



## Authority & Credibility

*Persuasion & Influence · Tier 2 · Component 2 — instructor overview*

**Grades:** 9–10    **Time:** ~45 min (flexible)    **Format:** whole-class reading, then individual or pairs

We can't verify everything ourselves, so we trust experts — a rational shortcut, and exactly why the *costume* of expertise is worth faking. This component teaches students to separate legitimate authority from its imitation with three checks: right field, verifiable record, real accountability.

### WHAT STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO DO

- Distinguish a **signal** of credibility (a title, a lab coat) from **evidence** of it (a verifiable record).
- Apply three checks — relevant field, verifiability, accountability — to any claimed authority.
- Identify **borrowed authority**: a real expert speaking outside their expertise.
- Explain why anonymity and "studies show" without a study weaken a source.

### WHY IT MATTERS

High-schoolers meet a flood of confident sources: influencers in lab coats, "doctor recommended," official-sounding institutes. The markers of expertise are cheap to rent, and the trust reflex fires fast. Students who reach past the signal to the substance are far harder to fool — in the pharmacy aisle and the voting booth alike.

The goal isn't cynicism. Real expertise deserves real weight. The skill is telling the difference on purpose, rather than letting a costume decide.

### PACING

| SEGMENT         | TIME      | WHAT HAPPENS                                           |
|-----------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Reading         | 10–12 min | Read the Student pages; pause at the CalmCore example. |
| Rate the source | 10 min    | Activity Part A in pairs.                              |
| Break the badge | 12–15 min | Activity Parts B–C.                                    |
| Debrief         | 8–10 min  | Discussion prompts (Instructor p. 4).                  |

### MATERIALS

The 4 Student pages per student or pair. Optional: a real ad or post that leans on authority.



## Authority & Credibility

*The mechanism in depth — part 1 of 2*

Authority is a reasoning shortcut: when we can't judge a claim directly, we judge the source instead and borrow its confidence. The shortcut is usually sound — most of what any of us knows, we take on trust from people who actually did the work. It is also reliably exploited, because the *markers* of expertise are far easier to copy than the expertise. The running example is **CalmCore**, a sleep supplement sold through a viral post.

### WHY THE SHORTCUT WORKS — AND SLIPS

We give authority extra weight almost automatically (appeal to authority), and confident, credential-heavy signals get overweighted even when they don't fit the question at hand (authority-signal overweighting). Worse, a strong impression in one area spills onto unrelated judgments — the halo effect (halo effect bleed). Someone attractive, famous, or simply well-produced *seems* more competent and honest across the board.

CalmCore's post opens with a person in a white coat, stethoscope draped, standing in what looks like a lab. The caption: "As a doctor, I only trust CalmCore." Every signal of authority is present — coat, setting, the word "doctor," a calm expert tone. None of it is evidence. We never learn a name, a field, a credential you could check, or whether the person is paid. The costume is doing all the work the halo makes possible.



---

# Authority & Credibility

*The mechanism in depth — part 2 of 2*

## HOW AUTHORITY GETS MANUFACTURED

---

Three moves recur. **Borrowed authority:** a real expert speaking outside their lane — a physicist on nutrition, a celebrity on anything — trading on genuine credibility where it doesn't apply. **Costume and jargon:** lab coats, "Dr." with no relevant doctorate, technical words chosen to impress rather than inform. **Institutional fog:** official-sounding names ("The National Wellness Institute") with no track record, and "studies show" attached to no study anyone can find.

CalmCore uses all three. The "doctor" may be an actor or a real doctor of something unrelated (borrowed authority). "Clinically studied ingredients" is jargon that sounds like "clinically proven" but promises nothing (costume). And the fine print credits "research from the Sleep Wellness Council" — an entity with a website and no findings you can read (institutional fog).

## THE THREE CHECKS

---

Against all of this, one short procedure holds up. **Right field?** Is this authority actually an expert on *this* question — sleep medicine, not "wellness" in general? **Verifiable?** Is there a real name, a real credential, a real study you could look up — or only "experts say"? **Accountable?** If they're wrong, does it cost them anything? A named physician risks a reputation and a license; an anonymous lab coat risks nothing.

## ONE LINE TO CARRY

---

**A signal is not evidence.** The question is never "does this look credible?" but "is the authority in the right field, is the record verifiable, and who is accountable if it's wrong?"



## Authority & Credibility

*Discussion guide — modular; assemble to fit your period*

These blocks are timed so you can build a lesson from them: a single period, or a full unit day. Run the activity with an opener before and a debrief after — pick what fits.

### TIME BUDGET — MIX AND MATCH

| BLOCK                  | TIME        | USE                |
|------------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| <b>Opener</b> (before) | 5–8 min     | Pick one, below.   |
| <b>Activity</b>        | 22–25 min   | The student pages. |
| <b>Debrief</b> (after) | ~5 min each | Pick 1–4 prompts.  |
| <b>Close</b>           | 3 min       | The takeaway.      |

**Single period:** opener + activity + one debrief + close. **Full lesson:** opener + activity + two or three debriefs + an extension.

### BEFORE — THE OPENER (PICK ONE · 5–8 MIN)

FORMAT: think-pair-share or a quick hands-up. GOAL: surface what students already notice and pose the question. END RESULT: every student has committed to a prediction or named a real example you can return to in the debrief.

- **Predict.** Show a stock "person in a lab coat" captioned "as a doctor, I recommend this." Quick hands-up: trust it? Hold the vote; revisit after the three checks.
- **From their world.** Ask for one "expert-backed" claim they met this week; keep two on the board to run the checks on in the debrief.

### THE ACTIVITY (BUDGET 22–25 MIN)

CONCRETE GOAL — STUDENTS CAN: rate a real source as strong, weak, or fake authority and name which check (field / verifiable / accountable) it fails.

### AFTER — THE DEBRIEF (PICK 1–4 · ~5 MIN EACH)

FORMAT: whole-class; call on the examples students generated in the opener and activity. END RESULT: students can state the takeaway in their own words and back it with one concrete example from their own life or the activity.

- What's the difference between *looking* credible and *being* credible?
- Why is a famous person a weak authority on most topics?
- What does "accountable" add — why does it matter if an expert can be checked?
- Take one claim from the board: does it pass all three checks?

### CLOSE (3 MIN)

Have a few students state the takeaway in their own words: **Right field, verifiable record, real accountability — or it's a costume.**



## Authority & Credibility

*Leading the discussion — pacing, redirects, and warm-ups*

The previous page is the plan; this page is for running it. Budget the period from the total below, and keep the redirect moves handy — most discussions falter in one of these four ways.

### DOES IT FIT THE PERIOD?

ONE PERIOD (~45–50 MIN): opener 6 + activity 22–25 + one debrief 5 + close 3 = **36–39 min.** BLOCK (~90 MIN): add two more debriefs and a differentiation extension from the facilitation page.

### WHEN DISCUSSION STALLS OR DERAILS

| IF...                       | MOVE                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Silence, or “I don’t know”  | Shrink the question: “Just name the first thing you noticed.” Give 30 seconds of silent think-time, then call on a pair, not an individual. |
| One or two voices dominate  | “Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t gone yet.” Run it as think-pair-share first, so every student has an answer ready to offer.             |
| It turns personal or heated | Move the trial from the person to the message: “What in the text makes you say that?” Keep the claim on trial, never the classmate.         |
| Answers stay on the surface | Push for evidence: “Where exactly — quote the line.” Then “What would change your mind?” to surface the reasoning underneath.               |

### WARM-UP BANK (SWAP IN FOR ANY OPENER)

Interchangeable with the opener on the previous page. Vary them across a unit so the hook stays fresh.

- **Two-minute hunt.** Find one real example of today’s move on your phone right now; keep the best one for the debrief.
- **Steelman it.** What’s the most honest reason someone would use this technique? Persuasion isn’t always dishonest — name the legitimate version first.
- **Rate and defend.** Put one message on the board; everyone rates it 1–5 for how persuasive, then defends the spread of answers.
- **Odd one out.** Three short examples, one isn’t the move — which, and how can you tell?



## Authority & Credibility

Facilitation, anticipated moves & answer key

### ANTICIPATED STUDENT RESPONSES & MISCONCEPTIONS

- **"So never trust experts."** The opposite — trusting real experts is how anyone learns anything. The point is telling real from fake, not distrusting all.
- **"If they have a degree, they're credible."** Press the *field*: a degree in one area isn't authority in another. Borrowed authority is the most common trap.
- **"It must be true — it says 'clinically studied.'"** Unpack the phrase: "studied" isn't "proven," and "an ingredient was studied" isn't "this product works."
- **Confidence = competence.** Students often rate the most confident source highest. Note that confidence is a signal anyone can perform.

### DIFFERENTIATION & EXTENSIONS

**Support:** give the three checks as a printed checklist to apply. **Stretch:** have students find a real health or finance claim and run all three checks, then write a one-paragraph verdict; or research what a genuine credential in that field requires. **Cross-curricular:** peer review in science; primary vs. secondary sources in history.

### ANSWER KEY — ACTIVITY

| ITEM                                  | SAMPLE RESPONSE                                                   |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A1 named cardiologist on heart health | <i>Strong — right field, verifiable, accountable.</i>             |
| A2 pop star selling detox tea         | <i>Weak/fake — borrowed authority.</i>                            |
| A3 "9 of 10 dentists" (no source)     | <i>Fake — a signal, not evidence; unverifiable.</i>               |
| A4 named engineer on her own bridge   | <i>Strong — right field and checkable.</i>                        |
| B (the Institute badge)               | <i>Ask: who are they, and what published record do they have?</i> |



---

## Authority & Credibility

*Real expertise vs. the costume of it*

A post crosses your feed: a person in a white coat, stethoscope around the neck, standing in a lab. "As a doctor, I only trust CalmCore for sleep." It feels convincing. But look at what's actually there — a coat, a setting, and the word "doctor." No name. No field. No study you could read. No way to know if they're paid. The whole thing is a costume, and it's working on you anyway.

You can't personally test everything, so you trust experts — and that's smart. Almost everything you know, you took on trust from someone who did the work. The catch is that the *look* of expertise is cheap to fake, and your brain hands out trust fast to anything that looks the part.

### WHY WE FALL FOR IT

---

When we can't judge a claim, we judge the source instead. A confident voice, a title, a lab coat, a prestigious logo — all of it triggers trust before we've checked anything. And a good impression in one area leaks onto everything else: someone polished, famous, or attractive *seems* more competent and honest across the board, even about things they know nothing about. CalmCore rents that leak.

### THE THREE WAYS IT'S FAKED

---

**Borrowed authority:** a real expert (or celebrity) speaking outside their field — a champion athlete selling supplements, a physicist talking nutrition. Real credibility, wrong subject. **Costume and jargon:** lab coats and words like "clinically studied," which *sounds* like "clinically proven" but promises nothing.

**Institutional fog:** official-sounding names — "The Sleep Wellness Council" — with a slick site and no findings you can actually read.



---

## Authority & Credibility

*Three checks that beat the costume*

Against all of that, you only need one short routine. Run any claimed authority through three checks.

### 1. RIGHT FIELD?

---

Is this person actually an expert on *this exact* question? "A doctor" isn't enough — a doctor of what?

CalmCore's coat says "doctor," but sleep medicine is a specialty. A famous nutritionist has nothing useful to say about your phone battery, and a brilliant engineer has no special authority on vaccines. Expertise doesn't transfer across fields just because someone is smart.

### 2. VERIFIABLE?

---

Can you actually check it? A real name, a real credential, a real study with a title you could look up — or just "experts say" and "studies show"? If you can't find the source, there's a good chance there isn't one.

"Clinically studied ingredients" that name no clinic and no study is a phrase, not a fact.

### 3. ACCOUNTABLE?

---

If they're wrong, does it cost them anything? A named doctor puts a reputation and a license on the line. An anonymous lab coat in a post risks nothing — which is exactly why the post is anonymous. Real experts can be checked, questioned, and corrected. Costumes can't.

### THE ONE LINE

---

**A signal is not evidence.** A lab coat is a costume. "Doctor recommended" is a phrase. "Studies show" with no study is nothing at all. Don't ask "does this look credible?" Ask: *right field, verifiable, accountable?* If a source can't pass all three, its confidence is just performance.





## Authority & Credibility

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**The three checks:** Right field? · Verifiable record? · Accountable if wrong?

### PART A — RATE THE SOURCE

Mark each **Strong**, **Weak**, or **Fake** authority, and give one reason.

| SOURCE                                                | RATING · WHY |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. A named cardiologist, on heart health.             |              |
| 2. A pop star selling a "detox" tea.                  |              |
| 3. "9 out of 10 dentists recommend it" (no source).   |              |
| 4. A named engineer explaining a bridge she designed. |              |

### PART B — BREAK THE BADGE

An ad reads "Backed by the Institute for Advanced Wellness." Write two questions you'd ask before trusting that badge.

|             |
|-------------|
| <hr/> <hr/> |
|-------------|

**PART C — BORROWED AUTHORITY**

A world-champion chess player posts that a certain phone is "the only one worth buying." Is that strong authority? Explain exactly what's being borrowed — and what it would take to make the recommendation credible.

---

---

**PART D — BUILD ONE, THEN BREAK IT**

Invent a convincing-but-fake authority badge for an energy drink (a title, an institute, a phrase like CalmCore's). Then write the single question that pops it.

**The fake badge**

---

**The question that pops it**

---

**PART E — IN THE WILD**

Find one real claim that leans on authority. Run all three checks and write your verdict in a sentence.

---

---