

Don't Believe the Headline

Reading climate headlines critically - and spotting greenwash along the way

Climate headlines are everywhere - in newspapers, on social media, in adverts. Some are solid reporting. Some are exaggerated. Some are designed to make a company look greener than it really is.

In this activity you'll build a simple toolkit for slowing down and reading headlines more carefully - a habit you can use far beyond the classroom.

1

First reaction | 5 min

On your own - go with your gut

Read each headline below. Mark whether you **Believe it**, **Doubt it**, or are **Not sure**.

Headline	Believe	Doubt	Not sure
"Scientists confirm 2030 climate targets now impossible to meet."	☐	☐	☐
"Our new packaging is 100% eco-friendly."	☐	☐	☐
"Global renewable energy capacity grew by a record amount last year."	☐	☐	☐
"This everyday product is secretly destroying the planet."	☐	☐	☐
"Company pledges to be 'carbon neutral' by 2040."	☐	☐	☐
"New study links extreme weather to rising global temperatures."	☐	☐	☐

2

The questioning toolkit | 8 min

With a partner - apply these questions to two headlines above

Before you trust (or dismiss) a headline, ask these five questions:

1	Who wrote or published this? What might they want me to think?
2	What's missing? Is there context I'm not being given?
3	What words are doing the heavy lifting? (e.g. "disaster", "breakthrough", "100%")
4	Is it specific or vague? Specific numbers and sources are easier to check than big claims.
5	Does it make me feel something strongly - and why? Strong emotion can be a clue something's designed to grab attention rather than inform.

3

Sort it out | 10 min

With your partner - sort these eight headlines into three piles

Decide whether each headline is **Solid reporting**, **Greenwashing**, or **Misleading / false**. Write your answer next to each one.

Headline	Your verdict
<i>"Made with 30% recycled plastic - the rest is up to you."</i>	
<i>"UK greenhouse gas emissions fell 4% last year, official figures show."</i>	
<i>"This £2 product will single-handedly save the rainforest."</i>	
<i>"Carbon-neutral flights now available" (small print: via unverified offsets).</i>	
<i>"Global sea ice extent tracked at second-lowest on record for this month."</i>	
<i>"Go green with our 'eco' range" (no further detail given on packaging).</i>	
<i>"City council approves new cycle lane network to cut car journeys."</i>	
<i>"Scientists 'baffled' as one cold winter 'disproves' climate change."</i>	

4

Write your own | 8 min

On your own, then share with a partner

Pick one misleading headline from Stage 3.
Rewrite it so it's honest and accurate - without losing reader interest.

Your honest headline:

Optional: write a deliberately misleading headline of your own. Swap with a partner - can they catch what's wrong with it?

Your tricky headline:

5

One rule to take away | 5 min

As a group

"Before I share a climate story, I will always..."

Guidance for teachers and climate educators

30-40 mins · KS3 (ages 11-13) · Individual → Pairs → Group

Before you start

Print one pupil sheet per person. Stage 3 works well if pupils can write directly on the sheet, or use mini whiteboards for the verdicts so the same sheet can be reused with another class. No prior knowledge needed from pupils.

Suggested verdicts for Stage 3: 1 Greenwashing · 2 Solid reporting · 3 Misleading/false · 4 Greenwashing · 5 Solid reporting · 6 Greenwashing · 7 Solid reporting · 8 Misleading/false

These are starting points, not fixed answers - encourage pupils to justify their own verdicts using the Stage 2 toolkit.

1 First reaction · 5 min · Individual

Hand out the pupil sheet. Read the instructions aloud before pupils begin.

“Just go with your gut on these - we’ll dig into why afterwards. There’s no wrong answer at this stage.”

Let pupils work quietly. Resist confirming or correcting at this point - the reveal happens gradually through Stages 2 and 3.

-  **If needed:** *If a pupil asks for the “right” answer straight away: “Hold that thought - we’re going to come back to these.”*

2 The questioning toolkit · 8 min · Pairs

Introduce the five questions on the sheet. Model question 3 (loaded words) using a headline pupils will recognise from the news or adverts.

“Look at this headline - which word is doing the most work to make you feel something? Is that word backed up by anything specific?”

In pairs, pupils choose two headlines from Stage 1 and apply all five questions to each. Circulate and listen for pupils starting to question their first reaction.

-  **If needed:** *If a pair finds the questions abstract: ask them to apply just question 1 (who wrote it?) and question 5 (how does it make you feel?) first - these are usually the easiest entry points.*
-  **If needed:** *For pupils who finish early: “Can you find a real headline from this week that fails at least two of these questions?”*

3 Sort it out · 10 min · Pairs

Pupils apply the toolkit to sort all eight headlines into three categories. Encourage them to use the toolkit questions as evidence for their verdict, not just instinct.

“For each one, pick at least one of your five questions and use it to justify your verdict.”

After 8-9 minutes, take a show of hands on a couple of the trickier ones (headlines 1, 4, and 6 tend to generate the most disagreement - that’s good, it means pupils are thinking critically).

Headline	Why
1. “30% recycled... rest up to you”	<i>Greenwashing - sounds positive but the vague second half does the real work, deflecting responsibility onto the customer.</i>
4. “Carbon-neutral flights”	<i>Greenwashing - offsets are unverified, and “carbon-neutral” implies a stronger claim than the small print supports.</i>

6. "Go green with our eco range"	<i>Greenwashing - "eco" is undefined and unsupported by any detail or evidence.</i>
8. "One cold winter disproves climate change"	<i>Misleading - confuses short-term local weather with long-term global climate trends; "baffled" implies false scientific uncertainty.</i>

-  **If needed:** *If pairs disagree on a verdict: that's fine - ask them to note both views and explain which toolkit question swayed them.*
-  **If needed:** *For a pupil who finds sorting overwhelming: narrow it to three headlines instead of eight, chosen in advance.*

4 Write your own · 8 min · Individual → pairs

Pupils choose one misleading headline from Stage 3 and rewrite it honestly, keeping it engaging rather than just bland.

"Being honest doesn't mean being boring - can you keep it interesting while making it accurate?"

The optional second task (writing a deliberately misleading headline to swap) works well as a quick extension or as the main task for pupils who enjoy a challenge - it tests whether they can apply the toolkit from the writer's side, not just the reader's.

-  **If needed:** *Sentence starter if pupils are stuck rewriting: "Instead of [vague claim], what's the actual number or fact?"*
-  **If needed:** *For pupils who struggle with open writing tasks: offer a partially completed headline with one or two words to fill in rather than a blank rewrite.*

5 One rule to take away · 5 min · Whole group

Ask each pupil to complete the sentence on their sheet individually (1-2 minutes), then go round the room for quick-fire answers - this works well as a closing round rather than a discussion.

"One sentence each, around the room. There's no need to explain it - just say your rule."

If time allows, write a few favourites on the board as a collective "class toolkit" to display or revisit later.

-  **If needed:** *Sentence starter if pupils are stuck: "...check who wrote it" or "...look for a number, not just a feeling."*
-  **If needed:** *If a pupil doesn't want to speak aloud: accept a written or whispered-to-a-partner answer instead - the goal is participation, not performance.*

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