

# Health and Media Literacy

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# Help students build health and media literacy skills

Every day, we make choices that affect our health. On a given day, students might decide whether to:

- Eat breakfast or grab an energy drink on the way to class
- Get a good night's sleep or pull an all-nighter to finish a paper
- Have sex with or without taking steps to prevent sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy
- Drive home after a few beers or ask a friend for a ride

To take care of our bodies, we need information about our health. But it can be tough to find health information that's accurate and easy to understand — especially online. **Health and media literacy skills** can help students learn about health topics and make informed decisions.

In this guide, you'll learn the basics about health and media literacy. Then you'll learn ways to help students build these important skills.



# Understanding health literacy

**Health literacy** is the ability to find, understand and use health information. All of us need health literacy skills to take care of our health.

For example, let's say your friend Sam just found out that she has a food allergy. To keep herself safe and healthy, Sam needs to decide what to eat every day. She might also decide to see a specialist, or a health care provider with training in health issues related to food allergies. To make those important decisions, Sam will need to wade through **a lot** of information — including some complicated medical terms — and apply that information to her own life.



# Searching for health information can get complicated!

Studies show that 9 out of 10 people struggle to understand health information. Why? Health information is often full of unfamiliar medical terms, scientific concepts, and other complex information. And when people are feeling overwhelmed — like when they're sick or stressed about a new diagnosis — it's even harder to process new information.

Often our first instinct is to look up health information online. But a simple internet search can steer us toward confusing or misleading health information. Imagine your friend Devon just found out he has asthma. Devon is a psychology major who's great at research projects, so you think it'll be easy for him to find the resources he needs. But when he searches for asthma info online, Devon finds a ton of conflicting info from medical websites and social media influencers. In the end, Devon's search leaves him feeling overwhelmed and discouraged.

People who are part of marginalized or medically underserved groups — including LGBTQ+ people, people of color, and people who have disabilities — may face even **more** obstacles to getting the health information and care they need. For example, LGBTQ+ people may have trouble finding health care providers who respect and affirm their identity. And people of color may experience medical racism from health care providers.





# Media literacy: Adding another layer

People look for health information in many different places, including social media (like Instagram or TikTok), Google and other search engines, and news platforms (like NPR or USA Today). So when it comes to learning about health, health literacy and media literacy go hand in hand. **Media literacy** is the ability to use the internet or other resources to find accurate information and apply that information to our own lives.

An important media literacy skill is thinking critically about the information that we see and deciding whether we can trust that information — basically asking ourselves, “**Is this legit?**” It may seem like a simple question, but to make that judgment call, people need to understand:

- Where to search for information on specific topics
- How to spot signs of false information
- How our choices, like the social media accounts we follow and the websites we visit, may affect the search results and recommendations we see

Not so simple, is it?



## SHARE RELIABLE SOURCES

Give students a shortcut through the maze of online health information! Point them toward credible websites like [Mayo Clinic](#), [MedlinePlus](#), or [Planned Parenthood](#) for reliable info.

# Misinformation and disinformation

People have been spreading false and misleading information for centuries — long before we had the internet! But the internet makes it easier to share information quickly and reach large groups of people. And since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen more and more false health information online. According to the World Health Organization, an **infodemic** is what happens when there's too much information — especially false information — going around during a disease outbreak (like COVID-19).

You may have heard people use the word **misinformation** to describe all this false health info. Technically speaking, misinformation is any information that's false or misleading — so a person might share misinformation with good intentions. **Disinformation**, on the other hand, is when people spread information that they know is false. For example, people may spread false information to mislead or manipulate others. Some people and organizations have used bots (automated computer programs that post on social media) to spread disinformation about COVID-19 and other health topics. People have also used **bots** to discredit, or lead others to doubt, trustworthy people or resources.



# Trust (and distrust)

**Trust** is another important piece of the health and media literacy puzzle. When we ask, “Is this information legit?” we’re also asking, “Can I trust the person who’s telling me this information?”

If you’ve spent any time on social media, you know there’s no shortage of health guidance from “experts.” When there’s a constant flood of information to take in — and a ton of misinformation and disinformation floating around — it’s tricky to separate fact from fiction. And that makes it harder for us to trust any new information we learn, creating a cycle of **distrust**.

The **CRAAP test** is a tool students can use to determine if online information is trustworthy. For more on the CRAAP test, see [pages 9 to 12](#).



To learn more about the importance of trustworthiness for peer ambassadors and health professionals, check out our [Building Trust](#) guide.





# How you can help

**Quick recap:** We have to navigate some very complicated systems to find, understand, and use health information. But health and media literacy skills can help us find our way! As a student ambassador, you can help students build those important skills. On the next few pages, you'll find some helpful tools and information to share with other students.





# Introducing the CRAAP test: A helpful tool to assess online health information

The **CRAAP test** is a method that students can use to figure out if online health information is accurate and trustworthy. (It's a great way to spot "crappy" or false information!)

Developed by librarians at California State University, Chico, the CRAAP test is a series of questions to ask when you're looking at an article or social media post. "CRAAP" stands for "currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose" — 5 important qualities to consider when evaluating online information.



## EDUCATE STUDENTS ABOUT THE CRAAP TEST

We've included the CRAAP test questions on [pages 11 and 12](#). Here are a few different ways you can share the test with students:

- Create a **social media post** about the CRAAP test on your campus social media account. You could even create a series of posts and focus on a few questions in each post.
- **Make handouts** about the CRAAP test. You can print out handouts or save them as PDF files for online sharing. Encourage staff at the campus health center and other relevant organizations on campus to share the handouts with students. You could also encourage professors to pass out handouts in class (or post them for online classes).
- **Plan an on-campus event or webinar** to educate students about the CRAAP test. You can even make your event interactive by asking students to spot "CRAAP," or use the CRAAP test to assess a webpage. Be sure to save time for questions and discussion!

The CRAAP test is just one way to assess online health information. For more helpful resources to use and share with students, check out [page 17](#).





# The CRAAP test

## CURRENCY: IS THIS INFORMATION CURRENT?

- Was this information posted or updated recently? Up-to-date content is more likely to be accurate than older content.

## RELEVANCE: IS THIS INFORMATION RELEVANT TO THE TOPIC I NEED TO LEARN ABOUT?

- Does the information relate to your topic or answer your question?
- Who's the intended audience? Who was this information written for?

## AUTHORITY: WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF THIS INFORMATION?

- Who is the author, creator, or publisher of this information?
- Is the author qualified to write about this topic? Do they clearly explain their experience or connection to the topic? Are they a health care provider, a researcher, or an expert in the field?
- Is the author associated with an organization? If so, what is the organization's stance on the topic? (The organization's political, religious, and cultural beliefs may shape the information they choose to share and the people they choose to feature on their website or social media.)

## LEARNING FROM PERSONAL OR LIVED EXPERIENCE

In addition to learning from experts like health care providers and researchers, we can also learn from people who have **personal or lived experience**.

Let's say you're interested in learning about autism. You could search for autism on a reliable site like [MedlinePlus](#) and learn from people who have lived experience. For example, you could follow autistic creators on social media, read books by autistic authors, or even talk to friends who have shared their experience openly. Academic knowledge and lived experience are 2 different types of expertise, and both are valuable in different ways!

# The CRAAP test, continued

## ACCURACY: IS THIS INFORMATION RELIABLE, TRUTHFUL, AND CORRECT?

- Can you verify any of the information with another source or from personal knowledge?
- What evidence does the author give to support their claims?
- Has the information been reviewed by experts, like researchers with experience on the topic?
- Does the content use a lot of emotional language? (Sometimes people use emotional appeals to mislead others, spread false information, or persuade others to take action. For details, see our [Storytelling for Health Communication](#) guide.)
- Are there spelling, grammar, or typographical errors? (If you're seeing a lot of those mistakes, the information is probably not reliable.)

## PURPOSE: WHY DOES THIS INFORMATION EXIST?

- What is the purpose of the information? Is the author trying to inform, teach, or entertain people? Are they trying to sell a product or persuade people to do something? (For example, are they an influencer who's been paid or received free products in exchange for their social media post?)
- Does the author make their intentions or purpose clear? (If not, they might be trying to mislead or manipulate people.)
- Is the content fact or just the author's opinion?
- Are there political, cultural, religious, institutional, or personal biases?



# Assessing health advice from family and friends

In addition to searching online, many students **turn to family and friends for health advice**. For example, students may call their parents for advice when they feel sick or ask friends for input on topics like nutrition and physical activity.

You can encourage students to think critically about health advice by asking themselves these questions:

- Is this person telling me a fact or their opinion?
- Where did this person get the information they've shared with me?
- Is there evidence that supports what this person told me? Can I verify it with other sources?
- Is it possible that their political, cultural, or religious beliefs might affect their viewpoint about this topic?
- Are they trying to influence my decision? If so, why?

Since many students are making health decisions on their own for the first time, advice from family and friends can carry a lot of weight. Remind students that they can play an active role in decisions about their health and their body. **Everyone** has the right to advocate for their well-being and ask for what they need.



## **ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT HEALTH ADVICE**

Just like the CRAAP test, you can share these questions with students on social media, on a handout, or at an on-campus event or webinar.

# Understanding how algorithms shape the information we see

With **search engines** like Google, we can type in any question or topic and get answers within seconds. It's easy to assume that the first few search results must be the best sources. They're first for a reason, right? Turns out, it's not quite that simple.

Search engines use algorithms to decide which webpages to show you. An **algorithm** is a set of instructions that computers follow to solve a problem or complete a task. Search engine algorithms use a lot of information about you — like your age, gender, location, websites you visit, and social media accounts you follow — to determine which search results you see first. The way you phrase your search can influence your results, too.

**Social media apps** like Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube also use algorithms to determine what content you'll see. If you tend to interact with certain types of content, search engines and social media apps will recommend similar content for you. Basically, we train these tools to show us the content we're interested in.





# Breaking out of online echo chambers

Algorithms are powerful tools that can help us find very specific information and connect with people who share similar interests. But they can also limit the content that we see, creating an **echo chamber** effect. If you only follow and interact with people who have similar beliefs, political views, or life experiences, you're likely to see content that reinforces your beliefs — and you could miss the opportunity to learn from people with different viewpoints. This can make it easier for misinformation to spread within online communities.

The fact is, algorithms are here to stay, and with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) they're likely to get even smarter. So it's up to us to think critically about recommended content on search engines and social media.

The good news is that simply **understanding how algorithms shape the information we see online** helps to counteract the echo chamber effect. You can also encourage students to **diversify their social media feeds** by following people with a variety of beliefs, political views, and life experiences. For example, if a student wants to learn about sexual health online, they could follow sex educators who are involved in LGBTQ+ or disability activism to broaden their perspective.



## EDUCATE STUDENTS ABOUT ALGORITHMS

Consider creating social media content or hosting an event to educate students about algorithms and how they shape our everyday lives and decisions about our health and well-being.

# Calling out false information

If you see something, say something! By **calling out false information on social media** and encouraging others to do the same, you can prevent that bad info from reaching more people.

But speaking up about misinformation isn't always easy. If you've spent any time on the internet, you know that telling people they're wrong can lead to some tense conversations. For example, people may respond with angry or critical comments if they feel that you're challenging their beliefs. Some people may even use "trolling" tactics like encouraging their followers to leave negative comments on your post.

With the right approach, you can avoid many online arguments and defuse conflict when tensions are running high. The key is to **address misinformation without shaming or blaming** people who posted it. Here are some tips to keep in mind and share with students:

- Show that you understand where the poster is coming from by repeating their concerns in your own words
- Acknowledge that it's hard to find accurate, unbiased health information
- Calmly and directly share the facts that you know to be true
- Direct people to credible sources to fact check the social media post for themselves
- Don't make any negative comments or accusations about the original poster

## TAKE THE CONVERSATION OFFLINE



Vulnerable conversations can be easier without an online audience. If you know the original poster "in real life," consider asking them to meet face to face. Share how their post made you feel and invite them to share their perspective on the issue. For more tips on managing conflict, see our [Building Trust](#) guide.



# Health and media literacy resources

Check out these resources for more information on health and media literacy:

- [MediaWise: Digital Media Literacy for All](#)
- [Center for Humane Technology: 8 Ways Social Media Distorts Reality](#)
- [University of Washington: Misinformation Resources](#)
- [George Mason University: The Debunking Handbook](#)
- [Stanford University: Civic Online Reasoning curriculum](#)
- [U.S. Surgeon General: Health Misinformation](#)
- [Benedictine University: Evaluating Sources with the CRAAP Test](#)

