# What Information Means to a Middle Schooler

The Rise of Narrative Fluency

## Where To?

Liberalism maintains that once we collect enough data, we will arrive at the correct models. But the increasing importance of narratives—and the consequent decrease in the importance in their underlying facts—has thrown this epistemology into doubt.[[1]](#footnote-2) Much contemporary pedagogy seeks to recover a sense of reality from the soup of competing truths that defines postmodernity. Seeking to disclaim bias and reassert the regime of factuality, writers of all ideologies have begun to speak of argument as the act of staking out territory in an information war, proving that postmodernism is here to stay. As a crude example, here I’ve concatenated a paragraph from a right-wing conspiracy site with an opening passage from a mainstream liberal essayist:

The manipulation of facts and the slow relentless war on reality is being waged on this landscape of the mind. When those who seek to control humanity can convince the world that what they say is true, we will rapidly descend into the most oppressive tyranny ever seen.

Most of us can’t afford the luxury of investigating, because we have more pressing things to do: we have to go to work, take care of the kids, or look after elderly parents. Unfortunately, history does not give discounts. If the future of humanity is decided in your absence, because you are too busy feeding and clothing your kids, you and they will not be exempt from the consequences. This is unfair; but who said history was fair?[[2]](#footnote-3)

Media-literate readers can tell the authors’ ideologies apart by the change in shibboleths: the right’s prophecies of battle, chaos, and Armageddon become the left’s boring sympathy for unpaid domestic labor. But both agree on one thing: that only a dark era of epistemological chaos can follow the sunset of objectivity. Whether they tell the leftist story of identity- and class-based oppression or preach brass-tacks Evangelical nationalism, modern ideologies claim veracity by positioning themselves as rocks of intellectual certainty amid a tumult of postmodern confabulation. It’s not the *correct* ideology that wins the most followers, but the one with highest degree of narrative fluency—the one that knows who to talk to and what tone to take.

I would do something about it if I could.

## Answering Postmodernity in K–12 education

Narrative fluency grows well on the holy ground of K–12 education, where many teachers play the guardians of the factual, hoping to protect students from the conflation of fact and narrative that defines postmodernism. Through projects like the media-literacy movement and critical-thinking initiatives, K–12 educators hope to derive a consistent process for discerning fact from fiction. Their results, however, testify to the pervasiveness of the postmodern phenomenon by asserting that truth is not fixed, but an ideal to be pursued, an asymptote always just out of reach.

### Media Literacy

When students scroll through their morning news feed or burrow nightly into YouTube’s rabbit hole, they do more than consume digital entertainment; they also supply valuable information to those platforms’ recommendation algorithms, which study the swiper’s movements and prepare the most addictive medley of ads and content to hold their attention. We’ve heard a lot about the intrinsic flaws of the attention marketplace: the algorithms it produces tend to guide consumers toward clickbaity political extremes and away from good-faith debate. But unplugging students from social media is a nonviable solution, because social media is now an essential part of kids’ existence. Without it, they have few options for learning about school events, talking about personal issues with their friends, and keeping up with political debates.

The goal of media literacy (sometimes called digital literacy or information literacy) is for students to keep their intellectual guard up as they navigate digital space. In a common media-literacy activity, students pull examples of media from their own social-networking sites. For each source, they make a table assessing the text’s tone, its intended audience, the source’s bias and conflicts of interests, and the credibility and variety of its citations. Then they deliver a verdict on whether the source is trustworthy or bullshit. Through this exercise, students are meant to see that because media comes with motives, therefore we shouldn’t take every claim we encounter at face value.

In the exercise above, media literacy is a counteralgorithm, a series of dispassionate tests you apply to a given piece of media to determine whether the author is trying to pull the wool over your monitor. But sociotechnical researcher danah boyd points out that the media litmus tests taught in American schools are not so politically neutral as they seem. Students learn to prize a liberal epistemology of data-dumping and analytical phrasing over the gritty appeals to morality and tradition that dominate conservative media—issues of style and form, not content. Now, it may be the case that magical thinking is more prevalent on the political right. But current media-literacy pedagogy teaches students only to *make* this association—to feel distrustful when they recognize the shibboleths of conservative rhetoric—without equipping them to critique a source’s underlying argument.[[3]](#footnote-4)

While media literacy markets itself as solution to politically motivated disinformation, like any algorithm with poorly chosen heuristics, the series of litmus tests known as media literacy is hackable. Let’s say I adapt media-literacy pedagogy for my Korean students and teach them to doubt the exaggerated claims made by MOGEF’s opponents. I tell my students that trustworthy sources usually cite quantitative data and explain their interpretations through careful reasoning, whereas fraudsters tend to fly bright chyrons across the display and appeal to base emotions.

In 2040, the robot that writes Jun-hwan’s morning news will know from its trove of biometric data that Jun-hwan, due to subconscious reflexes honed in my media-literacy class and others like it, tends to trust news articles that feature dark grey text on a white background and ample bar graphs. Now, if the alt-right’s fringe candidate wants to win Jun-hwan back, all his backers need to do is pay the robot company to stuff Jun-hwan’s articles full of *their* graphs, favoring *their* political beliefs, and all written in the calm, reasonable tone Jun-hwan associates with intelligence.

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Taught well, media literacy will encompass more than superficial indices of political orientation. In addition to knowing the warning signs of shoddy argument, students must know how to apply universal logical principles to test smart-sounding claims. They need to learn critical thinking.

### Critical Thinking

Here’s the argument for teaching critical thinking: Students need to be able to argue against smart fascists as well as dumb ones. You can teach students to identify biased media and purge it from their bibliographies, but you can’t delete the biased sources themselves. Unfortunately, bias is everywhere, and students must learn to face it with a cool head.

In critical-thinking activities, students are explicitly asked to fetch *academic* texts from across the political spectrum, then put these sources “in conversation” and weigh their claims on objective grounds. For a textbook example of critical-thinking pedagogy in action, consider the rise of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States of America* in progressively minded syllabi. Zinn argued that the accepted narrative of history tends to privilege the powerful and reinforce the dispossession of the masses. Thus, he wrote what he called history from below, amplifying the voices of those who suffer when others celebrate. However you feel about Zinn’s scholarship, there is much to admire about his moral resolution. A lifelong pacifist and advocate for civil rights, he believed civic consciousness could only come from appreciating history.

I had a Zinn teacher when I took US history in high school. When we studied a given event, our teacher would place a chapter from the vanilla, state-sanctioned textbook alongside the corresponding narrative from Zinn. The students debated and wrote about how the “winners” and “losers” of the episode in question. Over time, a pattern emerged: while the winners tend to leverage historical narrative to justify their own choices, the losers can find solidarity in retelling forgotten stories. This is the fundamental theorem of historiography.

In the Zinn classroom, however, the lesson ends here, with the banal admission that narratives have narrators and there is no such thing as a neutral bystander. And as Sam Wineburg points out, while Zinnist historiography tracks with modern insights into the injustices of segregation and American imperialism, it suffers from the same stridence that characterizes state texts. “Such a history atrophies our tolerance for complexity,” Wineburg writes. Rather than gaining a feel for how historians work with primary sources and develop arguments, students in the Zinn classroom come to see history as a contest of moral authorities. Think fast: will you cheer for David or Goliath?[[4]](#footnote-5)

Of course, most educators don’t set the two contrasting textbooks on the table and ask students to make a binary choice. At this stage, someone usually brings up *nuance:* it’s not red or blue, but purple. In my US history class, by May the consensus was that the state textbook wasn’t so much wrong as incomplete. If you spliced it together with Zinn, you could approximate the truth.

Once it graduates from cage fights between political tribes, critical-thinking epistemology maintains that the correct model of history sits somewhere between the conventional and revisionist narratives. This is, inevitably, true. But just as media-literacy exercises mistake woke shibboleths for truth, critical-thinking pedagogy mistakes precision for certainty. In the end, the narrative that gets fixed in students’ minds depends more on context and framing than objective truth. This conditionality is the very essence of the postmodern phenomenon that critical thinking claims to speak against.

Media-literacy and critical-thinking initiatives are generally targeted at K-12 education. In higher education, the feedback loop between research and teaching has driven college pedagogy toward a different sense of intellectual integrity.

## The Limits of Narrative Fluency

The pedagogical currents described above aim for what we might call narrative fluency: the receptive ability to tease arguments apart and examine their evidential bases, plus the productive ability to weave together original arguments using facts (or “facts”) and language. Far be it from me to deny the value of skills like historical thinking. If I were advising a high school civics teacher or history department chair today, and if they assured me that my pedagogical ideals wouldn’t be drowned under the practical challenges of teaching, I would likely tell them to draw from many of these streams. For all their limitations, creative pedagogies involving media literacy and public scholarship easily beat traditional facts-only teaching. Nonetheless, let me voice two broad concerns about narrative fluency.

The first is that serial exercises in critical-thinking can engender a kind of epistemological complacency. After the professors publish their op-eds, after the students grade them on the media-literacy rubric, after MOGEF passes the most rigorous vetting—in the face of all this evidence, Jun-hwan’s mind may remain unchanged. And if someone should then challenge his beliefs, Jun-hwan now has an ace in the hole: “I’ve looked at all the facts and studies. Have you? No? Then clearly *I’m* not the one who needs to give things a second thought.” Narrative fluency wants to be a process for overturning our long-held assumptions, but it can just as easily become an excuse for stubbornness.

At the heart of the critical-thinking discourse lies a spiritual belief—that if we only think hard enough, we will arrive at objective truth. How do we know when we’ve thought hard enough? The only way we can be “sure” that narrative-fluency pedagogy is working is if it guides people to the conclusions we have already decided they ought to reach. Those who maintain fringe views despite the teacher’s best efforts force us to backtrack and ask what went wrong: Perhaps we didn’t engage with the counterargument thoroughly. Perhaps the sources lacked diversity. Perhaps Jun-hwan just isn’t *getting* it. In any case, narrative fluency gets to measure its own yardstick.

My greatest concern about narrative fluency, then, has to do with trust. Just as mastering the language of science helped a generation of quacks trot out eugenic fantasies, narrative fluency can be twisted to regressive ends. Narrative is power: narrative is morally fraught.

Pretend, for a moment, that we get narrative-fluency pedagogy to work. We’ve figured out how to teach every student to distinguish fact from fake, analyze arguments critically, and write (or record, or code, or perform) persuasive narratives of their own. Only a subset of these students will enter professional fields that grant them a public platform. And only an idealistic subset of these will accept a life of financial insecurity to become journalists, teachers, or university researchers whose ostensible goal is to tell the correct story. The majority—and the most talented—of the narratively fluent will work at PR firms, undertake research in private industry, or serve as in-house legal counsel for multinational corporations.

The pedagogy of narrative fluency upholds itself as an antidote to moral bankruptcy, but in fact, narrative fluency is morally neutral. While narrative fluency may guide some students to the right answers, for many of them, it will become a marketable aptitude alongside the familiar twenty-first-century skills of computer coding, tax minimization, and personal branding. (Indeed, these skills themselves rely on kinds of narrative fluency.) Educators teach their students about argument in school under the assumption that it will make them more objective, conscientious voters. But once these students graduate, they find that the incentives are broken. There’s far more money in manipulating their peers on behalf of the powerful.

For a glimpse of this future, consider the media-literacy program at the Ross School, a private prep school in Long Island whose students come from all over the world and pay $41,200 in yearly tuition to learn about the “construction and deconstruction of media,” spar with bright young minds, and gain introductions into the big media’s tightest social circles. Ross’s curriculum, and education journalist Alexandria Neason’s glowing review of it, demonstrates a familiar pattern in pedagogical change: elite, private schools set the pace, and the rest of the education system plays catchup. Ross students, who’ve taken the best media-literacy courses from the best teachers earliest, will retain a competitive advantage in the workforce for years to come.[[5]](#footnote-6)

1. Rensin, “Blathering Superego.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The first paragraph is from InfoWars, “About Alex Jones.” The second is from Harari, *21 Lessons,* introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. boyd, “You Think You Want Media Literacy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Wineburg, “Howard Zinn.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Neason, “Students of Truth.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)