

## **Connecting with Community at the Library**

**City of Fairfax Language Arts 123 Competition 2025**

**By Suzanne S. LaPierre**

As a librarian, I believe there are four crucial steps we can take to foster more civil discourse within our communities. First, we must move beyond our echo chambers—whether physical or virtual—and engage with people who are different from us. Second, we need to learn how to disagree respectfully, avoiding name-calling and personal attacks. Third, we should confront our own cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, which often hinder understanding. Finally, we must become more discerning in our consumption of information and media by, for instance, checking sources for credibility and identifying red flags of misinformation.

The encouraging news is that public libraries offer valuable opportunities to address these challenges—for those who are willing to be part of the solution. Libraries are well-equipped to support each of these actions, as I'll elaborate below.

### **The library as a community hub**

When it comes to meeting people from different walks of life, the local library is a great starting point. It is one of the few places where people from disparate segments of society cross paths. At any given moment, the library is full of people of all ages, ethnicities, and

social strata: college students, genealogists, retired folks, researchers, preschool children, recent immigrants, new Americans, and people experiencing homelessness- all sharing the same space and resources. We see our fellow community members face to face, whether merely in passing or in deeper engagement such as community workshops or events.

It's easy to get insulated in our own social circles and forget that all these other people co-exist as members of the larger community. Libraries are a "3rd place" aside from home where there is less of a power imbalance than school or work. Here, people of all kinds can simply exist without having set expectations for what someone must or must not be doing (other than basic rules such as not eating in the library).

Classic programs such as book clubs can be beneficial in bringing people together to talk about complex issues and practice critical thinking. In an era of memes and tweets, reading an entire book and taking the time to think about it and discuss it with others is an accomplishment. Thoughtful reasoning is required to reflect on what we have read and discuss it with others who may have had different interpretations. Library book clubs can be more diverse than book clubs we might form within our neighborhoods or circles of friends.

Many libraries are also offering programs that explore current issues such as use of Gen AI tools, avoidance of online scams, and even learning about cryptocurrency. The library can be a place to learn more about the pitfalls and opportunities that are integral to new technologies. The library also has meeting rooms which can be used for civic association meetings or other gatherings.

## **Learning to disagree with civility**

Libraries can be places where people learn to disagree more civilly. Seeing others face to face makes one more likely to behave respectfully than the anonymity of online interactions. As mentioned above, the library can also be a place to try out new technologies. And while new technologies sometimes seem to drive us apart, they can also foster connection in new ways.

For example, we can learn a lot about disagreeing politely from ChatGPT and other GenAI chatbots! If you disagree with an answer provided by ChatGPT, it will respond with something like “that’s a valid point,” and perhaps offer an alternative point to consider, after validating your perspective. AI has been trained to exemplify some elements of civil discourse such as active listening, respectful language, acknowledgment of alternative viewpoints, constructive feedback rather than criticism, and open-mindedness. And of course, the chatbot will remain calm no matter how much you try to provoke it!

For example, if I assert to ChatGPT that cats are better than dogs, the chatbot will confirm that cats have undeniable charm, and advantages including cleanliness and independence- while pointing out that dogs are beloved by some for their enthusiasm and loyalty. In this simple exchange it has validated my opinion while also providing an alternative perspective. Even as we lament some of the problems that come with ChatGPT, such making it easier to circumvent original research, I think using it might help us practice basic techniques of civil discourse - or at least set a good example.

For in-person interactions, libraries have meeting rooms that are ideal for hosting town halls, civic association meetings, and informal gatherings. If you need a space to join with others to support a good cause or discuss issues to be resolved, the library is neutral ground. One public library I know of hosted a town hall with local politicians running for office. The ground rules included no negative attacks. Candidates could only talk about their ideas and proposed solutions, not what they perceived to be wrong with the other candidate! This seems like a great path to constructive goal-oriented dialog and problem solving.

### **Confronting our own cognitive biases**

Even when we are trying our best to be polite and open-minded, innate psychological tendencies cause us to cling tightly to our beliefs. We can loosen the reigns by becoming more aware of cognitive biases. We all have these to some extent, but we can mitigate them with practice. For example, a common cognitive bias is confirmation bias. This is the tendency to seek out information that supports, rather than challenges, our preexisting beliefs. We tend to gather or interpret evidence to confirm our preconceptions while rejecting or ignoring conflicting data. By becoming more aware of this tendency, we can practice trying to evaluate information more objectively.

Another common pitfall is absolutism, or all-or-nothing thinking, which involves portraying situations, organizations, or individuals in black-and-white terms. To counter this tendency, it's important to acknowledge that all humans—and anything they create—are inherently imperfect. A reasonable number of mistakes does not warrant completely discarding

something valuable. For instance, a mainstream newspaper may have published some errors during its century-long history of daily reporting- averaging around 150 articles a day, resulting in millions of articles over the years. Given this volume, occasional errors are inevitable. However, a newspaper committed to good-faith investigative journalism and adherence to the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics- which emphasizes verifying sources, minimizing harm, and openly admitting and correcting mistakes- deserves respect for its efforts. While such news sources may not be flawless, and consumers must always apply their own judgment, they are fundamentally different from television shows designed solely to present a single, biased perspective.

By the same token, few people are all good or all bad. We should strive to avoid stereotypes, try to understand others on a more individual basis, and give others the benefit of doubt.

Many libraries have LibGuides (librarian-created online resources) to help people spot and circumvent cognitive bias. One example is Molloy University Library's guide to critical thinking about sources: <https://molloy.libguides.com/c.php?g=58039&p=7150845>.

Westmoreland County Community College has a nifty illustrated chart of 50 cognitive biases to be aware of:

<https://westmoreland.libguides.com/c.php?g=1350478&p=10570022>. These are good starting points for people who want to become more aware of how cognitive bias can derail logic.

## **Media literacy**

Media literacy skills are more essential than ever in today's increasingly complex information ecosystem. The American Library Association (ALA) has been a steadfast advocate for media literacy, creating resources and initiatives to help library workers foster these critical skills within their communities. Many of these efforts focus on long-standing advice from librarians and educators, such as evaluating the credibility of sources.

However, new challenges have emerged in the modern media landscape, requiring the strengthening of additional skills—such as interpreting visual media in an era marked by the rise of convincing deep fakes.

Recognizing red flags that signal misinformation is a crucial skill. Sensational headlines or content crafted to provoke strong emotions are often indicative of clickbait or propaganda rather than credible journalism. On social media, posts that rely on techniques such as excessive use of all caps, numerous exclamation points, or unsettling and jarring visuals are common signs of content designed to evoke emotional reactions and bypass logical reasoning.

These days we are not just consuming content, most of us are actively creating content in the form of social media posts and other communications. We need to be good creators as well as discerning consumers. That means taking the time to fact check information before sharing and citing sources of information so that others can follow up if they want to fact check as well.

In short, we need to keep asking ourselves: Who wrote or created this? Is it true? Is it current? Does the individual or organization have an agenda? Have multiple reliable

sources confirmed this information? When in doubt, library staff are happy to help track sources of information and offer reliable databases and reference guides.

### **What about social media?**

While pondering these steps, I've tried not to fall into technological determinism- blaming the latest problems in society on recent technological changes. Folks in the 1920's worried about the radio causing short attention spans. Then in the 40's and 50's, panic arose over television corrupting young minds. Now we tend to blame the ills of society on social media.

It is tempting, and not entirely off-base, to blame the current state of disinformation on social media. Many adults of all ages now claim to get most of their "news" from social media. Valid news can certainly be conveyed through social media- it's often the swiftest way to circulate information widely. However, what passes for "news" on social media can also include satire, complete fabrications, and even more sinister forms of propaganda and disinformation. It's not always easy to track the source of information and the "people" (sometimes bots) who spread it. The current information landscape is complicated by troll farms and generative AI techniques that make it harder to distinguish factual content.

While social media plays a role in amplifying incivility and the spread of fake news, it's not solely to blame. Problems like polarization, misinformation, and incivility existed long before social media. Cognitive biases, emotional reactions, and the tendency to engage with sensational content are deeply human traits that transcend the medium. Current media is a complex ecosystem, of which social media is just one piece of the puzzle.

On the positive side, social media has also been a tool for building communities around shared interests, staying in touch with distant family and friends, raising awareness for good causes, and spreading important news. One of my favorite examples of the potential for positive impact is the increase in pet adoptions from animal shelters thanks to sharing their photos and stories via social media. New technologies aren't inherently good or bad, it's all in how we use them.

## Conclusion

While new platforms and technologies bring both advantages and challenges, stepping away from screens to connect face-to-face with our fellow humans offers immediate and meaningful benefits. By leaving behind the veil of internet anonymity, we are more likely to engage with civility and recognize one another as real, complex individuals. Public spaces provide opportunities to interact with those who hold different backgrounds and beliefs, fostering understanding. Engaging with others in person offers a reprieve from the influence of online agitators, allowing us to reclaim clarity and authenticity in our interactions.

While the public library isn't a panacea for every problem in society, it can be one gateway to building a stronger, more connected community. Whether it's reading books, exploring research databases, joining a book club, or participating in classes and programs, there's something for everyone. You can go a step further by hosting community meetings or workshops in library meeting spaces, volunteering your time, or joining the Friends of the Library. These actions may seem small, but like the first word on a page, every step is a beginning—and together, they create a story of progress and connection.



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