

Lesson Plan: Trolls—Just Like You and Me?

By Andrea Aust

Featured Resources

Above the Noise: [Are Internet Trolls Born or Made?](#)

The Lowdown: [No Comment! Why More News Outlets Are Getting Rid of Their Comment Sections](#)



Opening Quick-Write Prompt

When was the last time that you saw a mean comment on a website or on a social media post? Why do you think someone would leave a comment like that? How did it make you feel reading it?

A quick write allows students to write down their thoughts before discussing the opening question in order to increase participation and make the discussion more accessible to English Language Learners.

Objectives

- Students will analyze the research presented about why people post mean or negative “trolling” comments online.
- Students will evaluate how trolling has affected online communities and reflect on how it should be addressed.

Essential Question and Lesson Context

What causes someone to post mean or negative comments on websites and social media? How does that affect online communities?

Trolling is not new behavior, but why do people do it? And what effects does it have? Trolls tend to antagonize communities in order to amuse themselves and get attention at the expense of others. This is different than a cyberbully in that the goal of a cyberbully is usually to hurt or damage a *specific* person. Several studies have found that internet trolls tend to have certain personality traits. However, new research out of Stanford and Cornell has found that when the conditions are right, other people can be provoked into trolling, too.

Trolling has caused some online publications and news organizations to remove comments from their sites due to the effects the comments had on readers' perceptions of the content, as well as the costs associated with moderating the comments. Online engagement and social media, however, is not going away, so what is the best way to deal with trolling?

Key Vocabulary

Pre-teach key vocabulary before students do the activity, especially if you have English Language Learners. After going over the simple definition, consider providing a visual aid or having students draw one. More ideas for how to pre-teach vocabulary can be found [here](#).

Word	Simple definition
Antisocial (adj.)	Unfriendly, or unable to interact in a normal way with other people <i>His antisocial behavior caused him to be blocked from posting comments online.</i>
Civil dialogue (n.)	Polite and respectful discussion <i>A good rule for being a member in an online community is participating in civil dialogue.</i>
Egotistical (adj.)	Self-centered <i>She was so egotistical that none of her classmates wanted to work on the project with her.</i>
Empathy (n.)	Identification with the feelings of others <i>I had empathy for my friend when she was made fun of by a bully.</i>
Manipulator (n.)	A person who is good at influencing others, usually unfairly <i>Manipulators may convince you to give something up in order to benefit themselves.</i>
Provoke (v.)	To cause <i>Endless name calling provoked the girl to yell back at her bully.</i>
Remorse (n.)	Guilt or regret <i>The thief felt no remorse about stealing the woman's backpack.</i>
Taunt (v.)	Tease or provoke <i>One way to deal with someone who is taunting you is to not respond.</i>

Investigate

- Discuss the quick-write prompt as a class. You may ask a couple of students to share examples of mean or negative comments they've seen recently. Ask students why they think people leave comments like that and how it makes them feel when they read those comments. Does it ever change their perception of the original post?
- Have students watch the [Above the Noise episode](#) as a class.
 - **Stop the video at 1:49 and ask:** What do you think are some examples of behavior that's not acceptable in an online community? (Make a list on the board.)
 - **Stop at 2:10 and ask:** What is the difference between trolling and cyberbullying? Could any of the items in your list (above) be considered cyberbullying?
 - **Stop at 3:18:** Review some of the personality traits of online trolls and make sure students have a working understanding of the three terms (sadism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism)
 - **Stop at 4:30 and ask:** What did the researchers find out about bad moods and trolling behavior? What did they learn about when people see trolling comments from others? What could this data suggest about who posts trolling comments?
- Ask students what they thought was most interesting in the [Above the Noise episode](#). Did the research presented at the end of the video surprise them? Based on that, do they think trolling comments should be allowed online?
- Have students individually or in pairs read [The Lowdown post](#) about the reasons some news publications have removed the comments sections from their websites.
- Ask students if they've noticed if the ability to comment has been removed from any of the websites they regularly visit. If so, discuss if it's changed how they view the site. If not, ask if it would change how they interact with the content on the site.
- **Transition to the Make and Share:** Tell students they will have a chance to share their concerns about microfibers in the comments section of The Lowdown. The first time they comment, students must sign in to [Disqus](#), a free discussion app embedded in The Lowdown.
 - To sign in to [Disqus](#), click the "Comments" button at the bottom of The Lowdown.
 - Click the blue "Get Started" button in the gray "Welcome to Disqus" box.
 - Students will need to enter a username. We recommend first name, last initial.

- o After signing in for the first time, students must verify their email address before commenting. A verification email will appear in their inbox once they sign in to Disqus.

Make and Share

- Individually, students post responses in the comments section answering the following question:
What would you do about trolling comments if you were in charge of a news site? Would you remove comments, moderate the site carefully, let anyone post at will or use another strategy?
 - o Responses should be supported by evidence from the Above the Noise episode, The Lowdown post, or other research on the topic. (See source list)
 - o Encourage students to reply to other comments after posting their response. Remind them to use evidence to support their claims and respectful language when replying to others--no trolling!

Assessment/Reflection

- Students reflect on what they have learned through a class discussion or in writing:
 - o What is your biggest takeaway from the content presented in the video and article?
 - o What was it like to post your responses publically and reply to other posts? What did you learn from other students? What do you hope they learned from you? What will you do the next time you post a comment in response to The Lowdown?

[Circle chats](#), small-group discussions and [think-pair-share](#) provide a safer space for students to practice speaking and listening, and also boost participation during whole-class discussions.

Extension/Homework

Write/speak locally: Students turn their response to this issue into a letter, short speech or presentation, then research ways to make their voice heard in their community. (Example: Speaking during the public comment section of a city council meeting, posting in an online forum, etc.) For a list of how to contact local officials in your area, check out [KQED Learning's Local Election Toolkit](#).

Common Core Standards and NGSS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCR A.R.1	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCR A.R.7	Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W1	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
NGSS.SEP.7	Engaging in argument from evidence
NGSS.SEP.8	Obtaining, evaluating and communicating information
NGSS Appendix J: Core Idea 2	Influence of engineering, technology and science on society and the natural world