

Slurs, Offensive Jokes and How to Respond

Compelling Question: What impact do slurs and other offensive language have?

Grade Level		Time	Standards/Competencies	
K-2	3-5	45 Minutes	Common Core Anchor: Reading: R1 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL3 Language: L3, L5	SEL: Self-Awareness Social Awareness Responsible Decision-Making
7-8	HS			



Web Related Connections

Lessons

[Swastikas and Other Hate Symbols](#)
[Online Hate and Harassment and What We Can Do About It](#)
[Words Can Hurt, Help and Heal](#)
[The N-Word: Its History, Use and Impact](#)
[Intent Vs. Impact: Why Does it Matter?](#)

Other Resources

[Challenging Biased Language](#)
[When 'Just Joking' is No Joke: How to Respond](#)
[When Students' Jokes are Biased or Offensive](#)
[Slurs and Biased Language \(en Español\)](#)
[When it Comes to Bias, We Must Prioritize Impact Over Intent](#)

Key Words (cont.)

conservatism
 city council
 expletive
 KKK
 representing
 resign
 slur
 terminology
 unfit

LESSON OVERVIEW

Over the past several years, there have been several incidents of elected officials using slurs in public. In 2024, a Texas County Party Chair was under fire after he wrote several social media posts where he repeatedly called his political opponents slurs for gay people and people with disabilities. Also in 2024, a Maryland congressman who was running for U.S. Senate used a racist slur during a hearing on Capitol Hill. In 2021, an Alabama City Council member faced calls to resign after using the N-word during a council meeting. It seems that slurs, epithets and offensive jokes are part of our everyday lives and many people are unsure what to say or do when confronted with this offensive language.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about the situation with Senator Artiles, explore their thoughts and feelings about different slurs and offensive jokes that they hear online and in school and explore possible responses to slurs when they hear them.

[NOTE: Because this lesson explores slurs, offensive jokes and language, it is important to consider the level of trust and maturity among your students to discuss this sensitive material. Before proceeding, assess your students' ability to participate in this lesson in a productive way. This would be a good time to review classroom guidelines or rules, if you have already created them. If not, take 15–20 minutes to establish classroom guidelines using the [Establishing Classroom Guidelines](#) handout below. Throughout the lesson, remind your students that your discussion of these terms is designed to help students understand the negative and harmful impact of slurs and in no way indicates approval or grants them permission to use them now or in the future. It is critical that you never use any slur during the course of the lesson plan. It is also important to remind your students that slurs can never be used in your classroom, for this lesson plan or any other time.]

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will reflect on slurs, offensive “jokes” and language and their impact.
- Students will explore their opinions, thoughts and feelings about slurs and offensive language in their own lives.
- Students will consider words and phrases to use when responding to slurs and offensive language.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- Post-it® Notes or index cards (2–3 per student)
- Here I Stand statement signs (prepared in advance): “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “In between/not sure,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree.”
- “Alabama lawmaker uses racist slur in recorded council meeting, faces calls to resign” (one copy for each student)
- Pyramid of Hate (to project on board/smart board or one copy for each student)

PROCEDURES

What are slurs?

1. Ask students: *What is a slur?* Define **slur** as an insulting, offensive or degrading remark, often based on an identity group such as race, ethnicity, religion, ethnicity, gender/gender identity or sexual orientation.
2. Explain that over the past several years, there have been several incidents of elected officials using slurs in public. In 2024, a Texas County Party Chair was under fire after he wrote several social media posts where he repeatedly called his political opponents slurs for gay people and people with disabilities. Also in 2024, a Maryland congressman who was running for U.S. Senate used a racist slur during a hearing on Capitol Hill. In 2021, an Alabama City Council member faced calls to resign after using the N-word during a council meeting.
3. Have students turn and talk with a person sitting next to them and discuss slurs, offensive language or jokes they have heard, either directed at them or someone else, or ones they have heard in songs, movies or TV shows. Explain that students should not say the slur aloud but instead spell it out or say something like “the n-word” or “the f-word”.
4. Working on their own, have students think about other slurs or offensive language they have heard about. They can jot down some notes but again, explain to them they should not write the slur out as slurs are very harmful and upsetting to hear aloud or read in writing. They can write, “slur about disabled people, slur about Hispanic people,” etc.
5. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions. Remind them while we are discussing the use of slurs, they should not say the slur aloud.
 - What thoughts and feelings do you have when thinking about slurs you have seen or heard?
 - Where do you typically hear these words?
 - What impact do you think slurs have on the people the slur is about? What impact does the use of slurs have on others and on society?
 - Why is it important to understand the impact of slurs?
 - Where do these slurs come from?
 - How are slurs connected to stereotypes?



Reading Activity

1. Distribute a copy to each student of the article “[Alabama lawmaker uses racist slur in recorded council meeting, faces calls to resign](#)” give students 10 minutes to read it silently. (You can also distribute the night before to read for homework.)
2. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What happened?
 - What thoughts and feelings came to mind as you read the article?
 - What was the impact of City Council member Bryant's use of a racial slur?
 - How do you think you would have reacted if you were in the room when he used the slur?
 - What message is conveyed when elected officials use slurs in this way?
 - Why do you think some called for him to resign?
 - What do you think should be the consequences of using a slur in this way?

Here I Am Activity

1. Explain to students that they will listen to some statements about using slurs and offensive “jokes” and then decide to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement. Instruct students to indicate their opinion about each statement by positioning themselves along an imaginary line, depending upon how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement.
2. Select a large open space and indicate the position of an imaginary line with the farthest right point representing a STRONGLY AGREE response and the farthest left point a STRONGLY DISAGREE response. In between, place AGREE, IN BETWEEN/NOT SURE, AND DISAGREE along the continuum. Post the signs with these words that you created in advance on the wall.

Note: As an alternative, you can have students use thumbs up for agree, thumbs down for disagree and thumbs to the side for in between/not sure. Or, if you are teaching this lesson online, use [Mentimeter](#) (“Scales”) to create the continuum and provide the same selection of words—agree, disagree, etc., inviting students to select a response based on each statement.
3. Read some or all the statements below—one at a time—requesting students to take some time to decide where they want to be in the continuum, move silently to that place and observe where others choose to be. Following each statement, after everyone has chosen their spot, have one or two students from each group share their reasons for being where they are. Allow students to move upon hearing the reasons.
4. Read some or all of the statements below, requesting students take a few minutes to decide where they be in the continuum. Have them walk silently to that place and observe where others choose to stand. Following each statement, after everyone has chosen their spot, have students spend 2–3 minutes talking amongst themselves about why they are just being where they are. If time permits, have some students share with the rest of the class their thinking.
 - When I walk through the hallways of our school, I hear a lot of slurs and ethnic/racial jokes.
 - Adults should act as role models and not use slurs.
 - When someone makes a racial joke, you should just laugh it off.
 - Slurs and jokes are okay but should only be said in private among friends.
 - I see a lot of slurs and offensive jokes online.
 - When you hear slurs or jokes about your group, you should say something.

- It's okay to use a slur when talking about your own group (e.g., Black people using the N-word, girls using the B-word).
 - Words don't mean anything and people should get over it.
5. After the activity, lead a whole group discussion using the following questions:
- Were some statements easier to decide where to move to and some more difficult? How so?
 - How did it feel when most people had the same response as you? How about when most people were standing somewhere else?
 - Did you ever decide to change your position when you saw you did not agree with a majority of the group, or after hearing others' points of view?
 - What did you learn by doing this that made you either change your point of view or made you feel more strongly about your position?
 - What did you learn about slurs and offensive jokes by doing this activity?

Pyramid of Hate (Optional)

1. If time permits, show students the [Pyramid of Hate](#) by providing copies to each student or projecting on the board/smart board. Go over the different categories in the Pyramid of Hate, defining any words that the students do not know. Review the following points:
 - The Pyramid of Hate demonstrates the prevalence of bias and how incidents of bias, discrimination and oppression work together to create and perpetuate systems of hate and injustice.
 - Many people describe the behaviors at the bottom level of the pyramid not as significant and harmful as the higher levels. Like a pyramid, however, the levels above are supported by the lower levels. If people or institutions treat behaviors on the lower level as being acceptable or "normalize," it may not be long before the behaviors at the next level become more accepted. In addition, it is important to reflect on how people can address and interrupt the different ways that bias and hate manifest in individuals and society. If people address, challenge or interrupt bias on the lower levels of the pyramid, it helps to not "normalize" bias and hate and could impact the higher levels of the pyramid.
 - While the "higher" levels of the pyramid may be more consequential (e.g., bias-motivated violence, genocide), the impact on the individual of experiencing the lower levels should not be underestimated and can have a devastating impact as well.
2. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - Where are jokes, slurs and offensive language on the Pyramid of Hate?
 - What is the value of the Pyramid of Hate when learning about bias and discrimination?
 - At what level of the pyramid do you think it would be easiest (and most difficult) for someone to intervene?
 - What new information did you learn by looking at the Pyramid of Hate?
3. Sum up this section by pointing out that language and words matter and when they go unchecked and become "normalize," that can lead to higher levels on the pyramid. Also, it's important to point out that no matter what the intent of the person expressing the slur or insulting joke, it is harmful to the targeted person, to others, and to society as a whole.

Closing

Have students reflect on and consider everything they have learned. Then, have students write a word or phrase they could use as a response to a slur or offensive joke, whether it is directed at them or someone else. Ask them to consider something they would realistically say in the moment. Then, read them aloud.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [Colleagues Condemn Tarrant County Politician for Repeated Use of Slurs](#) (*The Texas Tribune*, October 2024)
- [U.S. Senate Candidate Apologizes for Using Racist Slur](#) (*The Guardian*, March 2024)
- [“4 Things to Tell Teens Who Joke About Race”](#) (The Root)
- [“Racist Slurs in Place-Names Have to Go, Say Geoscientists”](#) (EOS, March 19, 2021)
- [“America’s Maps Are Full of Racial Slurs—and That Needs to Change”](#) (*Scientific American*, March 30, 2021)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
Language
L3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
L5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

Establishing Classroom Guidelines

1. Write CLASSROOM GUIDELINES on the top of a piece of chart paper or on the board/smart board.
2. Ask students: *Why are classroom guidelines essential for creating a safe and respectful environment, for class discussions on difficult topics?* (For example, to have safe discussions, to encourage learning, to learn from mistakes, to minimize negative and unproductive conflicts, to hear different perspectives respectfully.)
3. Develop a web of student responses, and ask students to add additional words or ideas that come to mind when thinking about guidelines for respectful discussion.
4. Divide the class into small groups of 4–5 students and provide each group with a piece of chart paper and markers. Have each group select a recorder.
5. Explain to the class that each group is to develop 1–2 guidelines that they believe are important for each of the following three areas:
 - What does respectful discussion sound like?
 - What does it look like?
 - What does it feel like?

In addition to developing these classroom guidelines, students should be prepared to explain why they think each guideline is important.

6. On a piece of poster board, write GUIDELINES FOR RESPECT at the top.
7. After all groups have had time to develop two guidelines for each area, have a recorder from each group share the guidelines with the rest of the class. Discuss any guidelines that are unclear, clarify their meanings, and offer examples. Post each ground rule on the GUIDELINES FOR RESPECT poster board. If a group shares a ground rule that has already been established, put a check mark (✓) by the guideline to acknowledge agreement.
8. Hold a class discussion using the following questions as a guide:
 - How can these guidelines be used to help make our classroom a safe and respectful place?
 - How can we ensure that all members of the class abide by the guidelines?
 - What happens if someone does not abide by the guidelines?
9. Ask for consensus on abiding by each of the guidelines. Ask students to demonstrate their commitment to upholding the guidelines by signing their name or initials on the GUIDELINES FOR RESPECT poster board. Place the poster board (permanently) in a highly visible area of the classroom.
10. *(Optional)* Type up the class guidelines in the form of personal contracts and have each student sign their personal contract as a demonstration of their agreement to honor the guidelines.