Conspiracy Theories Past and Present

Overview
In this lesson, students learn how to identify conspiracy theories and to distinguish them from other questions about history or current events. First, students discuss a hypothetical conspiracy theory. Next, students complete a thorough reading about historical and contemporary conspiracy theories as well as ways to identify frequently used logical fallacies by conspiracy theorists. Finally, students role-play federal investigators determining if a set of facts amounts to a conspiracy theory.

Standards/Topics
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2; RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL. 9-10; 11-12.1.B: Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.

Topics: conspiracy theories, logical fallacies, 9/11, media literacy, U.S. history

Objectives
Students will be able to:
- Define conspiracy theory and explain how it has been used historically;
- Identify major logical fallacies used in conspiracy theories;
- Apply knowledge of logical fallacies to information that could be a conspiracy theory and evaluate that information.

Materials
Handout A: Conspiracy Theories Past and Present (one per student)
Handout B: Conspiracy Busters (one per student)
Handout C: Agency Report Form 7-22A (one per small group)
Exit Slip: 3-2-1 (one per student)
Slide Presentation

Procedure
I. Focus Activity – Brief Discussion
   A. Project Slide 1, which depicts Mount Rushmore in North Dakota. Tell students: Imagine a friend seriously told you that Mount Rushmore was actually carved by people under the control of an extraterrestrial civilization from the Andromeda Galaxy. What’s more, the carving of the presidents is intended as a welcome to the extraterrestrials who are coming soon to the United States.
   1. Ask students: How would you respond to your friend? (Accept relevant responses. Some students might answer by saying they think their friend is lying, playing a prank, or deluded.)
2. Ask: What seems to be wrong with the story that Mount Rushmore is the product of extraterrestrials? (Accept reasoned responses. Students may answer that it simply seems too fantastic to be true.) Ask: What more information would you need from your friend to convince you that the story is credible, or believable? (Students may say they need, first of all, proof that the Andromeda Galaxy civilization even exists. Then they might want to see official documents or other historical records to prove the existence of “control” by that civilization. The evidence would have to be extraordinary.)

8. Tell students that today they will learn about other stories told about events and even about everyday occurrences that are incredible, or unbelievable. Extraterrestrial civilizations are not necessary to make a story incredible. These incredible stories are called conspiracy theories.

II. Reading: What Is a Conspiracy Theory?
   A. Distribute Handout A: Conspiracy Theories Past and Present to each student. (Or assign as homework to begin activity the next day.)
      1. Tell students to underline each logical fallacy described in the reading.
         a. There are several described in the reading:
            1) anecdotal evidence
            2) cherry-picking data
            3) false cause
            4) the slippery slope
            5) begging the question
            6) personal incredulity

   B. Once students have completed the reading on Handout A, project Slide 2 and hold a whole-class discussion using Writing & Discussion questions 2 and 3 to check for understanding (both questions are displayed on Slide 2).
      1. In answering question 2, students should be as specific as possible when identifying their sources for information and not dismiss out-of-hand sources they assume are invalid. They can offer an opinion as to whether they think their sources are trustworthy or not and why.
      2. If a student offers a source that seems untrustworthy (perhaps gossip, a random internet site, or other hearsay), refer the student to the section of the reading “How to Spot a Conspiracy Theory” to determine if the information the student received falls in any of the techniques listed.

III. Activity: Role Play: Conspiracy Busters
   A. Organize students into groups of four or five.

   B. Distribute Handout B: Conspiracy Busters to each student.
      1. Give students a minute to read the instructions on the handout.
      2. Read aloud the letter from John Krebs, M.D., which is printed on the students’ handout.
      3. Check for understanding that all the groups know who Krebs is and what, in general, he is claiming (that the Deep State is trying to control Americans’ minds to prevent dissent, and to change the climate of the United States).
      4. Tell students to also assume that all the facts as stated by Krebs in the first four bullet points are true. In the fifth bullet point, students should also assume that someone has in fact made these claims under the initial “V” in online forums. (Note: Any similarity between the fictitious Budco Industries and a real corporation is purely coincidental.)
C. Distribute **Handout C: Agency Report Form 7-22A** to each group.

1. Give students a minute to read the instructions on the handout. Remind each group to choose a spokesperson. Check to see that all the groups know what the task is: Each group is team of researchers at a classified (i.e., secret) federal government agency that reviews documents received by other agencies that may need further investigation. They are to make a recommendation based on Krebs’s letter whether to pursue an investigation, file Krebs’s letter away for future review, or discard his letter as an incredible conspiracy theory.

2. Groups should follow the instructions and look at Krebs’s letter carefully.
   a. Groups should determine if Krebs uses too many logical fallacies.
   b. Groups should also use the list of faulty techniques listed in the reading under “How to Spot a Conspiracy Theory” as well as the logical fallacies to help decide if Krebs’s claims are credible.

3. Give students 10-15 minutes to complete the activity. The group should determine if Krebs’s claim about the Deep State is credible based on the information he has provided in his letter:
   a. If the group thinks it is credible, then the group should check “Pursue” after “Recommendation.”
   b. If the group thinks that Krebs uses might be onto something, but maybe there is still too much information missing to make a decision, then the group should check “File” after “Recommendation.”
   c. If the group thinks that Krebs uses too many logical fallacies and misleading statements to be credible, then the group should check “Discard” after “Recommendation.”
   d. Give each group a chance to share the results of their discussion with the class. Keep a tally to see if the class, as a whole, would pursue, file, or discard the claims of John Krebs.

IV. Closure/Assessment

A. Debrief the activity by projecting Slide 3 and asking the following:

1. What logical fallacies, if any, did you find in John Krebs’s claims?

Here are possible answers:

- The Department of Defense (DoD) has funded research into microwave development for decades. (This might be cherry-picking data (since the DoD surely funds all kinds of research) or personal incredulity (“I don’t know why the DoD funds this research, so it must be a secretive conspiracy.”).)
- Thousands of American citizens have complained of microwave monitoring. (This is probably anecdotal evidence, though “thousands” is more than a few. However, we do not know the source for this data.)
- Budco Industries installed a microwave sending station on the coast of South Carolina just before the appearance of Hurricane Florence in 2018. (Without much more information, this is a false-cause claim.)
• The United States Air Force has been experimenting with a microwave “heat ray.” (As with the DoD above, this is cherry-picking data. It could also be begging the question, since the implied conclusion is that the “heat ray” is part of the Deep State plot.)

2. Was it easy or hard to decide what to do with Krebs’s claims? Why or why not?

Have students complete the Exit Slip: 3-2-1 for this activity:

On the slip, students will jot down:

• Three things he or she learned from the lesson
• Two things they want to know more about
• One question they have about conspiracy theories
Conspiracy Theories Past and Present

Major unexpected events in history often intrigue people — the Kennedy assassinations, the crash of the Hindenberg, the bombing of Pearl Harbor. You can research these events in books, magazines, historical records, and on the internet. And for almost every such event you can find conspiracy theories.

Consider the attacks on September 11, 2001. Almost immediately after the destruction of the north and south towers of the World Trade Center (WTC), conspiracy theories started to spread on the internet. The conspiracy theorists generally dispute the mainstream narrative of 9/11, which is that hijackers involved in the Al-Qaeda terrorist group took control of four passenger airliners and crashed three of them into the WTC towers and the Pentagon. The fourth crashed in Pennsylvania.

Those that promote 9/11 conspiracy theories came to be known as “truthers” (spreading the “truth” about 9/11). Truthers mainly claim that the U.S. government was involved or complicit in the attacks. Many claim that elements of the mainstream story of 9/11 are lies or elaborate hoaxes. Their claims typically include any of the following: The WTC buildings were professionally demolished; jet fuel cannot burn hot enough to melt the steel used in the WTC’s construction; a missile or military jet, not a passenger plane, hit the Pentagon; a missile hit United Airlines Flight 93 before it crashed in Pennsylvania; and American air defenses were told to “stand down” on the day of the attacks. Others go so far as to claim the Bush administration directly authorized the attacks or at least had prior knowledge of the destruction to come.

The truthers and other people who rally behind conspiracy theories offer no substantive proof for their claims. They do frequently offer anecdotal evidence from eyewitnesses and hearsay. Or they try to find flaws or inconsistencies in some aspect of the official investigation (“cherry-picking” data) and use that to dismiss the official findings. Despite the weaknesses of its claims, the truther movement has become the most notable conspiracy of modern times and continues to maintain a strong online presence to this day.

The 9/11 truther conspiracy theories have much in common with conspiracy theories in general. They often go something like this: The official explanation for the event is wrong, and an elite group working for its own narrow interest caused the disaster — a school shooting, the death of a prominent person, even the loss of a war. The group holds great power and, by using it, can hide its guilt from the public, sometimes for decades. The group is often an agency of
government, an organized crime syndicate, a shadowy political group, or an elite religious group. There is usually little or no real proof for the claim.

A Long Tradition

Many experts note the increase in conspiracy theories in recent years that are fueled by the internet and social media. But they are nothing new in American history.

A recurring conspiracy theory is that of the Illuminati. In the election of 1800, Thomas Jefferson’s political enemies spread libelous charges claiming he was a member of a group called the Illuminati and, as such, was planning to abolish religion in America.

There really was an organization known as The Order of the Illuminati, founded in Bavaria (part of Germany) in 1776 by law professor Adam Weishaupt. The small group promoted ideas inspired by philosophers of the Enlightenment. They advocated the abolition of monarchies, established religion, private property, and marriage to bring about true equality and goodness. It’s true that the Illuminati met clandestinely, but their secular ideas challenged the powerful Catholic Church in Bavaria. So Weishaupt saw secrecy as a necessity. After the Bavarian ruler outlawed secret societies (there were others) in 1785, the Illuminati drifted into obscurity.

Despite the apparent collapse of the historical Illuminati and the tireless debunking by historians, some conspiracy theorists still believe the Illuminati not only survived but gained worldwide power and influence. They believe the Illuminati are now shadowy elites trying to rule the globe in a “New World Order.” The Illuminati serve as a perpetual, explanatory suspect for events even today. For example, conspiracy theorists have accused singer Beyonce of being a member of the Illuminati, pointing out supposedly “devil-worshipping” details in online videos of her 2013 Super Bowl half-time performance.

The attempt to politically malign a presidential candidate with a conspiracy theory reappeared with the inception of the “birther” movement during the 2008 presidential race. These conspiracy theorists, or “birthers” as they are colloquially known, questioned the validity of Barack Obama’s citizenship — and thus his eligibility to run for president. Proponents of the conspiracy, including future president Donald Trump, falsely claimed Obama was born in Kenya, rather than Hawaii, and that he engineered a cover-up of that fact for many years.

Birthers demanded the publication of a birth certificate. Despite a pre-election release of an official Hawaiian birth certificate and the subsequent release of a long-form birth certificate in April 2011, birthers questioned the documents’ authenticity. Some still doubt Obama’s citizenship, even though he is no longer president.

Real Versus Imagined Conspiracies

In the real world, conspiracies do take place. In criminal law, a conspiracy takes place when two or more people combine for the purpose of doing an unlawful act or a lawful act by unlawful means. Small groups of criminals and terrorists do plot murders, bank robberies, airplane hijackings, bombings, and other crimes. People are charged, tried, and convicted of conspiracies on a regular basis. To win a conviction for criminal conspiracy, prosecutors must prove a case beyond a reasonable doubt by following strict rules of evidence.

Such criminal conspiracies have taken place in American history. The Watergate scandal is the most notable, as it was a verified criminal conspiracy and cover-up, perpetrated by government officials on behalf of a sitting U.S. president, Richard Nixon. The break-in of Democratic National Committee offices in the Watergate Hotel on July 17, 1972, garnered such infamy that it inspired the ubiquitous use of the suffix “-gate” to informally denote scandalous conspiracy.
Some conspiracies are real criminal conspiracies while others are not. “Pizzagate” was a false conspiracy involving rumors on social media that a Washington, D.C., pizza restaurant was the base for a child-trafficking ring run by Hillary Clinton. One believer in Pizzagate came to the restaurant with a semi-automatic rifle to rescue the fictitious children but was arrested.

The late historian Richard Hofstadter wrote that conspiracy theorists usually make a “leap in imagination” from a series of facts to the assumption that they all fit together to prove that some evil group is about to take over or was responsible for some disaster. It is like arguing that the Illuminati believed in equality (true); Jefferson believed in equality (true); therefore, Jefferson was part of an Illuminati conspiracy to rule the world.

Sometimes, conspiracy theorists don’t even bother with facts. Instead, they propose a set of assumptions, treat the assumptions as facts, and then jump to conclusions. For example, many truthers make the assumption that 9/11 was too elaborate to have been done by 19 terrorist hijackers. Therefore, it must have been manufactured or orchestrated by a powerful government — like the United States. In truth, of course, events like 9/11 can be accomplished by terrorists who are able to find and act on opportunities. And there is no substantive proof to show that government officials deliberately staged or ordered 9/11 and similar tragedies.

These jumps in logic are logical fallacies. A logical fallacy is flawed reasoning. Using anecdotal evidence and cherry-picking data are two logical fallacies described above. Another common one in conspiracy theories is the false cause. This fallacy concludes that X caused Y simply because X happened before Y. For example, many conspiracy theorists claim the Bush administration deliberately allowed 9/11 to happen as a pretext (deceptive reason) for the later U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, since 9/11 preceded 2003. Conspiracy theorists often rely on this fallacy to “prove” that 9/11 was an “inside job” used to undermine opposition to the future 2003 invasion.

Another fallacy common to conspiracy theories is the slippery slope. This fallacy asserts that if event A happens, then terrible events B, C, D, etc. will inevitably follow. Therefore, event A must be stopped. It is a popular fallacy among conspiracy theorists. For example, Alex Jones, the host of Infowars, is known for his boisterous rants that often employ the slippery-slope fallacy, among others. His Infowars web site has millions of visits monthly.

Jones is known for his claim that the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was a “false flag” hoax in which children and school staff were never really murdered. He claimed that the parents of the children were “crisis actors” feigning outrage in order to rally public support for gun control. Further down the slippery slope, any parental demands for, say, a ban on semi-automatic rifles would quickly lead to a national ban on all firearms and the abolition of the Second Amendment. After that, America would be a fascist, dystopian hellscape.

In other words, in this fallacy, outrage over Sandy Hook (event A) will lead to nationwide totalitarianism (event Z). Therefore, Jones dismisses event A — even claiming it is a hoax — in order to warn against event Z.
How to Spot a Conspiracy Theory

By far the most common flaw in conspiracy theories is the failure of those who hold them to offer sufficient proof. If someone makes a claim, he or she has the burden to prove it. The more serious or extraordinary the claim, the more proof is required.

Instead of proof, however, conspiracy theorists often rely on the following techniques:

- **Mix facts with falsehoods.** Like most claims, even false ones, there are often some facts that support a conspiracy theory. As Watergate and other scandals have proven, the government is capable of conspiracy and cover-ups. This does not mean that everything the government does is a conspiracy or cover-up designed to hide crimes of elected officials or to bring about totalitarianism. Often, conspiracy theorists will use anecdotal evidence to mix facts with falsehoods.

- **Attack the established version of the facts, or “the official story.”** Lacking proof for their own conclusions, many conspiracy theorists focus on perceived flaws in established conclusions. For example, retired professor of theology David Ray Griffin has said that “the official story about 9/11 is a gigantic conspiracy theory that 19 Arab Muslims, under the guidance of Osama bin Laden, defeated the world’s most sophisticated military defense system, and also [brought down] the World Trade Center . . . .” By characterizing the “official story” as a “giant conspiracy theory” and contrasting civilian hijackers with “the world’s most sophisticated military defense system,” Griffin casts doubt on the established version. He implies that that doubt itself is proof that the established version is false. This is known as the logical fallacy of begging the question, or stating a conclusion as an argument. He also uses the logical fallacy of appealing to emotion, or using highly charged emotional appeals instead of reasoned argument to support a claim. Griffin is appealing here to a common yet erroneous Islamophobic stereotype of Muslims — and ethnic stereotype of Arabs — as unsophisticated.

- **Claim the proof has been lost or destroyed.** To account for a conspiracy theory’s lack of proof, many will assume a cover-up to explain the mysterious loss of evidence. Some even argue that the loss of evidence itself proves a cover-up. When U.S. military officials deposited Osama bin Laden’s body in the North Arabian Sea after his 2011 assassination by a Special Forces team, for example, some conspiracy theorists claimed that the lack of bin Laden’s body proved he was still alive somewhere. These assertions ask us to imagine a cover-up that would involve dozens, sometimes hundreds of people or officials, all of whom somehow successfully keep the secret of the conspiracy over the span of years or decades. As many examples in history demonstrate, it is not so easy to control events, people, or information.

- **Assert personal incredulity.** The logical fallacy of personal incredulity is the assertion that if I do not know how something happened, then it must be false. For example, the “chemtrail” conspiracy claims the puffy streaks that planes sometimes leave in the sky are actually evidence of a government plot to control the weather or spread airborne drugs designed to tranquilize the masses. In reality, the wispy clouds emitted by planes are just water-condensation trails called contrails. They form because jet exhaust contains some water vapor that cools at cold, high altitudes. Contrails are usually small ice crystals, giving them a kind of “glow” in sunlight. But if someone does not understand how ice crystals can form in jet exhaust, it can be tempting for that person to instead imagine that contrails are mysterious — even sinister. And a government conspiracy might be an easy explanation.

- **Use only information that confirms bias.** Virtually all of us are guilty of confirmation bias to some degree. That means we favor information that confirms our beliefs. And it is not surprising that we may feel uncomfortable when facts contradict our beliefs, and even our
prejudices. But conspiracy theorists tend to show strong confirmation bias and immediately dismiss contradictory facts as lies or misinformation. This explains how birthers could question the authenticity of Barack Obama’s long-form birth certificate. It was a fact that contradicted their belief that he was lying about his citizenship.

- **Make the cynical appeal.** Many conspiracy theorists ask us to believe that the world is irreparably corrupt. They charge that those who are not convinced by their theories are just being naïve or, worse, are involved in the conspiracy itself.

The biggest flaw of most conspiracy theories is that none of them ever seems to pan out. Jefferson did not abolish religion in the United States. After 200 years, the Illuminati have failed to achieve world government. And Barack Obama was born in Hawaii.

**Writing & Discussion**

1. The late astronomer Carl Sagan said, “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” How extraordinary are the claims of the conspiracy theories described in the article? And how extraordinary is the evidence for those claims?

2. Have you heard or read about any of the stories mentioned in the article (for example, “chemtrails”)? If so, what were your sources? How trustworthy do you consider those sources to be?

3. What is a logical fallacy? Cite at least three mentioned in the article in your answer.

4. Why do you think people believe in conspiracy theories? Cite at least three examples from the article to support your answer.
Conspiracy Busters

Directions: You are a researcher at a secret government agency that investigates conspiracy theories to determine whether they have validity. You and your partners have been assigned the task of evaluating the following letter and writing a report to give to the agency director. Follow these steps:

1. Carefully review the letter below, which has been received by the agency. You will have to decide if the letter contains a theory that (a) your agency should pursue (investigate immediately), (b) file (store for a future investigation when more information comes to light), or (c) discard (do not investigate now or in the future because it is too incredible).

2. After reading the letter below, review the section “How to Spot a Conspiracy Theory” in the reading Conspiracy Theories Past and Present to help guide your analysis.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

My name is John Krebs, M.D. I am about to publish an e-book called Weather Warfare and Energy Weapons. It contains the results of 10 years of research during which I uncovered a plot of enormous danger to the nation. It involves members of the Deep State within the Pentagon, the National Security Agency, and other federal agencies. The Deep State consists of unelected government officials who act outside the rule of law. In a nutshell, these groups are working together to create high-tech weapons using microwaves to impose mind control on American political dissenters, and to change the climate of the United States. Here are just a few of the facts:

• The Department of Defense has funded research into microwave development for decades.

• Thousands of American citizens have complained of microwave monitoring, including mind control attempts and other symptoms such as increased anxiety and fatigue while using microwave ovens. Many political protesters have complained of similar symptoms after encounters with riot police.

• Budco Industries installed a microwave sending station on the coast of South Carolina just before the appearance of Hurricane Florence in 2018.

• The United States Air Force has been experimenting with a microwave “heat ray” for breaking up violent crowds. The Air Force has also published research on weapons to create "artificial weather."

• Files proving the conspiracy had been collected by a government employee with high-level security clearance who goes by the code-name “V.” V’s files were destroyed in a fire of mysterious origin, which “fire investigators” called an “accident.” Fortunately, V has a photographic memory and shares this information and warnings about new “weather weapons” and the Deep State in online forums.
Agency Report Form 7-22A

As a group, discuss and fill out the following report. Be prepared to present your report to the director.

1. Researchers Submitting this Report: (Names)

2. Era Involved (Check One)  Historical____  Contemporary____

3. Reasons this conspiracy theory may be invalid: (Provide at least two examples):

4. Logical Problems Noted: (Provide at least two examples):

5. Recommendations (Check One)  Pursue____  File___  Discard____  (Provide Reasons):
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