

DEVELOPING **DIGITAL** DETECTIVES

Essential Lessons for Discerning
Fact From Fiction in the 'Fake News' Era

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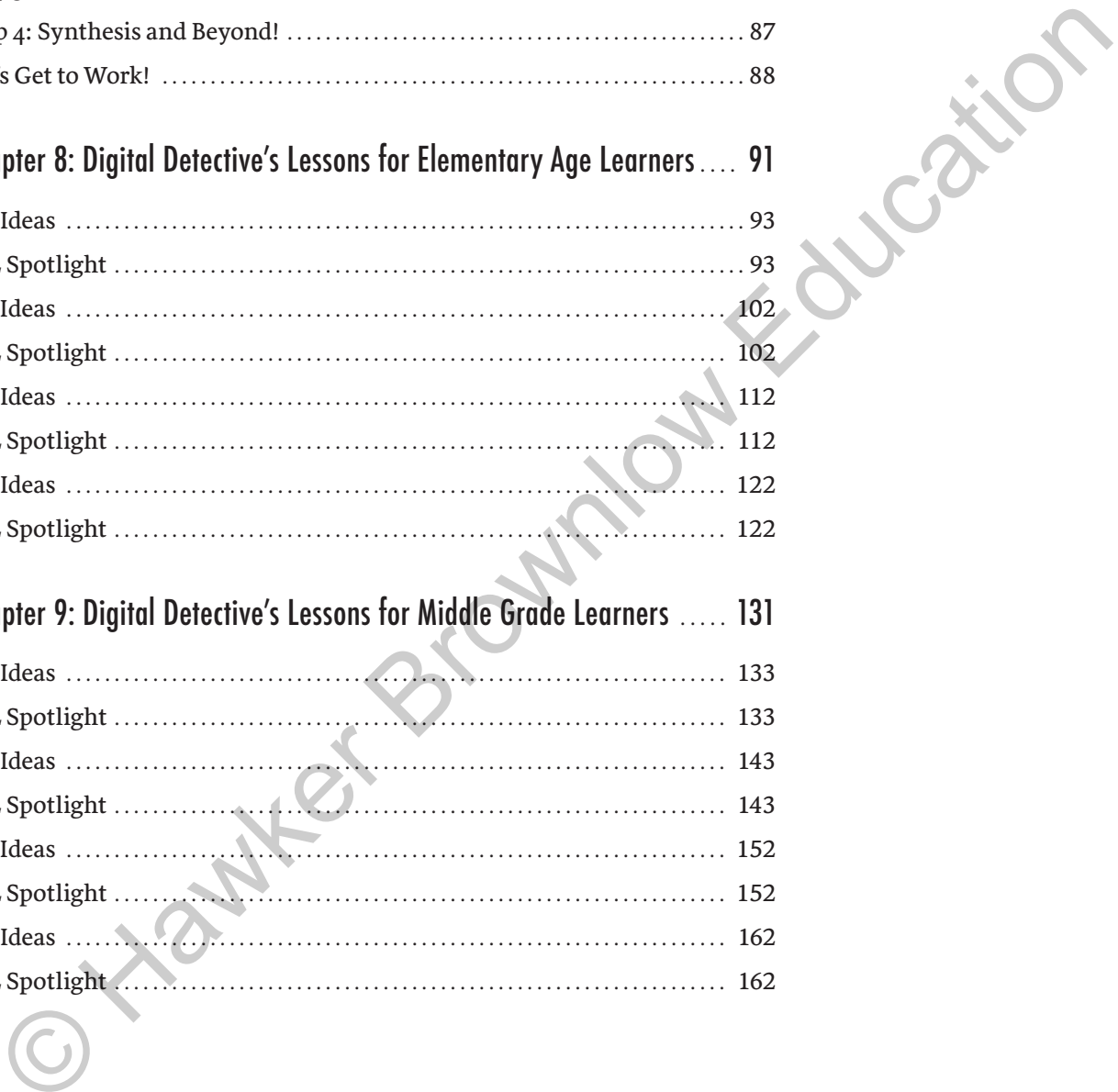
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Introduction

Let's Get Started!



A variety of resources related to this chapter can be found in the Digital Detective's Evidence Locker. Use the QR code to the left, or visit evidencelocker.online. Then navigate to Introduction.

The recent weeks and months have taught us a painful lesson. There is truth and there are lies, lies told for power and for profit. And each of us has a duty and a responsibility as citizens, as Americans, and especially as leaders . . . to defend the truth and defeat the lies.

—U.S. President Joseph R. Biden

On January 6, 2021, a group of rioters, some of whom were armed, forced their way into the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. Millions of people around the world, including perhaps some of the demonstrators in Washington who were there to protest the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, watched in shock as the mob overtook the Capitol Police, scaled barricades, and swarmed the steps, until finally breaking through locked windows and doors to storm the seat of American democracy. While their ultimate goal of confronting and even harming specific lawmakers (such as

the Vice President of the United States) was unsuccessful, a number of people were killed and many others were injured.

As these events unfolded, the world was facing a series of other unprecedented crises: a global pandemic and the resulting infodemic (WHO et al., 2020), climate change, and an ongoing struggle for racial justice (to name just a few). All of these monumental challenges have one thing in common: They are all fueled, and worsened, by misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation.

Just as the events of January 6, 2020 were spurred on by conspiracy theories about the recent presidential election, global efforts to address COVID-19, climate change, and racial injustice have been hampered by social media-fueled disinformation and entrenched group thinking. It's for this reason that we believe mis-, dis-, and malinformation, and their effect on the decisions we make, are the greatest threats facing our world today. If that sounds hyperbolic, we assure you that it isn't. Until we get a handle on our own ability to determine what can and can't be trusted in the information we consume, we stand very little chance of truly confronting the other problems we face as a species.

There's an old saying that goes, "The definition of insanity is repeating the same actions and expecting different results." Information literacy is not a new discipline. And yet, traditional approaches to this work are clearly not cutting it. In light of all the challenges we face, we believe that continuing to apply the same methods to this problem, while keeping our fingers crossed for better outcomes, not only fits this definition of insanity but is also incredibly irresponsible. Today's complex information landscape requires learners of all ages to be *Digital Detectives*: information sleuths who actively pursue clues to credibility by examining information through multiple lenses.

The Four Lenses

This book comprises, essentially, two sections. Chapters 1 through 4 describe the protocol we've developed for evaluating false information: the Four

Lenses. Unlike traditional checklists that ask learners to seek and find a static, right answer to the question of whether content can be trusted, the Four Lenses magnify the connection between our own emotional responses to information and our ability to thrive during an infodemic. The Four Lenses are a tool for understanding and evaluating the relationship between the motives of those who create and spread false content and what we bring to the table as human beings. With that in mind, no single lens represents a “Go Directly to Jail” card: a one-and-done tool for identifying what can be trusted from what can’t. Taken together and in order, the Four Lenses are a nuanced approach to information literacy that challenges learners to think deeply about the information they consume, how that information affects them, and how their behavior online affects others and our world.

1. The **Triggers Lens** (Chapter 1) helps Digital Detectives recognize how information is designed to trigger an emotional response and how those responses then drive our behavior online. More importantly, however, this lens supports educators in the work of helping learners develop strategies for managing those triggers so that they are better able to navigate and evaluate the information they consume.
2. The **Access Lens** (Chapter 2) helps learners understand how the device through which they are accessing information influences their ability to determine what can be trusted. In addition to the layers social media adds to the process of locating traditional markers of credibility, the Community Reading Experience, which accompanies content shared in those spaces, plays a role in influencing our decisions as content creators and consumers. The Access Lens allows Digital Detectives to take control of their device, rather than letting the device control them.
3. The **Forensics Lens** (Chapter 3) supports Digital Detectives in the work of developing authentic investigations to guide their searches for credibility clues. Long gone are the days when a simple checklist or mnemonic device was sufficient to the task of determining whether information can be trusted. This lens seeks to help learners develop the skills for creating the



The First Lens: Triggers



Reminder: A variety of resources related to this chapter can be found in the **Digital Detective's Evidence Locker**. Use the QR code to the left, or visit evidencelocker.online, then navigate to Chapter 1.

Even when the researchers controlled for every difference between the accounts originating rumors—like whether that person had more followers or was verified—falsehoods were still 70 percent more likely to get retweeted than accurate news. [Additionally] content that arouses strong emotions spreads further, faster, more deeply, and more broadly.

—Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral

Explore This Lens

We all know what it's like to read, watch, or hear something online that evokes an extreme emotional reaction. Before we know it, we're tapping out a strongly worded, 240-character editorial to post alongside it when we pass the same content on to our own network of followers. Although the emotions involved often feel complicated and difficult to untangle, the chain of events that begins when we encounter an **emotional trigger** and ends with us liking and/or sharing information that we haven't fully vetted is really quite simple.



Our brains are remarkably good at classifying information. This is a product of evolutionary efficiency. Let's use the book you're reading as an example. Whether you're reading a physical or digital copy, or you're listening to this as an audiobook, your brain didn't have to spend time analyzing what it was encountering. Your brain already knows what a book is. It didn't have to exert any energy deciding whether or not the book was dangerous. Your brain didn't have to figure out the book's function. Your brain has already classified what a book is, so that analysis isn't necessary. With these tasks handled automatically in milliseconds, your brain could focus on other tasks, including the work of interpreting and applying the book's content. In *Fact vs. Fiction: Teaching Critical Thinking Skills in the Age of Fake News*, we unpacked the concept of confirmation bias, or the idea that once we've established an opinion about something, we dismiss any information that contradicts those beliefs. In his book *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know about the People We Don't Know* (2019), Malcolm Gladwell highlighted the work of Timothy R. Levine, who calls this phenomenon "defaulting to truth," with *truth* meaning anything that our brains have already classified into the category of representing truth.

Let's look at the example of *Developing Digital Detectives* again. If you picked up this book assuming it would be great, because of its reviews or your prior experience with the authors, it would take a lot of evidence to make you think otherwise. You might have even initially dismissed contradictory evidence because your brain had already made some decisions about what was true about the book. This may be a demonstration of confirmation bias because the new information about the book contradicts your already existing beliefs. But it could also be an example of *ambiguity aversion*, which refers to our brain's default toward known information versus that which is unknown. As the old saying goes, "better the devil you know than the one you don't." In this example, it's likely that you would dismiss new knowledge about the book because the known information requires less work for your brain to process. Our brains prefer the ease of autoprocessing already known content to the cognitive workout required in analyzing the unfamiliar. Obviously, we hope you love our book, but as Gladwell pointed out, when it comes to media literacy, our brains are often working against us. "Defaulting to truth is a problem," he stated. "It lets spies and con artists roam free" (2019, p. 93). Gladwell posited