

# Real or Artificial?

## *Evaluating News in the Age of AI*

**Course:** Civics / AP Government / Media Literacy

**Grade Level:** 9–12 (AP-appropriate)

**Time:** 1–2 class periods

**Lesson Type:** Inquiry-based analysis, media evaluation

**Materials:** Printed or digital news packets, student worksheet

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## Lesson Overview

In an era of artificial intelligence and rapidly spreading misinformation, citizens must be able to evaluate the credibility of news sources. In this lesson, students examine four news stories—two generated by AI and two from highly reliable journalistic sources—and attempt to determine which are real and which are artificial.

After making their selections, students analyze **how** they made those judgments, what cues they relied on, and why distinguishing fact from fabrication has become increasingly difficult in a democratic society.

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## Essential Questions

- How can citizens tell the difference between real journalism and AI-generated fake news?
  - What standards should be used to evaluate credibility?
  - How does misinformation threaten democratic decision-making?
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## Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Evaluate news stories for credibility and reliability
  - Identify indicators of AI-generated or fabricated content
  - Distinguish between reputable journalism and misinformation
  - Explain why media literacy is essential to citizenship
  - Reflect on how technology complicates democratic participation
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# Lesson Structure

## Part 1: Introduction (10 minutes)

Begin with a class discussion:

- Where do you get most of your news?
- How confident are you that what you read online is accurate?
- Should citizens be responsible for verifying information before sharing it?

Do **not** mention AI yet.

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## Part 2: News Story Evaluation Activity

### Student Instructions

You will be given **four news stories**:

- **Two are real**, from established, reliable news organizations
- **Two are AI-generated fake news stories**

Your task:

1. Identify which stories you believe are **real** and which are **AI-generated**
2. Provide written justification for each decision

Students should **not** use Google during this phase.

## Part 3: Initial Decision

Students complete the following:

**Story Real or AI? Confidence Level (1–5) Why?**

- A     Real  AI
  - B     Real  AI
  - C     Real  AI
  - D     Real  AI
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## Part 4: Reveal & Discussion

After students commit:

- Reveal which stories were real and which were AI-generated
- Allow reactions (this is usually where the lesson *lands*)

Discussion prompts:

- Which stories fooled you most?
  - What signals did you rely on?
  - Were those signals reliable?
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## Part 5: How Do We Decide What's Real?

Guide students toward **evaluation criteria**, such as:

### Credibility Indicators

- Named sources vs. vague “experts”
- Neutral tone vs. emotional language
- Specific data and verifiable facts
- Transparency of authorship
- Established news organization standards

## Red Flags of AI / Fake News

- Overly dramatic framing
  - Lack of attribution
  - Perfect grammar but shallow detail
  - Claims that discourage verification
  - Appeals to fear, anger, or urgency
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## Part 6: Reflection (Written Assessment)

### Prompt (choose one):

1. Why is it becoming harder to distinguish real news from fake news?
2. What responsibility do citizens have in preventing misinformation?
3. How does misinformation threaten democracy?

(1–2 paragraphs)

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## Assessment Options

- News evaluation worksheet
  - Written reflection
  - Class discussion participation
  - Exit ticket: *“One rule I will use before sharing news”*
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## Teacher Guide & Safeguards

- Do not use real extremist or conspiratorial content
  - Make clear that AI can sound *very convincing*
  - Emphasize evaluation skills, not “gotcha” moments
  - Reinforce that being fooled is normal—and fixable
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## Why This Lesson Matters

This lesson teaches a **foundational democratic skill**:

*The ability to evaluate information before acting on it.*

Students consistently report that this activity:

- Changes how they read news
  - Makes them more skeptical (in a healthy way)
  - Helps them understand the danger of unchecked technology
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## Optional Extensions

- Have students **create their own AI fake headline** and explain the tricks used
- Compare AI fake news to historical propaganda
- Connect to voting behavior and social media algorithms

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# STUDENT PACKET

## News Evaluation Exercise

*(Sources intentionally omitted)*

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### Story A

The U.S. Supreme Court issued a decision addressing how states conduct federal elections. The ruling clarified that while state legislatures have authority to regulate elections, their actions remain subject to review by state courts and must comply with state constitutions.

The majority opinion emphasized that no branch of government operates in isolation and that judicial oversight is a fundamental part of constitutional governance. Legal analysts noted that the decision preserved existing checks and balances while rejecting arguments that would have granted state legislatures unchecked authority over election rules.

Several justices wrote concurring and dissenting opinions highlighting different interpretations of federalism and the role of state courts. The decision is expected to influence how future election-related disputes are resolved at the state level.

### Story B

A coalition of state governments has quietly begun testing artificial intelligence–driven voting software ahead of upcoming elections, according to internal documents obtained by independent researchers. The system reportedly uses machine learning to “optimize ballot counting efficiency” and is being piloted without public oversight.

Critics warn that the technology cannot be fully audited due to proprietary algorithms, raising concerns about election transparency. Officials involved in the project declined to comment, citing national security considerations.

Advocacy groups are calling for an immediate halt to the program until the public can verify how votes are processed. Some experts say the lack of disclosure represents a fundamental threat to democratic legitimacy.

## Story C

Federal economic data released this week showed a slowdown in inflation compared to previous months, driven largely by easing energy prices and stabilization in supply chains. Economists cautioned that while the trend is encouraging, price levels remain higher than they were several years ago.

Government officials pointed to the data as evidence that recent policy measures are beginning to take effect. Independent analysts noted that inflation trends can fluctuate and warned against drawing conclusions from a single report.

Markets reacted modestly to the announcement, with investors closely watching future reports for confirmation that inflation continues to cool.

## Story D

A newly uncovered government program allegedly uses artificial intelligence to monitor citizens' online behavior and flag individuals who may become politically "disruptive." According to unnamed insiders, the system evaluates social media posts, private messages, and browsing patterns to generate risk profiles.

Supporters of the program argue it helps prevent civil unrest and misinformation, while critics say it amounts to mass surveillance. Officials neither confirmed nor denied the existence of the program, stating only that "advanced tools" are used to protect public safety.

Several commentators claim the program operates outside existing legal frameworks, though no formal documentation has been released.

# TEACHER KEY

## Real vs. AI-Generated Analysis

### ✔ Story A — REAL (Paraphrased)

#### Why it's real:

- Neutral, restrained tone
- Named institutions, not vague actors
- Multiple viewpoints (majority, concurrences, dissents)
- No emotional manipulation
- Matches widely reported Supreme Court coverage

#### Key credibility cues:

- Specific but verifiable claims
  - Balanced legal analysis
  - No urgency or fear-based framing
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### ✘ Story B — AI-GENERATED FAKE

#### Why it's fake:

- Vague sourcing (“internal documents,” “independent researchers”)
- High emotional stakes without evidence
- Claims discourage verification
- Buzzwords without technical detail (“optimize ballot counting efficiency”)

#### Red flags:

- “Quietly begun,” “cannot be audited,” “declined to comment”
  - No named agencies, courts, or laws
  - Appeals to fear and secrecy
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## ✔ Story C — REAL (Paraphrased)

### Why it's real:

- Uses publicly available government data
- Includes expert caution and uncertainty
- Avoids sensational language
- Describes limited, incremental change

### Key credibility cues:

- Mentions multiple perspectives
  - Acknowledges limits of conclusions
  - Mundane market reaction (not dramatic)
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## ✘ Story D — AI-GENERATED FAKE

### Why it's fake:

- Anonymous insiders only
- Extremely serious claims with no documentation
- Vague legal assertions (“outside existing frameworks”)
- Emotionally charged language without proof

### Red flags:

- Surveillance + AI + secrecy combination
  - “Neither confirmed nor denied” used as evidence
  - No courts, laws, or oversight bodies cited
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## HOW THIS PLAYS IN CLASS (What You'll See)

- **Most students correctly identify Story C**
- **Story B and D split the room**
- **High-achieving students often overthink Story A**
- The “aha moment” comes when students realize:

*Professional tone ≠ truth*

*Emotional urgency ≠ evidence*

## **OPTIONAL DEBRIEF QUESTION (Highly Effective)**

“If AI can already write fake news this convincingly, what does citizenship require from us now that it didn’t 20 years ago?”