LESSON 1

What the Algorithm Decides You See

40 minutes | Why This Is In Front of You

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

- Explain that an algorithm is the set of rules an app uses to put posts, search results and recommendations in order
- Describe how the same five posts move up or down when a feed chases each of three goals: keep you scrolling, keep you informed, show the newest first
- Name the goal a feed they really use seems to chase, and what it gives up to reach that goal

BEFORE THE BELL

- Open the interactive activity on the board and check that the three goal controls (scrolling, informed, newest-first) snap the posts as expected.
- Decide whether the class will call out while you drive the board, or pairs will run the interactive on devices if available.
- Have a non-social fallback ready (music, search, gaming or shopping recommendations) for students without social accounts.

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

ANSWERS AND LOOK-FORS

- Keep you scrolling: top, “BREAKING: shocking claim about a celebrity”, then “A funny pet video”; bottom, “Local council notice about road works”. Chasing watch-time and reactions pushes the sensational, angry post and the funny clip to the top, not the most true or useful ones. Strong feelings keep people scrolling.
- Keep you informed: top, “A clear explainer on how to spot scams”, then “Local council notice about road works”; bottom, “BREAKING: shocking claim about a celebrity”. When the feed is trying to keep you informed, the scam explainer and the council notice come first. These rarely get the most likes, so a feed built to grab attention hardly ever puts them on top.
- Show newest first: top, “BREAKING: shocking claim about a celebrity”, then “A funny pet video”; bottom, “A clear explainer on how to spot scams”. Showing the newest posts first puts the most recent ones at the top, whether or not they are true, useful, or even checked. New is not the same as reliable.

TEACHING MOVES

- 1. Start. Open from what every student already does: scroll a feed, pick the next video, search. Keep to about four minutes. Do not define every term yet; the interactive will make the idea concrete.
- 2. Examine and Discuss. Give one short definition: rules, signals and a goal. Pose the key question about the same five posts under three goals. Take at most two volunteered examples, then move on.
- 3. Hands-on: Be the Algorithm. Drive the interactive on the board. Take a quick human top-two with reasons from the card signals. Run Keep you scrolling and Keep you informed with two comments after each snap, then Show newest first. Freeze on the takeaway that surprised the class.
- 4. Your Turn. If the hands-on ran long, set the four notes as homework. Otherwise circulate and push past "it shows what I like" toward a named goal, two signals, and one rise-and-sink trade-off.
- 5. Make Sense. Keep the full five minutes even if Your Turn was cut. Collect two or three trade-off sentences and map them onto scrolling, informing and newest-first. State clearly that ranking is a design choice with winners and losers.
- 6. Reflect. Talk only: nothing to type or save. Take two or three voices on what a feed might hide and which goal they would set. There is no single right answer.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- Students think "the algorithm" is a single secret person or a conspiracy deciding their feed. What to do: Keep it concrete: software using rules, signals (likes, watch-time, recency, who shared it) and a goal the product is chasing.
- Students assume an angry or high-emotion post should never rise, so a feed that promotes it must be broken. What to do: Agree many people would rank that way as humans, then press the design point: a feed built for reactions often still promotes it.
- Students assume newest-first means the most careful or trustworthy posts appear first. What to do: State the takeaway plainly: newest-first ignores quality almost entirely. Fresh is not the same as checked.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Emerging: Let them call out signals while you drive the interactive on the board, or pair them with a partner who handles the controls. Accept one named feed and one clear signal as a solid start on Your Turn.
- Developing: Prompt for a named goal and a specific post that rose or sank, not only "it shows me what I like". Have them say their trade-off sentence aloud to a partner before sharing with the class.
- Proficient: If devices and time allow, have pairs complete a full five-post human rank and compare it to all three goals. Pairs swap trade-off sentences and challenge whether the claim is fair to the evidence, with no class verdict that platforms are simply good or bad.