

PAPER TRAIL

Teacher Guide

FOR TEACHERS

Grade level: 9–12

Format: individual or pairs

Time: ~45 min per claim

OVERVIEW

Paper Trail is a source-tracing exercise built around fictional but realistic viral claims. Each claim comes with five evidence exhibits — a social media post, a product webpage, a blog article, a press release, and a citation slip — that together form a chain leading back to an origin. Four of the five exhibits are fabricated for this exercise. One is genuinely real: an existing, findable source that students can look up and read for themselves. The exercise asks students to work backward through the chain, identify what kind of source each exhibit is, and determine what the real underlying source actually says, as opposed to how it has been characterized along the way.

WHY THIS DESIGN

Most media literacy exercises ask students to spot an obviously fake claim. Paper Trail asks something harder and more realistic: to trace a claim that sounds plausible back through several layers of retelling, and to notice where that retelling quietly drifted from what the original source actually supports. The one real source in each packet is not fabricated — it exists, has a real citation, and can be independently verified. What is misleading is not the source itself but how it has been selectively cited, vaguely attributed, or quietly recontextualized along the way. This mirrors how a great deal of real misinformation works: not outright fabrication, but citation laundering.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify and classify different types of media sources (original research, news, press release, blog, social post, advertisement).
- Trace a claim backward through multiple layers of retelling to its origin.
- Distinguish between fabricated framing and a genuine, verifiable source.
- Evaluate whether a citation actually supports the claim attributed to it.
- Practice basic source-verification skills, such as looking up a DOI or PMID and confirming a journal is real.

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STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

Codes below reflect the CCSS grades 9–10 band. The 11–12 band equivalents (e.g. RH.11-12.1, RI.11-12.8) address the same skills at increased text complexity and apply equally well to this exercise.

STANDARD	DESCRIPTION
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.8	Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1	Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9	Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.8	Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; avoid plagiarism and follow a standard format for citation.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.6	Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- One Evidence Exhibits sheet per claim (printed or on screen).
- One Paper Trail worksheet per student (fillable PDF or printed).
- Internet or library database access, for the verification step at Hop 4.
- The Student Guide and glossary, for reference during the exercise.

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FACILITATION STEPS

1. Distribute one claim's Evidence Exhibits sheet and worksheet.
2. You do not need to reveal in advance which exhibit is real — the exhibits sheet already states that some are fabricated and at least one is real, which is enough framing.
3. Let students work through Hops 1–4 independently or in pairs, identifying what each exhibit is and what kind of source it represents.
4. For Hop 4 (Exhibit E), have students actually look up the citation using classroom internet access or a library database, and confirm the title, journal, and DOI exist.
5. Once they find the real source, have them read enough of it (the abstract or summary is usually enough) to compare it against how Exhibits C and D described it.
6. Have students complete Field Notes, describing what changed between the real source and the version that went viral.
7. Debrief as a class: at which hop did the claim start to diverge from what the source actually supports?

ABOUT THE ANSWER KEY

The accompanying answer key documents one reasonable reading of each claim's trail, including the intended real source and the intended tells at each hop. It is not canonical. Students may reasonably identify additional tells, or describe the drift in the claim differently than the key does — source criticism is an interpretive skill, not a lookup task. Use the key as a discussion anchor, not a grading rubric.

DISCUSSION & EXTENSION PROMPTS

- Which hop in this chain did the most damage to accuracy — the first retelling, or a later one?
- Would you have caught the fabricated exhibits without being told one was real? What tipped you off?
- Find a real headline from this week that reminds you of this claim. What would it take to trace it the same way?
- If your class did more than one claim: which domain was easiest to trace? Which was hardest, and why?