

Fake News



Pre-reading Questions

1. Have you ever come across a news story online that turned out to be fake? How did you realise it wasn't true?
2. Why do you think some people believe fake news?
3. What are some ways that fake news can affect us or society?

Have you ever encountered a story online that seemed too shocking to be true - only to realise later it was completely fake? Welcome to the world of fake news, where sensationalist headlines and **misleading** information **spread like wildfire** across the internet. Fake news refers to false or heavily **distorted** content designed to **manipulate** opinions, stir up controversy or simply generate profit. Unlike innocent gossip, fake news can have serious consequences and thanks to social media, it's more common than ever.

Why Is Fake News Such a Big Deal?

You might think fake news is just harmless **clickbait**, but it can have far-reaching effects. From influencing elections to spreading dangerous health myths, fake news has the power to shape public opinion and even impact real-life decisions. For example, during global crises, false reports can cause unnecessary panic, while political misinformation can create divisions within society.

The trouble is, fake news often appears legitimate. It uses eye-catching headlines, **sensationalist** language and even real images taken out of context. Many people fall for it without realising because they don't take the time to verify the facts. Fake news **preys on** emotions, using fear, excitement or outrage to get people to share content without thinking twice. Before you know it, false information is spreading faster than the truth.

Disclaimer: This resource has been made for the purpose of teaching English language learners. We know that students can be learning English in many different places, in many different ways and at any age, so we try to keep these resources as general as possible.

There are many acronyms associated with English language teaching. These include (but are not limited to) ELT, TEFL, EFL, ELL, EAL and ESOL. While the term ESL may not fully represent the linguistic backgrounds of all students, it is the most widely recognised term for English language teaching globally. Therefore, we use the term 'ESL' in the names of our resources to make them easy to find but they are suitable for any student learning to speak English.

Why Is It So Easy to Fall for Fake News?

The internet has made it easier than ever to publish and share information and not all of it is reliable. Social media **algorithms** are designed to keep us engaged, often prioritising content based on popularity rather than accuracy. The more clicks, shares and comments a post gets, the more people see it - whether it's true or not. Another factor is **confirmation bias** - we naturally believe information that aligns with our opinions and are more likely to dismiss anything that contradicts our views. Fake news plays on this by presenting **exaggerated** or biased information that feels right even if it isn't.

How to Outsmart Fake News

So, how can you tell fact from fiction? Here are some smart ways to spot fake news:

1. Examine the source

Is it from a well-known, trustworthy organisation? Fake news sites often have misleading names that resemble real ones.

2. Cross-check facts

If a story is true, multiple credible news outlets will report it. If it's only appearing on one obscure site, be wary.

3. Watch for sensationalist language

Words like "shocking," "you won't believe," or "the truth they don't want you to know" are often red flags.

4. Think critically

Does the story seem too good (or bad) to be true? Does it contradict established facts?

5. Fact-check with reliable sources

Reputable fact-checking organisations and well-established news sources can help verify the accuracy of information.

6. Pause before sharing

Don't be part of the problem. Take a moment to reflect before hitting that share button.



Teenagers Share Their Fake News Experiences

Even the most tech-savvy teens can fall for fake news. Here's how four teenagers learnt important lessons the hard way.

Sophie

"I saw a post claiming that my favourite singer had secretly been married and was quitting music. The website looked legit and the article had loads of convincing details, so I immediately told my friends. Everyone was talking about it and it spread like crazy in our group chat. A few days later, the singer posted on Instagram saying the rumours were completely false. I felt so embarrassed! It made me realise how easy it is to **get the wrong end of the stick** when you don't double-check the facts."

Ben

"Last summer, I was looking for a part-time job when I saw an advertisement promising 'easy money working from home'. The offer seemed perfect - flexible hours, great pay - but they asked for my personal details upfront. Luckily, I mentioned it to my dad before applying and he warned me it might

be a scam. A quick search showed loads of complaints about the same job ad. I nearly fell for it and it taught me to always check for reviews before trusting anything online."

Jasmine

"I kept seeing online videos about a so-called 'miracle cure' for acne that involved rubbing lemon juice on your skin. The influencers sounded so convincing that I decided to try it, even though my mum warned me not to. After a few days, my skin was burning and I had to go to a dermatologist. The doctor told me it was a common myth and that it had actually damaged my skin barrier. Now, I know better than to believe every health tip I see online."

Tom

"I once got a message saying that hackers were stealing passwords and that I should change all my login details immediately. The message came from a friend, so I thought it must be true and rushed to change everything. Later, I checked online and realised it was an old **hoax** circulating again. I felt pretty stupid for panicking. Now, I make sure to verify things before taking action."

Questions

Activity 1

Match the words and expressions from the text to their definitions.

1. misleading (adj) _____
 2. sensationalist (adj/n) _____
 3. clickbait (n) _____
 4. algorithm (n) _____
 5. spread like wildfire (idiom) _____
 6. confirmation bias (n) _____
 7. exaggerate (v) _____
 8. get the wrong end of the stick (idiom) _____
 9. hoax (n) _____
 10. manipulate (v) _____
 11. distorted (adj) _____
 12. prey on (v) _____
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- A. A set of rules or processes used by computers to solve problems, often determining what content people see online based on their behaviour.
 - B. To quickly become known or popular, usually referring to information, news or rumours.
 - C. To make something seem larger, better or worse than it really is.
 - D. To take advantage of someone's fears or weaknesses in a dishonest or unfair way.
 - E. Giving the wrong idea or impression, often on purpose.
 - F. To control or influence someone in a clever or dishonest way for personal gain.
 - G. The tendency to believe information that supports your existing views while ignoring facts that contradict them.

- H. Presenting information in a way that is intended to provoke excitement or shock, often at the expense of accuracy.
- I. Changed or altered in a way that makes something appear different from reality.
- J. A deliberate deception or trick intended to make people believe something false.
- K. Online content with exaggerated or misleading headlines designed to attract attention and encourage people to click on it.
- L. To misunderstand something completely.

Activity 2

Use the words from Activity 1 to complete the sentences.

1. Many online advertisements use _____ tactics to attract clicks, promising shocking content that often turns out to be irrelevant.
2. The rumour about the celebrity breakup started on social media and began to _____ within hours, reaching thousands of people.
3. Some influencers intentionally _____ their success to make their lifestyle seem more glamorous than it actually is.
4. News websites often create _____ headlines to grab attention, even if the actual story isn't as exciting as it sounds.
5. Scammers often _____ vulnerable people by pretending to offer help, only to steal their personal information.
6. His story was so _____ that it no longer resembled the truth; every detail seemed twisted to fit his agenda.
7. Social media platforms use complex _____ to show users content they are likely to engage with based on their previous activity.
8. I completely _____ when I thought she was moving to another country; she was only going on holiday.

9. The prank they played on their teacher was meant to be harmless fun, but it ended up being a full-scale _____ that got them into trouble.
10. Politicians sometimes try to _____ public opinion by spreading half-truths that favour their own agenda.
11. His argument was based on _____ information that made the situation seem far worse than it actually was.
12. People often fall for fake news due to _____ , only believing things that align with their own opinions and ignoring facts that contradict them.

Activity 3

Answer the questions about the text.

1. What does the text suggest about why people are more likely to believe fake news without verifying it?

2. How does the text explain the role of social media algorithms in spreading misinformation?

3. What techniques does fake news use to make itself appear credible and believable?

4. Why might someone ignore accurate information that contradicts their beliefs, according to the text?

5. What advice does the text give for identifying and avoiding fake news?

Activity 4

Which of the four teenagers...

1. ...experienced negative consequences after following advice they found online?

2. ...initially believed false information because it seemed realistic and well-presented?

3. ...realised that verifying sources before sharing information is crucial?

4. ...learnt the importance of seeking advice from others before taking action based on online content?

5. ...teenager's experience highlights the dangers of reacting too quickly to alarming messages without checking their validity?

6. ...realised that not everything that seems like a great opportunity online can be trusted?

Activity 5

Use the lines to make notes about your opinions. Then, discuss the questions in pairs or in groups.

1. Do you think social media platforms should do more to prevent the spread of fake news? Why or why not?

2. How can fake news impact young people differently compared to adults? What kinds of misinformation do you think teens are most vulnerable to?

3. What steps do you personally take to make sure the information you read or share is accurate?

4. Can you think of a situation where fake news might have serious consequences? How do you think it could affect individuals or even entire communities?

5. How do you feel about influencers or celebrities sharing information without verifying its accuracy? Should they be held responsible?

6. If you had to explain to a younger sibling how to spot fake news, what advice would you give them?

Activity 6

Read the news headlines below. Decide if they are real or fake using the tips from the lesson.

