

## Media Literacy at-a-glance

**Introduction:** Thank you for checking out *Media Literacy* from The Nomadic Professor! In this sneak-peak into the course we're going to invite you to do a little self-scrutiny of the way you tend to consume new information. This challenge comes from lesson 21 in our semester-long *Media Literacy* course, outlined below. To answer the guiding question from lesson 21—*What is your "information constitution"?*— we'll invite you to complete a 2- to 3-day audit of all the information you consume, and submit (if you choose ☺) a written or recorded reflection about your findings. We respond to all submissions whether you take the full course or not, so we'd love to hear from you—students, teachers, and parents alike! You'll find all the necessary instructions in the handouts and links to follow. Enjoy!

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### Unit 1: The Fundamentals

1. What is "Media Literacy"?
2. What is "Humane Technology"?
3. "The Question Concerning Technology"
4. The Medium is the Message
5. How accurate are our intuitions?

### Unit 2: History

6. Where did "the media" come from? Part 1: The Partisan Press, the Penny Press, and the Professional Press
7. Part 2: The Collapse of Time and Space
8. Part 3: Toward a Wireless "Public Sphere"
9. Part 4: Shifting Models, Shifting Incentives, and Shifting Experiences
10. Part 5: The Many Faces of Journalism (1)
11. Part 6: The Many Faces of Journalism (2)
12. Part 7: Is being informed really worth the trouble?
13. Part 8: AI

### Unit 3: Politics

14. What is the "political spectrum"?
15. How well does the "political spectrum" map onto the real world?
16. How should we explain American political polarization? (1)
17. How should we explain American political polarization? (2)
18. Can information be used as a weapon? (1)

19. Can information be used as a weapon? (2)
20. What are "media bias ratings" trying to capture?
21. What is your "information constitution"?

### Unit 4: Language

\*This unit is still under construction, with new sessions becoming available as they are ready. All topics marked with an asterisk are ready now!

*Bias, Framing, Reading between the lines, Word choice, Persuasive techniques, \*The Rhetorical Triangle, \*Logical arguments, Fallacies, Facts vs. opinions vs. value judgments, Humor, Agendas and vested interests, \*Political cartoons, Advertisements*

### Unit 5: Tools

\*This unit is still under construction, with new sessions becoming available as they are ready. All topics marked with an asterisk are ready now!

*Reading like a historian, \*Lateral reading, Single tasking, Click restraint, Original sourcing, Reverse image searching, the SIFT method, AI, Unplugging*



\* Scan here to sign up for our **free Media Literacy preview** and see what the course is like online!

# What is your “information constitution”?



- 1 Watch [this video](#) to hear “information constitution” defined. Then reflect on your information constitution using the chart below. Scratch a hashmark where you think your current constitution lies along each spectrum. Put a date by your hashmark so you can add new hashmarks as your constitution changes.

## Naïve

*Do you tend to believe what you’re told without asking a lot of questions? Do you accept information at face value? Do you uncritically accept the stated intentions of others? Do you repeat what you’re told before vetting it?*

## Skeptical

*Do you tend to consider a range of sources before making a judgment? Do you try to gain perspective early in your research? Do you ask enough questions to get under the surface? Are you comfortable saying “I don’t know”?*

## Cynical

*Do you tend to dismiss institutional authority out-of-hand? Do you accept circumstantial evidence? Do you believe that the truth is being covered up? Do you reject others’ claims to good intentions?*

## Aloof

*Do you actively avoid the news? Do you tend to be “out of the loop” in conversations about current events? Do you intentionally ignore media outlets, headlines, and conversations about what’s going on in the country or the world?*

## Strategically Ignorant

*Are you strategic about what you ignore and what you pay attention to? Do you try to gain perspective (as opposed to knowing every headline)? Do you know what sources you trust and why? Are you usually aware of multiple perspectives? Are you comfortable saying “I don’t know”?*

## Hyper-connected

*Does your daily routine include significant time for news consumption? Do you spend multiple hours each day on social media or other news sites, reading, commenting, and/or posting? Do you have a visceral reaction to opposing opinions, or feel the need to react to many posts a day?*

## Confused

*Are you easily frustrated or confused by competing claims? Do you feel out of your depth quickly? Do you tend to lack the context or background you would need to make an informed judgment?*

## Informed

*Do you have more than superficial context and understanding of the issues you care about? Have you read widely enough to respond to counterarguments? Are you open to counterarguments? Can you steel man your opponents’ positions? Are you comfortable saying “I don’t know”?*

## Dogmatic

*Are you unshakably convinced about your conclusions? Do you tend to reject counterarguments out-of-hand? Do others think you’re opinionated, arrogant, or closed-minded? Do you speak more than you listen? Is it hard to remember the last time you changed your mind? Do you rely on straw man versions of your opponents’ positions?*

## Unmoored

*Do you tend to feel too insecure to come to a conclusion? Do you find it impossible to decide between competing priorities? Are you easily persuaded by whoever happens to be talking, or whatever argument you happened to hear last?*

## Confident

*Are you able to integrate new information with your existing network of priorities and judgments? Are you able to let new information change your mind? Are you able to articulate why you accepted or rejected a particular judgment or claim? Can you think within and outside of your existing sects, tribes, and loyalties? Can you steel man your opponents’ positions? Are you comfortable saying “I don’t know”?*

## Hyperpartisan

*Does your thinking inevitably agree with the orthodox position of your tribe, sect, party, or group? Is it hard to remember the last time you disagreed (out loud) with the leadership of your tribe, sect, party, or group? Do you tend to promote your group or your ideas (do you get any of your ideas from outside of your group?)? Do you rely on straw man versions of your opponents’ positions?*

## Undiscriminating

*Do you give your attention to whatever source happens to end up in front of you?*

## Selective

*Do you discriminate between sources that are worth your attention and sources that aren’t?*

## One-sided

*Do you ignore credible sources that aren’t already saying what you think?*

- 2 Do a personal 48–72-hour (longer if you choose!) information audit<sup>1</sup> in which you record all the ways you process information now, and how well those ways hold up on closer inspection. To get you started, a few model contexts and sources are listed and evaluated in the tables below. You should print or make a table like this for yourself (blank copy included after the model notes), or an alternative version that is more intuitive for you. Your reflection will be graded using the rubric at the end of this handout, so make sure your notes help you prepare to meet the listed criteria.

*Potential sources, contexts, and subjects for you to include in your table: Friends? Family? Neighbors? Strangers? Celebrities? Academics? Podcasters? Influencers? Experts? Professionals? Politicians? Home? Work? School? Out in public? Social media? Commercials? “Online”? Threads and comments? Rumors and gossip? A picture? A video? An article? An op-ed? A book? A meme? Politics? Science? Medicine? History? Culture? Art? Money? Business? Technology? Society? Fashion? Sports?*

*What information?*

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An epoxy distributor suggested an alternative product was inferior

*What context?*

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I had called him to ask about available product

\*stranger/business owner

*What reaction?*

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We’d been talking for a while so he’d successfully built rapport with me and I took his testimony at face value

*Upon reflection?*

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He runs two successful related businesses, which works in his favor; but he’s also trying to win my business, and so has no incentive to recommend another product; I need to do more research, including talking with more sources and running my own experiments

*Is your reaction captured in one of our information constitution spectrums? Explain.*

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My reaction was a little naïve and probably somewhat aloof; aloof because I didn’t want to take the time to judge between a thousand sources for a product I’m not going to use very often., I just wanted a clean answer and no work to figure out what was actually true.

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<sup>1</sup> information audit: while “the news” might make up much of this audit, bear in mind that you also actively and passively process other information throughout the day—in conversation, on social media, through web searches (perhaps relying on Siri, Alexa, ChatGPT, or Google to summarize answers for you), and other places. The information you process ranges from daily rumors and gossip, to substantive claims about history and science. Think of this “information audit” more broadly than an audit of how you process information about current events from popular media outlets; think of it as an audit of your habits for verifying the information and claims you come across in a range of daily contexts.

### *What information?*

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With a wink, a guy at the car lot joked that interest rates wouldn't come down "until January or so" (implying that the Democrats are keeping them high; this was Dec. 2024, just before the start of Trump's second term)

### *What context?*

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I was there looking into a vehicle I planned to finance; he was a sales rep

\*stranger/salesman

### *What reaction?*

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I rejected his "claim" out of hand; he seemed like a partisan speaking outside the field of his expertise, about a subject that I don't think is easy to forecast even if you're an expert (interest rates)

### *Upon reflection?*

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Interesting to consider that I noticed this as a claim and belief because it bothered me, when there are probably many other claims and beliefs throughout the day in similarly mundane contexts that I don't notice because instead of rubbing against my priors, they affirm what I already believe; I can't even confirm whether this guy was a partisan or just trying to build rapport, but I was pretty quick to read a lot into his joke

### *Is your reaction captured in one of our information constitution spectrums? Explain.*

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My reaction probably falls somewhere between informed/dogmatic or confident/hyperpartisan; I was pretty quickly defensive and judgmental about a throwaway line from a person I'd only been introduced to a minute before.

### *What information?*

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In a Tucker Carlson clip on X he claimed that the U.S. is currently in a “hot war” with Russia, and recently sent missiles onto the Russian mainland, killing at least 12 Russian soldiers

### *What context?*

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I got a Free Press newsletter in my email; skimming the newsletter I came across a link to the clip and watched about 2 minutes of Tucker talking in front of Red Square in Russia

\*journalist/newsletter

### *What reaction?*

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I’m highly skeptical of Carlson; in my exposure to him he comes across like a ratings-hungry and insincere actor, who leans into sensational claims and the audience they help capture; I watched the clip with my guard up and fact-checked his claims about the U.S. killing Russian soldiers with missile strikes into mainland Russia

### *Upon reflection?*

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A brief Google search unearthed articles from many sources (from CNN, to the AP, to Fox News, and everything between) explaining that Ukraine fired U.S.-made long-range missiles into Russia with Biden’s permission; “the U.S. fired missiles” vs. “Ukraine fired American missiles with American permission” seems like an important distinction that journalists shouldn’t elide in their reporting; whether you think this is a distinction without a difference or not, it seems important that the journalist tell it how it is and let the audience decide; this kind of outrage-inducing framing from Tucker affirms my prior decision to exclude him from my regular news diet

### *Is your reaction captured in one of our information constitution spectrums? Explain.*

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I think my reaction is probably closest to skeptical, since it doesn’t necessarily reflect a cynical attitude toward all media, and it was based on the assumption that if the U.S. was directly at war with Russia, that story would be covered in more places than this one partisan video clip. It could be seen as moving toward partisan as well, if my gut-level distrust of Carlson is influenced by his politics more than his methods.

### *What information?*

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Much of Hitler's financing for his 1930s rise came from sales of his 1920s manifesto, Mein Kampf

### *What context?*

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I heard this claim from Ryan Holiday in a Free Press podcast interview with Michael Moynihan; Holiday is a one-time marketer, now writer and podcaster, known for his exposé on the marketing and advertising industry, Trust Me, I'm Lying, and many works on Stoic philosophy; Holiday's claim was in passing and part of a different point, so it's hard to say how much was for rhetorical purposes vs. how much was part of an actual historical argument

\*writer/podcast

### *What reaction?*

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I've read and listened to Holiday and Moynihan for some time, so I don't really listen with my guard up; if I have a problem with something I hear from them it tends to be disagreement over some interpretation or other, rather than skepticism about their general credibility; this claim stuck out to me because if I've heard it before, I've forgotten it, and it seemed like an interesting historical wrinkle in the story of Hitler's rise to power—on the one hand the world needs to be informed about what he thinks, on the other hand becoming informed about what he thinks funds his rise to power; I wanted to verify this claim to understand how much Hitler actually made from sales of Mein Kampf

### *Upon reflection?*

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Having sources you rely on for good information seems like justifiable practice—these two are part of my information diet because I've grown to trust their intent, approach, and information; on this particular question—of Hitler funding his rise to power with money from Mein Kampf—it was difficult to find concrete answers efficiently, so to some extent I have to hold this as an open question going forward; sources I can find online and in journals and publicly available books suggest he was made a millionaire by sales of Mein Kampf, and that he didn't really distinguish between state money and his private wealth, but I haven't found anything directly linking his private wealth to the success of his rise, and that connection doesn't seem self-evident to me

### *Is your reaction captured in one of our information constitution spectrums? Explain.*

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My reaction probably hovers somewhere around skeptical and strategically ignorant. I'm not accepting the claim at face value, nor am I obsessed with verifying it and using that understanding to embrace or reject the source in any final way. I'm comfortable leaving the question open and not really knowing the final answer.

### *What information?*

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Marc Andreessen created the first user-friendly web browser when he was 22, but Bill Gates and Microsoft crushed his company

### *What context?*

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Researching something else online, this Tweet came to my attention; the author is Fernando Cao Zheng, an author I don't know anything about; he has a blue checkmark, but I've lost track of how meaningful that is or isn't; it's a Tweet, so it's necessarily short, emphatic, and opinionated; he follows the initial Tweet with a thread that purports to uncover the whole story

\*tweet

### *What reaction?*

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Basically indifference; this isn't a subject I care to fact check, at least not right now—i.e., tech competition, antitrust law, Microsoft's business strategies, the competition for Internet dominance, etc.—so I glossed over the claim without much consideration

### *Upon reflection?*

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My general impression of most Twitter/X conversations is that they're all subject to the attention economy and incentives this course has covered in depth, and that if they all disappeared nothing would change except people would go elsewhere for information, so it's hard to get too animated about what gets said there; further, this particular claim is something I don't feel compelled to have an opinion about right now, so I'm comfortable not knowing whether it's true, or what the particulars of the argument are (though who knows whether seeing it has primed me to accept or reject some related claim in the future)

### *Is your reaction captured in one of our information constitution spectrums? Explain.*

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My reaction is probably closest to strategic ignorance—I could look into the source, I could corroborate the claims, I could develop an opinion, but it's not a priority, so I'm choosing to remain ignorant.

*What information?*

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*What context?*

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*What reaction?*

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*Upon reflection?*

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*Is your reaction captured in one of our information constitution spectrums? Explain.*

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- 3 What did you learn about when, where, and how sources around you make claims, and how you react to them? This is a space for broad notes and takeaways from your self-scrutiny. Think of this as scratch paper to help you meet the rubric criteria, especially the criteria for “reflection.”
- 4 Based on what you discovered in this exercise, how would you characterize your current information constitution, and what actions could you take to improve that constitution where it is weak? This is a space for broad notes and takeaways from your self-scrutiny. Think of this as scratch paper to help you meet the rubric criteria, especially the criteria for “assessment.”

- 5 In an essay (+/- 800 words) or video (+/- 1.5 minutes): (1) reflect on your information audit, (2) summarize the state of your information constitution, and (3) speak to any changes that might improve your constitution. Refer to the rubric below to see the criteria for this assignment. *\*In 2017 The New York Times issued a similar challenge. Follow [this link](#) to peruse a handful of example student responses. Bear in mind that the prompt and rubric for the NYT challenge are different than ours, but you may still find it useful to see how other students responded to a similar assignment.*

We'd love to see your results! Email any completed audits and reflections to:  
**[submissions@nomadicprofessor.com](mailto:submissions@nomadicprofessor.com)**

- 6 Go back to the information constitution spectrums we started with and record new hashmarks if this audit and reflection has caused you to recognize that your constitution is different than you originally judged along any or all of the spectrums.

## “Information constitution” rubric

		No (0)	Yes (1)
Completeness			
Did you meet the guidelines? Essays: +/- 800 words (within 50 words); videos: +/- 1.5 minutes (within 5 seconds)			
	No (0)	Partially (1-2)	Yes (3-4)
Notes			
Did you record notes during your information audit? Are your notes thorough? Useful? Insightful? Specific? From a range of sources and contexts?			
Reflection			
Good discussion of information examples? Good understanding of when a claim is being made? Good insight into personal reactions? Good reflection on meaning of reactions?			
Assessment			
Nuanced assessment of your current information constitution, supported with specific examples? Good considerations of what could change to improve your constitution?			
Mechanics			
Is your work mechanically sound? Essays: complete sentences and paragraphs; developed ideas; cohesive structure; good punctuation, spelling, and grammar; videos: planned and edited; good audio and video; originality, effort, and compelling visuals			
		Total: /17	