source

"I bet it's brand new information to people that President Obama had a six-month ban on the Iraqi refugee program after two Iraqis came here to this country, were radicalized and were the masterminds behind the Bowling Green massacre. Most people don't know that because it didn't get covered."  
Kellyanne Conway on "Hardball," Feb 2, 2017

(Retrieved NY Times, Feb 3, 2017 <https://nyti.ms/2k3CZul>)

# The article goes on to say

- There was no "Bowling Green Massacre"
- President Obama did not have a ban on Iraqi refugees
- There were two Iraqi insurgents living in Bowling Green that "participated in terrorist activities overseas and attempted to continue providing material support to terrorists while they lived here in the United States."
- Kellyanne Conway substantiated her claim that something had happened in Bowling Green [that had not been covered by the media] by pointing to an old news story, on ABC, about the arrests.

I CANNOT TELL A LIE. I....

PSST! GEORGIE!  
TRY USING  
"ALTERNATIVE  
FACTS"!

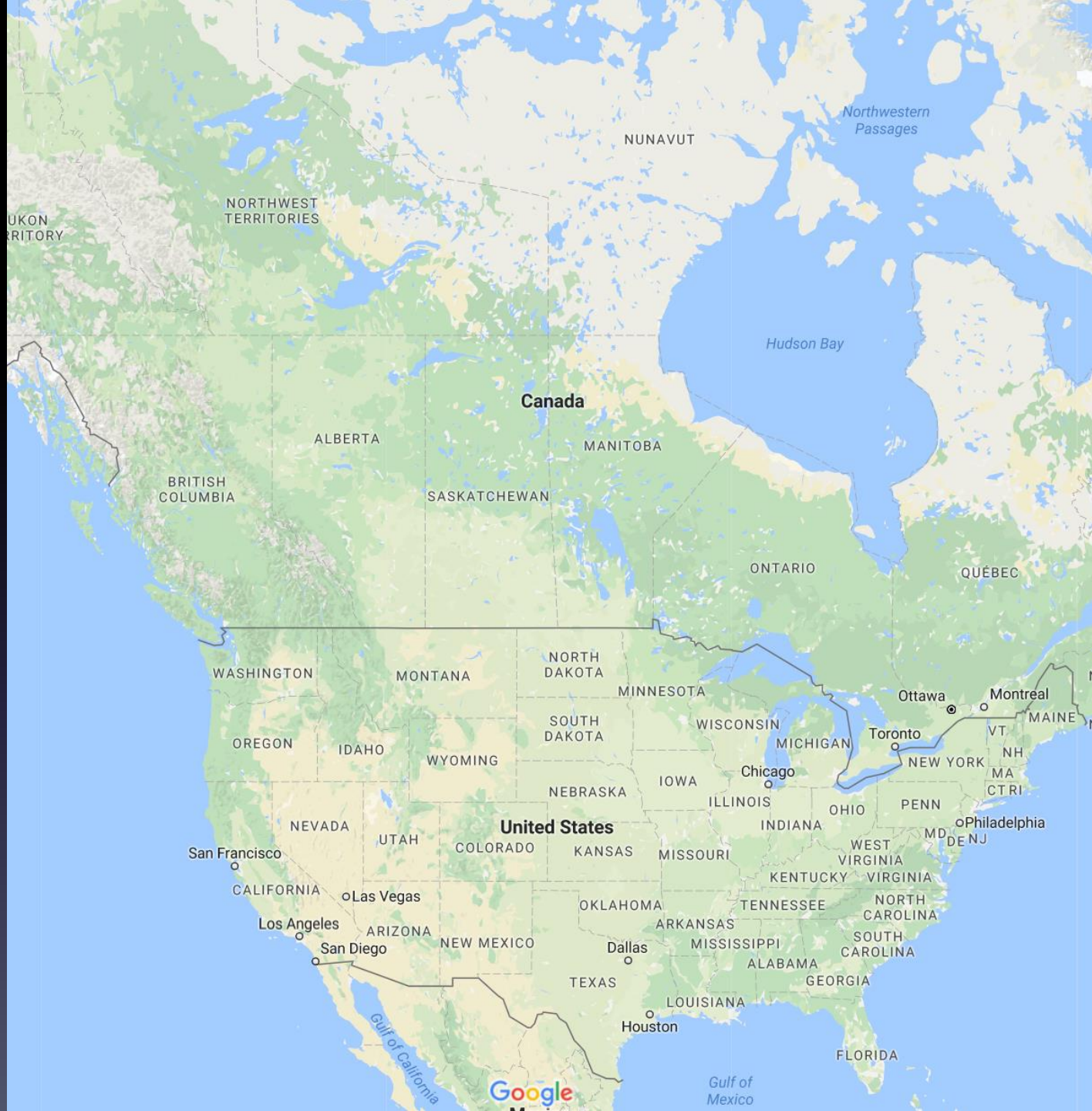


# Teach Students to Draw Out the Implications of Statements

"I've already said I'm happy to look at how we can increase pipeline production for U.S. oil, but Keystone is for Canadian oil to send that down to the Gulf. It bypasses the United States and is estimated to create a little over 250, maybe 300 permanent jobs." (President Obama, interview with WDAY of Fargo, N.D., Feb. 26, 2015)



Show the students a map



YUKON TERRITORY

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

NUNAVUT

Northwestern Passages

Hudson Bay

Canada

ALBERTA

MANITOBA

BRITISH COLUMBIA

SASKATCHEWAN

ONTARIO

QUÉBEC

WASHINGTON

MONTANA

NORTH DAKOTA

MINNESOTA

Ottawa

Montreal

OREGON

IDAHO

WYOMING

SOUTH DAKOTA

WISCONSIN

MICHIGAN

Toronto

NEW YORK

VT

NH

MA

CT

RI

NEVADA

UTAH

NEBRASKA

United States

IOWA

ILLINOIS

Chicago

PENN

MD

Philadelphia

WEST VIRGINIA

VIRGINIA

San Francisco

CALIFORNIA

Las Vegas

Los Angeles

San Diego

ARIZONA

NEW MEXICO

KANSAS

MISSOURI

INDIANA

OHIO

TENNESSEE

NORTH CAROLINA

SOUTH CAROLINA

TEXAS

OKLAHOMA

ARKANSAS

MISSISSIPPI

ALABAMA

GEORGIA

LOUISIANA

Houston

FLORIDA

Gulf of California

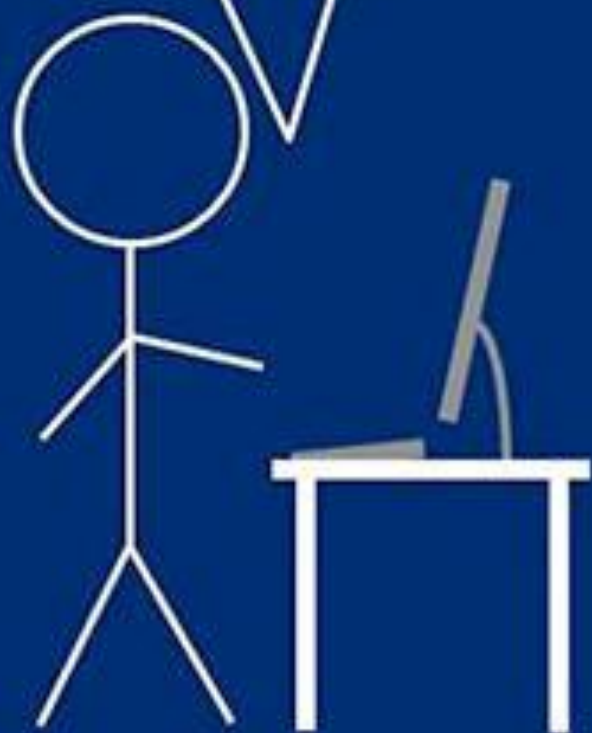
Google

Gulf of Mexico

Ask, how exactly will  
this pipeline get from  
Canada to the Gulf of  
Mexico and "bypass the  
United States?"

If students do not know  
how to read a map, then  
you have a fabulous  
teaching opportunity!

Did you fact  
check this  
before  
reposting it?



I don't need to. It  
agrees with my  
preconceived views  
and biases so it must  
be true!



# Gray Areas

Sometimes there is a statement that it is not possible to find enough information about to substantiate that it is real news. I recommend viewing these as fake news, even if they sound correct to you. (Remember confirmation bias.)

# Here's an example:

"Part of the problem ... is nobody wants to hurt each other anymore." Donald Trump

(Retrieved on Mashable retrieved on Feb 3, 2017

at: <http://mashable.com/2016/03/12/trump-rally-incite-violence/#2.LxWr5Qgiqa>)

# Frames

Finally, remember that brains respond to facts and to the way facts are framed. For instance, assuming we had an election with only two candidates, Donald and Hillary. If I say "Donald won," it is logically and semantically or factually identical as saying "Hillary lost." However, your brain processes "Donald won" and "Hillary lost" in different ways. Likewise, your brain processes "there is a 90% you will win" and "there is a 10% chance you will lose" differently.

(See: Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.)



To avoid framing traps, slow down and reframe things.

# Recap

## Internal

- Read the whole story or watch the whole video or read the entire transcript
- Parse/close read the source, transcripts are helpful
- Look for contradictions
- Look for ad hominem attacks
- Check the date. Is it consistent with the claim?
- Look for signs that it could be satire, such as absurd names
- Be aware of your biases

## External

- Examine the website of the source
- Look for contradictions in other statements by the same person
- Check other sources such as the reliable newspapers; if it's a big story, it will be there too.
- Check non-partisan fact check sites
- Ask if it fits within the larger framework of reality
- Go to the primary source if possible
- Research the author, what else has the author written (be careful to avoid ad hominem attacks)

# A Few Resources

## Reliable Non-Partisan Fact Check Sites:

[Factcheck.org](https://factcheck.org)

[politfact.com](https://politfact.com)

[snopes.com](https://snopes.com)

[washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/](https://washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/)

## Reliable News Sources:

Cable News Network ([cnn.com](https://cnn.com))

Chicago Tribune ([chicagotribune.com](https://chicagotribune.com))

Guardian, US edition ([theguardian.com/us](https://theguardian.com/us))

Los Angeles Times ([latimes.com](https://latimes.com))

New York Times ([nytimes.com](https://nytimes.com))

Wall Street Journal ([wsj.com](https://wsj.com))

Washington Post ([washingtonpost.com](https://washingtonpost.com))

Non-exhaustive List

## General:

Almossawi, Ali. *An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments.* , 2013. Print (Children's Book)

Jackson, Natalie. "Fake News' Is Real. Here's How To Know If You're Reading It." *Huffington Post*. N.p., 1 Feb. 2017. Web. 3 Feb. 2017.

Kiely, Eugene, and Lori Robertson. "How to Spot Fake News." *FactCheck.org*. N.p., 18 Nov. 2016. Web. 03 Feb. 2017.

Sykes, Charles. "Why Nobody Cares the President Is Lying." *New York Times*. N.p., 4 Feb. 2017. Web. 4 Feb. 2017.

## Contradictions:

Lynch, Michael P. "Truth, Politics and the Power of Contradiction." *The New York Times* 2016: 2. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*. Web. 26 Jan. 2017.

## Framing:

Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow.* , 2011. Print.

Lakoff, George. *The All New Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate.* , 2014. Print.

## **To understand parts of the country far from here:**

Hochschild, Arlie R. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right.* , 2016. Print.

Packer, George. *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America.* , 2013. Print.

## **To understand more about politics and economics:**

Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty.* New York: Crown Publishers, 2012. Print

Hacker, Jacob S, and Paul Pierson. *Winner-take-all Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer-and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class.* , 2010. Print.

Mayer, Jane. *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right.* , 2016. Print.

Piketty, Thomas, and Arthur Goldhammer. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century.* , 2014. Print.

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**To view the LibGuide, please  
use this URL:**

**<http://libguides.dominican.edu/spotting-fake-news>**