

The Question of Polling

Written by Beth Thornton

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Polling, especially around election time, has always been big business but this type of information gathering is also widely used to get a sense of where the public stands regarding an issue, idea, or product. But who's doing the asking? How is the question phrased? And, how is the data presented to the public? These are all factors to consider when reading a poll and this is where questions about author, audience, and purpose can help you interpret the data.

A recent study by Common Sense Media found that teens, when asked, preferred Snapchat and Instagram to Facebook. The authors were intentionally studying teens, but what if you wanted to know about the whole population— would the responses to the same question be different?

Ask students to poll friends and family members about their favorite social media sites.

AHA! Who you ask makes a difference!

Grade Level: 6-8

Materials: Discuss the findings of the report on [teen social media use](#), as well as any other examples of polling you want to address (see [Pew Research](#)

for more examples). FYI: Polls typically stick to one question with a multiple choice answer. Surveys ask multiple questions with broader range. Review the Key Questions/Core Concepts for Media Literacy.

Key Question #1: Who created this message?

Core Concept #1: Media messages are constructed.

Key Word: Author

Key Question #3: How might different people understand this message differently?

Core Concept #3: Different people experience the same message differently.

Key Word: Audience

Key Question #5: Why is this message being sent?

Core Concept #5: Most messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

Key Word: Purpose

Activity: Ask your students to poll 15 of their friends and family members --including varying ages and generations-- about their preferred social media sites. Ask students to write down the question they will use to poll their audience, and stress to them the importance of asking exactly

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the same question to each participant. There should be no attempt by the pollster to influence the responses. Have students tally the results and create a basic bar graph to share with the class. Does the data match their personal views or are they surprised? If they break down the data by age or gender, does the outcome change? Would the outcome change if there were more choices or if the question was phrased differently?

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