

CLUE SPOTTING 4: Overgeneralizations

Grades 3-5 (20-30 minutes depending on how long you play the game)

Playing a game based on a “Two Truths and a Lie” format, students learn to distinguish between statements that are true and statements that are overgeneralizations (which, by definition, are always false). They’ll hear examples of how overgeneralizations might show up in media sources and consider that stereotypes are a form of overgeneralization.

Note: This activity will be most effective if the examples provided are familiar and connect to students lived experiences, culture, home, and community. Be prepared to customize the examples provided. For example, if an example referenced baseball but most of your students follow basketball, then change the example to be about basketball.

Prerequisite: This lesson assumes that students already know what a stereotype is and that they have a basic understanding of how stereotypes can hurt people.

Students will

- Learn the definition of “overgeneralization”
- Understand that overgeneralizations are always false and that stereotypes are a form of overgeneralization
- Know at least three that media makers use overgeneralizations as misinformation
- Begin to develop the habit of asking “Who is included when someone says “we” or “they”?”

Students will practice

- Spotting overgeneralizations
- Listening skills
- Linking conclusions to evidence

Materials: Chart paper or projection with these words: Every, Everyone, Everybody, Nobody, We, They, All

Step 1

Prepare students to play “Two Overgeneralizations and a Truth.” This is like the game “two truths and lie” except the students must identify the truth and explain why the other choices are overgeneralizations.

Introduce the new vocabulary word:

An “overgeneralization” is a statement that makes a claim about a group of

people but is only true for some of the people in that group.

Give an example that will apply to most but not all of your students. For example, *Show of hands, who loves to eat bananas?* Chances are that many, but not all hands will go up. Pause to take note that the group is not unanimous.

Continue by explaining that if you said, *I can report to the people who make lunch that we all love bananas*, you would be making an overgeneralization, because even

if most kids raised their hands, not everybody raised their hands.

And that type of overgeneralization has consequences. If the dietician who runs the cafeteria believed that everyone loves bananas, they may decide to provide bananas more often and oranges, apples, or grapes less often. That would be bad for kids who don't like bananas or who would prefer a different fruit.

Tell students that:

The most important thing to know about overgeneralizations is that they are always false.

Using questions, continue providing information about where students might encounter overgeneralizations. Use as many or as few of these examples as students are capable of understanding:

- If an advertiser said *'Everybody is rushing to buy my new and improved backpacks,'* would that be an overgeneralization? Explain that advertisers often overgeneralize to imply that everyone wants or needs their product, hoping that it will create peer pressure (If everyone is buying this brand, I should buy it, too) or FOMO (fear of missing out). But what did we just learn about the most important thing about overgeneralizations? (A: They are always false)
- If a reporter said that crime happened in a certain city *"all the time,"* would that be an overgeneralization? Help students understand that it almost certainly is because cities are very large and while some spots are more dangerous than others, most people on most days in most places do not experience crime.
- If an influencer on YouTube said that we should stop eating tomato sauce (and pizza!) because a study found that some people can be allergic to tomatoes, would that be an overgeneralization? Yes, because they are applying one small research study to everyone, even though different

body types or circumstances can lead to very different reactions to the thing that was tested.

This would also be a good time to introduce the question, "Who is the 'we'?" (or more properly, Who is included when this influencer says "we"?) Suggest that asking the framing question, Who is included or excluded (and why)? is a helpful habit whenever they come across words like "we" or "they."

- If someone said, *"Everyone who cares about our city supports re-electing our mayor,"* would that be an overgeneralization? Definitely. And in a democracy, a particularly dangerous one. Some people use overgeneralizations to help their preferred candidate win by implying that everyone agrees with them and that those who don't are bad people.
- Are stereotypes overgeneralizations? Invite students to explain what a stereotype is, providing help as needed:
Stereotypes suggest that everyone who shares a certain identity is the same, e.g., "Asian people are experts at karate." or "Kids today are lazy."
Tell students that: All stereotypes are based on overgeneralizations. And what did we learn about overgeneralizations? They're always false. So stereotypes are always false.

Step 2

Fortunately there are clues that students can use to spot overgeneralizations. Share the chart of words and invite students to read them aloud:

Every, Everybody, Everyone,
Nobody, We, They, All

Make sure everyone knows what each word means.

Explain: *These words are often used in overgeneralizations, but they can also be used in statements of fact. And sometimes the "all" is implied, but not said (like writing "Texans" instead of "All Texans" even when you're implying that what you're saying is true for*

all Texans). What that means is that we have to pause and think when we see these words to determine if they indicate an overgeneralization or a fact. It can be confusing, so we're going to play a game to practice.

Step 3

Explain the rules of the game. You're going to read three sentences. One is true. The other two are overgeneralizations. The players' job is to spot the overgeneralizations and explain why they aren't true.

Review a triad together so everyone understands:

Americans like hamburgers but Mexicans prefer tacos.

Everybody thinks that thin-crust pizza is better than pizza with thick crust.

Every living thing on the planet needs fresh water.

Invite students to explain, filling in gaps as needed:

Americans like hamburgers but Mexicans prefer tacos.

It is common for overgeneralize to mistakenly assume that everyone who lives in a place where a food originated eats that food all the time or only eats that food. It's true that lots of Americans like hamburgers, but we also like tacos, spaghetti, Chinese food, fried chicken, sushi, etc. And so do Mexicans. This sentence could be true if it added the word "some."

Everybody thinks that thin-crust pizza is better than pizza with thick crust.

Many people from Chicago or Detroit (both famous for pan pizza) would disagree!

Every living thing on the planet needs fresh water.

Fact. It's a generalization but not an overgeneralization because it is true. And the more we know about our world, the easier it is to spot overgeneralizations.

Step 4

Decide whether students will play as individuals or in teams and play the game.

Advanced students might want to try to create their own trios.

Everyone knows that Africa is one big jungle.
Every student in this school lives in _____
[fill in blank with your State].
Cities are dirty and filled with criminals.

Everyone has a birthday.
Everyone celebrates Christmas.
We all watch the Super Bowl.

All the popular kids drink chocolate milk.
Only wimps eat salad.
Bread is part of the diet of every culture.

Doctors can read.
Athletes are rich.
Business owners cheat their customers.

Girls like Barbies and boys like action figures.
Everyone needs shoes, but no one needs a particular brand of shoes.
All eyes will be on Los Angeles for the 2026 World Cup. [or fill in any major sporting event that would be familiar to students, e.g., the next Olympic Games or Super Bowl]

Use as many or as few of the trios as time and interest allows. After each trio, review the answers. See the answer key below.

Note: If you want students to practice reading skills, create print versions of the trios and display one trio at a time.

You can also use printed trios to practice modifying the overgeneralizations so that they are true. For example, how many of these would be factual statements if you started with the word, "Some"?

Lesson 5A ANSWER KEY

Everyone knows that Africa is one big jungle.

There are jungles in Africa, but it is a huge continent with deserts, beaches, cities, mountains – nearly every type of environment. You might share some photos of African cities to show that the continent includes modern urban areas. Invite students to think about where they get ideas about Africa. Is it movies like Lion King or Madagascar? Are those good sources for factual information about Africa?

Every student in this school lives in _____ [fill in blank with your State].

This is a fact for public schools, which require residency to enroll. It may not be true for private schools near state borders. In that case, substitute with another fact that would be true about every student in your school.

Cities are dirty and filled with criminals.

Students who live in cities are likely to know that some parts of the city are nicer or safer than others, but the statement is an overgeneralization. Students who don't live in cities may believe the statement based on news reports that they or their families have seen. This is a good example of a stereotype that is created by news reports about places people have never been. Remind students that, by definition, the news reports on what is unusual. So they report on crime because it doesn't happen everywhere all the time.

Everyone has a birthday.

Fact. People celebrate birthdays in different ways, but everyone alive was born on a particular day.

Everyone celebrates Christmas.

Recent census data indicate that 65-70% of Americans identify as Christian. About 25% do not identify with any religion. And the rest identify with religions other than Christianity - Judaism (2%), Buddhism (1.2%), Islam (1.1%), Hinduism (1%), Sikhism (0.5%). So a lot of Americans celebrate Christmas, but not everybody. Source:

<https://bestdiplomats.org/different-religions-in-the-us/> 26 April 2024, O. Mamchii

We all watch the Super Bowl.

This is a good example to ask Who is included in “we”? Nearly 124 million people watched the 2024 Super Bowl. But there are approximately 340 million people in the U.S., and several billion worldwide, so “we” didn't (and don't) all watch the Super Bowl. But all the kids in a class might.

All the popular kids drink chocolate milk.

This is the type of sentence an advertiser might use to sell chocolate milk. It draws a false link between product consumption and a group of people. All sorts of people drink chocolate milk and popular kids drink all sorts of beverages. No doubt some of them don't drink chocolate milk because it has added sugar, which can drain people's energy.

Only wimps eat salad.

There are stereotypes about eating unhealthy food as being a sign of toughness. Of course, unhealthy food makes you weaker, not tougher, so athletes often favor foods like salad.

Bread is part of the diet of every culture.

This is a fact. People in different places make different types of bread, but every culture has some form of this staple.

Doctors can read.

Becoming a doctor requires going to college and passing licensing exams. That requires reading. So, we can deduce that every licensed physician knows how to read. This is a fact.

Athletes are rich.

Famous athletes are often wealthy, but there are thousands of athletes in sports that are not well known (e.g., steeple chase, water polo, biathlon, curling, bobsledding). They don't earn much money. Neither do players who are pro in a major sport but never make it to the top league (e.g., minor league baseball players).

Business owners cheat their customers.

Good example of the "all" being implied. Some business owners cheat their customers, but most, especially local small businesses, want to build great relationships with their customers and community. They treat customers fairly.

Girls like Barbies and boys like action figures.

A good example of an overgeneralization based on stereotypes. It would be true if the sentence said "some." Some kids (of all genders) like to play with dolls and others don't. Some girls would choose to play with a Transformer over a Barbie, while some boys would choose the opposite. Just like some girls like blue things and some boys like pink things and some like both blue and pink things, even though peer pressure may make kids hesitate to admit that. Gender doesn't determine what we like. If possible, you could give real life examples (e.g., a male teacher who wears a pink tie to honor breast cancer survivors, or a girl who loves her blue jean jacket).

Everyone needs shoes, but no one needs a particular brand of shoes.

Babies don't actually need shoes (and until they learn how to walk, are better off barefoot), but once we learn how to walk, it's safer for everyone to wear shoes and certain places that we need to be (like school) require shoes. But they don't need to be expensive brand name shoes, no matter what advertisers say. So this is a fact for everyone except babies.

All eyes will be on Los Angeles for the 2026 World Cup.

"All eyes" is a common turn of phrase to suggest that a particular event is important. But even important events are not viewed by everyone. And what's important to some people might not even be of interest to others.

If you need a reference for the earlier stereotype statement about Asians and karate, check the list of winners in Olympic karate competitions. Most of them are not Asian.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Olympic_medalists_in_karate).

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Use this activity as a follow up to a social studies lesson about stereotypes.

Have students go on an "overgeneralization hunt," looking for examples in news articles or text books. Connect to ELA by asking them to re-write the sentences they find so that they are not overgeneralizations. If applicable, connect to civics lessons by facilitating students sharing their re-writes with authors, journalists, or publishers.

AASL Standards Correlations

- A. VI. 2. Understanding the ethical use of information technology and media.
- A. VI. 3. Evaluating information for accuracy, validity, social and cultural context, and appropriateness for need.
- B. I. 1. Using evidence to investigate questions.
- B. IV. 3. Systematically questioning and assessing the validity and accuracy of information.
- D. I. 3. Enacting new understanding through real world connections.
- D. III. 1. Actively contributing to group discussions.
- D. VI. 3. Inspiring others to engage in safe, responsible ethical and legal information behaviors.