Are These Stories True? (Nope.)
Why fake news is a problem, and what can be done to stop it

Preview: An informational text about fake news from the 15th century until today (with plenty of tips on how to recognize fake news) is paired with a Jewish folktale about a boy who learns a lesson about spreading false stories.

Learning Objective: to apply an idea from a folktale to information presented in a nonfiction text; to identify strategies for avoiding fake news

Key Skills: author’s craft, key ideas, text features, inference, synthesis, theme, key details

Step-by-Step Lesson Plan
Close Reading, Critical Thinking, Skill Building

1 Preparing to Read
Preview vocabulary.
(3 minutes, activity sheet online)
Project or distribute the Vocabulary Words and Definitions. Review as a class. Highlighted words: integrity, legitimate, objective, overdramatizing, reputable, retractions, sensational, unsubstantiated, unwittingly

2 Reading and Discussing
“Are These Stories True? (Nope.)”
(20 minutes, activity sheet online)
Read the article as a class. Then discuss the following.

Close-Reading Questions
At several points in the article, author Kristin Lewis writes in first person. Why might Lewis have made this choice? How does it affect the article’s tone and/or meaning? (author’s craft) Perhaps Lewis chose to write sections of her article in first person to acknowledge her connection, as a journalist, to the topic of fake news, to connect with readers, or to help readers understand the responsibility that some writers feel to provide truthful, accurate information. Students may say that Lewis’s use of first person gives the article a personal, candid, or earnest tone, or that it conveys Lewis’s personal interest in the topic of fake news.

According to the article, why do people publish fake news? Provide text evidence. (key ideas)
According to the article, people publish fake news to make money. On page 11, Lewis explains that each click on a fake news story makes money for the site that posts it. Another reason fake news is published is to influence readers’ beliefs and actions, such as when John Adams and other patriots wrote made-up stories to influence people’s attitudes about the Revolutionary War (timeline, p. 11).

What role does the internet play in the problem of fake news? Provide text evidence. (key ideas)
The internet makes it easy for people to publish fake news stories, as Lewis explains when she writes, “Today,
anyone with a Wi-Fi connection and a smartphone can write a ‘news’ story and publish it online” (p. 10). And, Lewis explains, online fake news sites do not hold their writers to journalistic standards the way serious news organizations do (p. 12). In addition, the internet makes the dissemination of fake news fast and easy—stories spread “like wildfire,” as Lewis puts it (p. 10).

What makes fake news appealing to readers? In your answer, draw on information about fake news of the past and present. (key ideas, text features) Fake news is appealing because it is sensational. Writing about today’s fake news, Lewis states that “made-up stories with sensational headlines … lure people into clicking and sharing” (p. 10). In the centuries that followed the printing press, Lewis explains, popular fake news stories “preyed upon people’s fears about the unknown and their grief after tragedies” (p. 11), while “sensational headlines” sold papers in the days of yellow journalism (timeline, p. 12).

What are five signs that an article you find online might be fake? (key details) Answers may include: (1) it’s on a website you’ve never heard of; (2) the headline or content is sensational; (3) it does not have any quotations; (4) it refers to studies or statistics but does not name their sources; (5) if you google the names of experts quoted in the article, you cannot find any trace of them.

“‘The Story That Got Away’”
(20 minutes, activity sheet online)
Read the folktale as a class. Then discuss the following questions, some of which draw on both texts.

Close-Reading Questions
Do you think Yankel intended to harm Reb Wulff’s business? Use text evidence to support your answer. (inference) There is no evidence that Yankel intended to harm Reb Wulff’s business. The first paragraph tells us that Yankel loved to tell stories. This suggests that Yankel’s motivation was not to harm Reb Wulff’s business, but to enjoy the attention he would get from telling a funny story. Also, Yankel never checks to see how his story affects Reb Wulff’s business; you can infer that Yankel never even considered the harm he might do.

Explain why the rabbi told Yankel to place feathers on doorsteps and then pick them up. (key ideas, theme) The rabbi asked Yankel to place feathers on doorsteps and then pick them up knowing that Yankel would not be able to do so; the rabbi did this to make the point that stories, like feathers, cannot be retrieved once they are released into the world. In other words, the rabbi uses the feathers as a metaphor for stories.

How do both the article and the folktale support the idea that spreading false information can be harmful? (synthesis, theme) Both texts support the idea that spreading false information can be harmful by exploring what can happen when people make decisions based on inaccurate information. In the folktale, the false story that Yankel tells causes people to avoid shopping at Reb Wulff’s bakery. In the article, Lewis implies that people cannot make good decisions about important matters like whom to vote for and what issues to support if they are basing those decisions on false information (p. 10).

Critical-Thinking Question
Consider the quote by Edward R. Murrow at the end of Lewis’s article. Do you agree with it? Explain. Answers will vary. Those who say no may point out that both the folktale and Lewis’s article make clear that people’s opinions and behavior can be influenced by inaccurate information.

Skill Building
Featured Skill: Synthesizing
(15 minutes, activity sheet online)
Distribute the Synthesis activity for students to complete independently. It will prepare them to respond to the prompt on page 15.
Differentiation

For Struggling Readers
In a well-organized paragraph, explain why fake news is a problem and what can be done to solve this problem. Support your answers with evidence from “Are These Stories True? (Nope.)”

For Advanced Readers
Use information in “Are These Stories True? (Nope.)” to analyze a news article you find online. Describe your process: What you analyzed, the results, and your conclusion about whether the article is legitimate or fake.

Find the complexity factors, literature connections, and online resources for the paired texts at Scope Online.