

Global Voices is a weekly column written by Craig and Marc Kielburger examining current events, topics and issues affecting local and global communities. Each month, engaging classroom resources are created to accompany one column to help educators bring world issues into the classroom in a digestible manner. For more information on how to sign up please visit WE.org/global-voices-signup.

Beware of Hidden Messages in Memes—Think Before You Click

Fact Sheet

- The word meme was created by British author and biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Derived from an ancient Greek word that means “to imitate,” Dawkins coined the term to help explain how cultures are developed and spread. ([WIRED](#))
- In his book, Dawkins compared memes to the spread of a virus, which later led to the social media expression “to go viral.” ([WIRED](#))
- Long before the Internet was invented, there were popular images appearing in print media, and even as graffiti on walls, that could be considered “memes.” One example was the phrase “Kilroy was here,” accompanied by a simplistic cartoon of a man looking over a wall. During the Second World War, this meme was drawn on walls across Europe by American soldiers. ([Know Your Meme](#))
- Using Google searches as an indicator, popular use of the word “meme” on the Internet began to really grow starting in 2012. ([Google Trends](#))
- There is no agreement on what was the first true Internet meme, but some people consider that it was the “dancing baby” 3D animation image, made popular by the TV series *Ally McBeal*. ([Thrillist](#))



WE Learning Framework Skills



Critical Thinking



Action Planning



Reflection

These icons identify the most relevant skills students will develop using this resource. Learn more about the WE Learning Framework at WE.org/we-schools/program/learning-framework/.

Subject

- ▶ English Language Arts

Materials

- ▶ Front board
- ▶ Paper and writing utensils
- ▶ Computer/tablet with Internet access

Key Terms

- ▶ **Meme**—A cultural idea or practice that is passed from one person to another, from one generation to the next. In modern social media, a meme is a picture or piece of short text that is copied and shared.
- ▶ **Viral**—In the context of social media, when something like a photo, video, text or article is shared very widely and very rapidly.
- ▶ **Innocuous**—Something that appears to be innocent and not harmful.

Classroom Activity - Grades 9 to 12:

Essential Questions:

- ▶ Why is it important to think critically about the material you share online?

Learning Goals:

Students will:

- ▶ Understand how messages are communicated through media texts
- ▶ Recognize how media texts can be interpreted in different ways
- ▶ Think critically about what they share on social media

Discussion:

1. What is a meme?
2. The term “meme” was originally coined in 1976 by British author and biologist Richard Dawkins and is derived from an ancient Greek word meaning “to imitate”. Why are memes considered a form of imitation?
3. Why have memes become popular on social media?
4. How could a meme be harmful or dangerous?
5. Why is it important to think critically about what you share online?
6. What does Mark Blevis mean when he says: “Memes replace thoughtful conversation and prevent us from finding common ground between different opinions”? Do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Dive Deeper:

1. Introduce students to the six-word story. Explain that you will show them an image and they must communicate what's happening in the picture using only six words.
2. Select an image for students that will generate a variety of different stories (e.g., www.flickr.com/photos/syriafreedom/8309708775) and give them 10–15 minutes to create their story. The purpose of this activity is to demonstrate how an image can be interpreted differently by different people.
3. Once students have completed their story, ask them to share it with a partner or select five or six stories to share as a class.
4. Discuss the following questions:
 - How does your story compare to other students' stories?

- Why are there differences even though everyone wrote about the same picture?
- What influences the way we interpret pictures and other media texts?

5. As a class or in small groups, read the article “Beware of Hidden Messages in Memes—Think Before You Click” and discuss the questions in the Discussion section.

Educator’s Note: While memes can be phrases, videos, photos, images or gifs, this activity will focus on memes that use photos or images and text.

6. Explain to students that memes shared on social media often use photos or images to communicate a message. However, the images may be taken out of context or interpreted differently than what was originally intended. For example, when Griffin Kiritsy was in his first year of college in the United States, he was featured in a magazine article about being a freshman which included a photo shoot. Someone found Griffin's photo online and turned it into a meme about [a naive and incompetent college freshman](#). While some people may consider this a funny meme, it uses Griffin's photo in a way he did not originally intend.
7. Using the “walk and talk” strategy, have students find a partner and, as they walk around the class, ask them to discuss: How you would feel if you had been in Griffin's position? What would it feel like to have an image of you used as a meme? How would it affect your life now and in the future?

As an alternative, students can remain in their seats and discuss the questions with a partner.

8. Ask students to share some of their favourite memes and discuss the following questions. Make sure to choose memes that include photos or images and to remind students about the types of content that are appropriate to share in class.
 - What message is this meme trying to communicate?
 - How was the photo or image interpreted in order to create the meme?
 - Where does the photo or image come from?
 - Does the message of the meme reflect the original context of the photo or image?
 - What are the potential consequences of using a photo or image to create a meme?
9. Explain to students that memes can change or distort how an image is interpreted and can often reinforce negative gender, cultural or racial stereotypes. For example: a meme featuring someone participating in a cultural celebration may be humorous to some, but may also reinforce harmful stereotypes about that culture.

10. Divide students into pairs or small groups and assign each pair or group a meme. As an alternative, allow students to select their own meme.
11. Ask each pair or group to analyze their meme and the message it portrays. Encourage students to use the following guiding questions to support their analysis:
 - What is the meme? Describe the text, photo or image it uses.
 - What message does this meme communicate?
 - Why is this meme popular? Why might people like this meme?
 - What negative stereotypes does this meme reinforce?
 - Would you share this meme with your friends and family? Why or why not?
 - Would you share this meme on social media? Why or why not?
12. Once students have finished their analysis, assign each pair or group a number. Call out two numbers and have those pairs or groups share their meme and analysis with each other. Continue to call out numbers until each pair or group has someone to share with. If time allows, have students rotate two or three times so they have an opportunity to share with as many of their peers as possible.
13. To conclude, ask each student to reflect on what they have learned about memes and what they must consider before sharing content online. Allow students to share their reflections in a written response, an oral presentation or by creating their own original meme.

Extension:

Explain to students that memes are often created using political or historical images. If someone views this type of meme without understanding the specific historical or political context, they may misinterpret the message of the meme. For example: a political party may create a meme using a photo of their opponent and text that misrepresents their opponent's views or beliefs. If someone views that meme and isn't familiar with that candidate's platform, they may interpret the message of the meme as an accurate and factual representation of that candidate.

Have students investigate popular historical or political memes on social media and analyze how these memes could alter or distort a viewer's understanding of history or politics. Encourage students to develop guidelines to help themselves and others think critically about what they are viewing and sharing online.