

LESSON 1

What the Algorithm Decides You See

40 minutes

What You Are Really Looking At

WHAT THIS LESSON DOES

Explore how algorithms decide the order of posts in your feeds and recommendations. Act as the algorithm to rank content and compare different goals like keeping you scrolling or informed. Understand the trade-offs involved.

WHAT STUDENTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO

- Investigate the role of algorithms in how information is presented online
- Explain in plain terms how feeds, search results and recommendations are ordered
- Name the trade-off when a feed chases scrolling, informing, or newest-first

BEFORE THE BELL

- Open the feed-ranker interactive on the teacher device before the class arrives. Physical post cards are optional only if the interactive is unavailable; the five posts and their tags are already set up in the interactive.

What the Algorithm Decides You See

HOW THE LESSON RUNS

4 min	introduction	Start
5 min	content	Examine and Discuss
14 min	activity	Hands-on: Be the Algorithm
7 min	content	Your Turn
5 min	content	Make Sense
3 min	content	Reflect
2 min	summary	What You Covered

TEACHING MOVES

- 1. Start. Frame the shift in one line: students already ask who made something and why, now add the prior question of who decided they would see it. Keep it short and do not define terms yet.
- 2. Examine and Discuss. Give one tight definition: rules plus signals plus a goal the product chases. Take at most two volunteered examples, then pose the key question and move on the moment it is clear.
- 3. Hands-on: Be the Algorithm. Run about 3 minutes on a quick human top-two with reasons, 8 minutes running Keep you scrolling then Keep you informed with two comments after each snap, then snap Show newest first and read the takeaway. Stay analytical, not a verdict on social media.
- 4. Your Turn. Circulate and push past 'it shows me what I like' toward a named goal and a named trade-off. If the hands-on ran long, set the four notes as homework. Offer music, search, gaming or shopping to students without social accounts.
- 5. Make Sense. Harvest two or three student trade-off sentences and map them onto the three goals. Name the point plainly: ranking is a design choice with winners and losers, not neutral magic.
- 6. Reflect. Take two or three voices on what a feed shows and hides. Keep it spoken only. There is no right answer on which goal is best.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- Students think 'the algorithm' is a single secret person reading their feed, or a conspiracy. Keep it concrete: it is software applying rules to signals such as recency, likes and who shared, all serving a goal. Point to the interactive as the ranking made visible.
- Students argue the emotional or angry post should never rise, treating ranking as a moral verdict. Agree that many people would rank it low as humans, then press the design point: a feed built for reactions often still promotes it. That is the trade-off, not a judgement.
- Students assume newest-first means best or most trustworthy. When you snap Show newest first, say aloud that fresh is not the same as checked. Point to a useful older post that sinks.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Emerging: Give a first move to copy: pick the post from a friend or the one with most likes and say which signal made you choose it. Let them watch the board snaps and name just one post that moved rather than ranking all five.
- Developing: Ask them to name the signal behind each pick, not gut feeling, before they commit to a top two. Have them predict which post will sink under Keep you scrolling before you run it, then check.
- Proficient: Set the optional extension: swap trade-off sentences with a partner and challenge whether the trade-off is fair to the evidence, with no class verdict. Ask them to name a useful low-engagement post and explain exactly which goal would rescue it and what that goal costs.