

ENCOUNTERING TROLLS and OTHER BAD ACTORS

Grade 5 (40 minutes, easily split into two sessions of 10 and 30 minutes)

Students are likely to have encountered social media through using sites like YouTube, TikTok, or perhaps Facebook or a gaming site, but they're still novices. That means they aren't fully aware of all of the types of "posers" that may cross their paths online.

Without triggering anxiety about unknown dangers lurking everywhere online, this activity helps students understand that there are types of accounts created for the specific purpose of causing disruption or harm. Knowing how to spot them can help students avoid them.

Without requiring them to log on to an online site, the activity walks students through a set of online scenarios created specifically for this activity. The scenarios introduce clues students can use to recognize social media trolls, bots, and sock puppets.

Students will learn

- To spot telltale signs of social media accounts that are fake or malevolent
- The meaning, in an online context, of "troll," "bot," and "sock puppet"

Students will practice

- Spotting trolls, bots, and sock puppets
- Discussion & listening skills
- Reading text formatted for online conversations

Materials: one copy for each student of the [Trolls Tip Sheet](#) and [Trolls Scenarios Worksheet](#); optional: [Share, Challenge, Report, Skip handout](#)

Step 1

Ask, *Does anyone know what a "troll" is?*

Expect the possibility of pop culture answers: An animated movie character, a villain in the fairy tale *Three Billy Goats Gruff*, or perhaps even a character in J.R.R. Tolkien's famed middle-earth fantasies. If that's the case, model a bit of digital literacy and admit that you probably need to adjust your prompt and ask something slightly different:

What is a "troll" online or on social media?

Without implying that everyone and everything on line is fake or out to hurt them, explain that trolls are just one type of person who shows up in social media with the intention of disrupting others' conversations. Today you're going to share some tips to help them spot three nefarious characters they might encounter. And problems that they can spot are easier to avoid than problems we don't see or problems that surprise us.

Explain: *It's hard to see or deal with things that we don't have words for, so*

we'll start with some labels. Distribute copies of the [Trolls Tip Sheet handout](#) and review it together.

Take a few minutes for each example to ensure that students understand what to look for. Invite them to ask questions. Where possible, for general clues (e.g., trolls are mean), talk about what sorts of words might signal that someone is intentionally being mean. Though they haven't seen them yet, you might use some of the words from the scenarios as a way of priming students for the next step of the activity.

Note: They'll need the Tip Sheet for the next step, so make sure they have a way to keep it handy.

If you're dividing this activity into two sessions, stop here, letting students know that they're going to be using what they've learned next time.

Step 2

Divide students into small groups and give them the [Troll Scenarios](#) worksheet. Every group can answer all three scenarios, or each group can be assigned one scenario and share their answers with other groups at the end. If possible, make sure that every group has at least one strong reader who can read aloud the scenario and refer back to the Tip Sheet Handout. As needed circulate to remind students to refer back to the Tip Sheet and be sure they can explain their answer.

Step 3

Have a spokesperson from each group share their answers and explanations. Review the responses with an emphasis on the clues that students used. You can use the Answer Key below to fill important gaps, using questions to introduce concepts whenever possible (e.g., *Did you notice ____? What did you make of that?*).

SCENARIOS ANSWER KEY

Scenario 1: PRODUCT REVIEW

Answer: Most likely a bot.

The repetition is the key. Probably deployed by ARSRGR8 (ours are great), a competitor to Ruberee (rubbery).

Scenario 2: DOG PARK GROUP

Answer: A troll.

J.Smith is mean ("stupid haircut") and disrespectful (telling the vet that they must want dogs to hurt each other) and trying to pick fights ("Who cares?"). But also notice how often they change the subject, making the conversation about types of dogs or whether cats are better than dogs, or that they'd rather have a pool (which is not up for consideration).

Also ask, *Was anyone in the conversation helpful? Were there people who disagreed without being mean?* An example might be the people speaking about how the practice field is used.

For advanced or experienced students, you might also explore how the troll comments made them feel and what they thought about Dr. Vet's attempts to respond. Were the responses effective? Worthwhile?

Scenario 3: COOKING ADVICE

Answer: A bot.

The repetition of similar wording, from an account that isn't a person, always hawking a product. The end even suggests a mechanism - a bot programmed to respond to particular words.

Scenario 4: THE SUPER FANS

Answer: Sock Puppets.

A person can make it seem like they are more popular than they actually are by creating fake accounts to praise themselves or recommend a purchase. The sudden change in comment patterns and the limited vocabulary (e.g., using the word "great," but not a lot of other adjectives) are also clues.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Collaborate with teachers to give students practice writing sentences using kind words. Consult with a professional mediator or school counselor who can teach students what they can say to de-escalate when someone says something online that isn't true.

AASL Standards Correlations

A. II. 2. Adopting a discerning stance toward points of view and opinions expressed in information resources and learning products.

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.

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.