



CYBER CIVICS

Level 1: Digital Citizenship

UNIT 3: YOUR DIGITAL REPUTATION
LESSON 9

RECOMMENDED GRADE: 5–6
APPROX. TIME: 2 SESSIONS, 50 min.

DIGITAL BACKGROUND CHECK

A “digital reputation”—the entirety of one’s online behavior—is often today’s first impression. Every Snap, TikTok, DM, and comment, even if deleted, can shape what others think of us. Colleges, coaches, employers, and even AI bots, are watching us today. For young people, this can have a huge impact (both positively and negatively) upon their future endeavors. Since this is a difficult concept for youth just starting to use digital tools to grasp, this lesson helps them see the possible consequences of posting questionable content online. This very important lesson will likely take a couple of class sessions to complete.

KEY STANDARDS

ISTE Standards: Digital Citizen (1.2.a, b, d).

CASEL Competencies: Social Awareness (3.a), Relationship Skills (4.a, b, d), Responsible Decision-Making (5.a, d, e).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY: 5th: RF.5.4, W.5.4, W.5.9, SL.5.1, SL.5.2, SL.5.4, L.5.4, L.5.6; 6th: RI.6.1, RI.6.2, RI.6.3, RI.6.4, RI.6.7, W.6.4, SL.6.1, SL.6.2, SL.6.3, SL.6.4, L.6.4, L.6.6.

aiEDU: 1a (Define & Identify AI Systems), 2b (Identify & Address Bias), 2c (Examine AI Use & Outputs).

AILit: K1.4 (Types of AI Systems), K2.2 (Training Data), K2.5 (Bias), K3.1 (Capabilities and Limitations), K4.1 (AI in Decisions); Engage with AI 4 (Examine how predictive AI systems provide recommendations that can inform or limit perspectives), 6 (Explain how AI could be used to amplify societal biases), 7 (Analyze how well the use of an AI system aligns with ethical principles and human values).



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will...

- ✓ Explain what a digital reputation is and what contributes to it (posts, comments, and what others share).
- ✓ Analyze how online information can be searched, copied, reshared, seen by invisible audiences, and preserved even after deletion.
- ✓ Evaluate a candidate’s digital background to form an impression of them.
- ✓ Assess how AI tools that score digital reputations can be powerful yet flawed, processing more information than a human without truly understanding it.

INTRODUCING THE LESSON

As students will learn by watching the video, a “reputation” is “the judged opinion that people in general hold towards something or someone.” Ask your students if they have ever heard this phrase before: *Your reputation precedes you*. Then, screen [Video 1].

THE LESSON

1. Let students know that in today's lesson, they'll explore how important a "digital reputation" is. Explain that this is "a collection of everything you do online—what you post, what others post about you, and more!"
2. Anything we post online—whether it's a photo, comment, video, or anything else (good and bad!)—can be searched for by others, copied and reshared, viewed by large, often invisible audiences, and it never really goes away (even if you delete it!).
3. To help students understand the real-world consequences of posting regrettable things online, tell them about a few true examples where online behavior had a major impact on young people's lives:
 - A high school athlete lost a scholarship to Marquette University after a screenshot from Snapchat surfaced showing her using offensive language ([learn more](#)).
 - Another high school student in Louisiana was removed as student body president and lost college scholarship offers after a video of her dancing inappropriately at a party spread on social media ([learn more](#)).
 - Another high school student had his Harvard admission rescinded after screenshots of inappropriate comments he had made two years earlier in private texts and a shared Google Doc were circulated online by classmates. Even though the comments were made in what he believed were private conversations, and even though he apologized, Harvard cited "maturity and moral character" as the reason for its decision — the same criteria universities use today ([learn more](#)).
4. Tell students that although these are extreme examples, for all of us what we post online can shape how others see us. Whether someone is applying to their dream college, trying to get their first job, making a new friend, or even attempting to get noticed for being an awesome influencer, it's likely their online activities will be taken into account. In other words, every Snap, TikTok, DM, and comment—even if deleted—can shape their digital reputation.
5. To help students understand this, tell them they'll be role-playing. By imagining they are college admissions officers (people who decide which students get accepted into a university), they'll get to decide which of two final candidates should receive a full college scholarship.

Let them know that their decision will be based not on grades or test scores, but on each candidate's digital background. Just like in real life, many colleges now check applicants' digital activities before making big decisions, especially when a major scholarship is on the line. Emphasize that colleges, just like individuals, have reputations to protect. So they're cautious about admitting students whose online behavior might reflect poorly on the school.

ACTIVITY

Divide students into groups of 3-4. Show (or print and distribute the Student Packet) the digital background data gathered about both candidates. Review and discuss this information together.

Each group should carefully review each candidate's digital background and then complete the analysis worksheet. Instruct students to make their decision based on each candidate's "honesty, maturity, and moral character" (explain this is the same criteria universities like Harvard use). When finished, groups should report which candidate they selected, if either, and explain how they arrived at their decision.

Afterwards, explain that neither candidate will receive the scholarship due to too many concerns about their digital reputation (chances are your students will have come up with this conclusion on their own). But there is more to this lesson in part 2.

ACTIVITY, PART TWO

The next step is to challenge the conclusions and assumptions students may have made about each candidate. For example:

- Did they assume David hacked into his school's computer? (Point out that the article referred to a "Dave" Downing who was on the school's lacrosse team, not a soccer player named "David" Downing. Explain that at big high schools, students sometimes share the same last name. You may also want to explain what the word "allegedly" means!)
- Did they think it was unfair to judge David for liking and commenting on someone else's post? (Explain that today, even our comments and likes can contribute to our digital reputations, especially as new technologies, like artificial intelligence, can quickly scan a person's digital background—including comments, likes, and even deleted posts—to form a "risk profile." This is why digital reputations matter more than ever.)
- Were they concerned that Sarah's name was not included in the Honor Roll on her school's website? (Ask students: *Do you think every school regularly updates their website? Is it possible that the person responsible for the website just hadn't gotten around to updating it yet?*)
- Did they think poorly of Sarah because "Cee-Jay" posted a comment claiming Sarah copied her recipe and her photo? Were they concerned about the bad review Sarah received from an anonymous person on the tutoring website? (Discuss: We don't really know who each of these people are. Ask: *Could "Cee-Jay" be a competing food blogger wanting to make Sarah look bad? Could the anonymous person be a competing tutor?*)

ACTIVITY, cont.

Now, take the debrief one step further by asking students to consider the role of AI:

- *If a college used an AI tool to score each candidate's digital reputation, do you think it would reach the same conclusion as you did? Why or why not?* (Students may assume AI would be more thorough or more fair than humans. Challenge both assumptions. An AI scanning Sarah's profile might never question whether "Cee-Jay" had a motive, it would simply register the accusation. Conversely, it might miss positive signals that require judgment, like recognizing that her tutoring profile shows initiative. Help students see that AI can process more information than a human but doesn't necessarily understand it better.)
- *Does knowing that AI—not just humans—might be judging your online activity change the way you think about what you post, comment on, or even like?* (This question is intentionally open-ended and personal. Some students may feel this is unfair surveillance; others may not be bothered. Both reactions are worth exploring. If students push back on the fairness of AI screening, validate that concern and remind them that this is exactly why understanding digital reputation matters now, before they have extensive online histories. The goal isn't to frighten them but to empower them to be intentional.)

Concluding This Lesson

Explain that while the decision not to select either candidate based solely on information found online might seem unfair, unfortunately these types of judgments are made every single day.

Ask students what they learned in this lesson. Then review:

- It's important not to jump to conclusions when viewing online information, because information on the Internet is not always completely accurate or even true!
- Still, others might make judgments about you based on what they find online.
- Although you may not be able to entirely control what others post about you, you can and should make wise decisions about what you post about yourself.

Important Note: The posts that follow are not meant to be viewed as "good" or "bad." They are a fairly typical representation of the kinds of things youth might post. Remember, the purpose of this lesson is to allow students to imagine what others might think and what sort of impression they might form about a young person based on what they see online.

GOAL

Students understand the importance of a digital reputation.

L1-9

(Activity inspired by Our Space: Being a Responsible Citizen of the Digital World and Common Sense Media's Trillion Dollar Footprint lessons.)

FOR STUDENT:

DIGITAL BACKGROUND CHECK

Candidate #1: Email to Admissions Office

New message

← → ↺

Q David K. Downing

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To... Admissions Committee

Subject... David K. Downing College Application

Dear Admissions Committee,

My name is David Downing and I'm a senior at West Lake High School where I'm a diligent student and maintain a 4.0 GPA. I also play varsity soccer and was recently named "Most Valuable Player." As a passionate environmentalist, I look forward to attending your college in order to study environmental science.

Thank you for considering my application,
David Downing

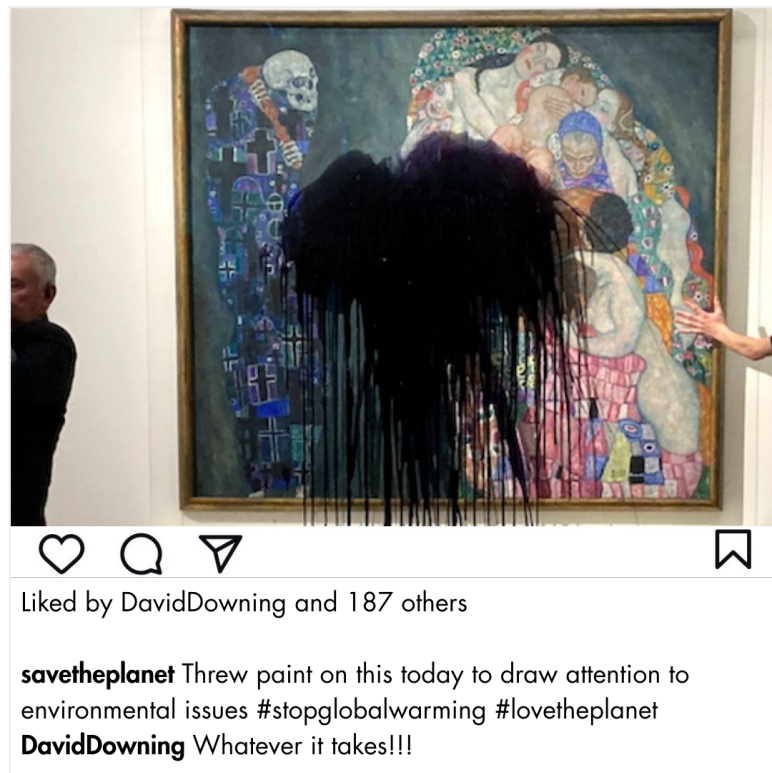
SEND

Candidate #1: Digital Background

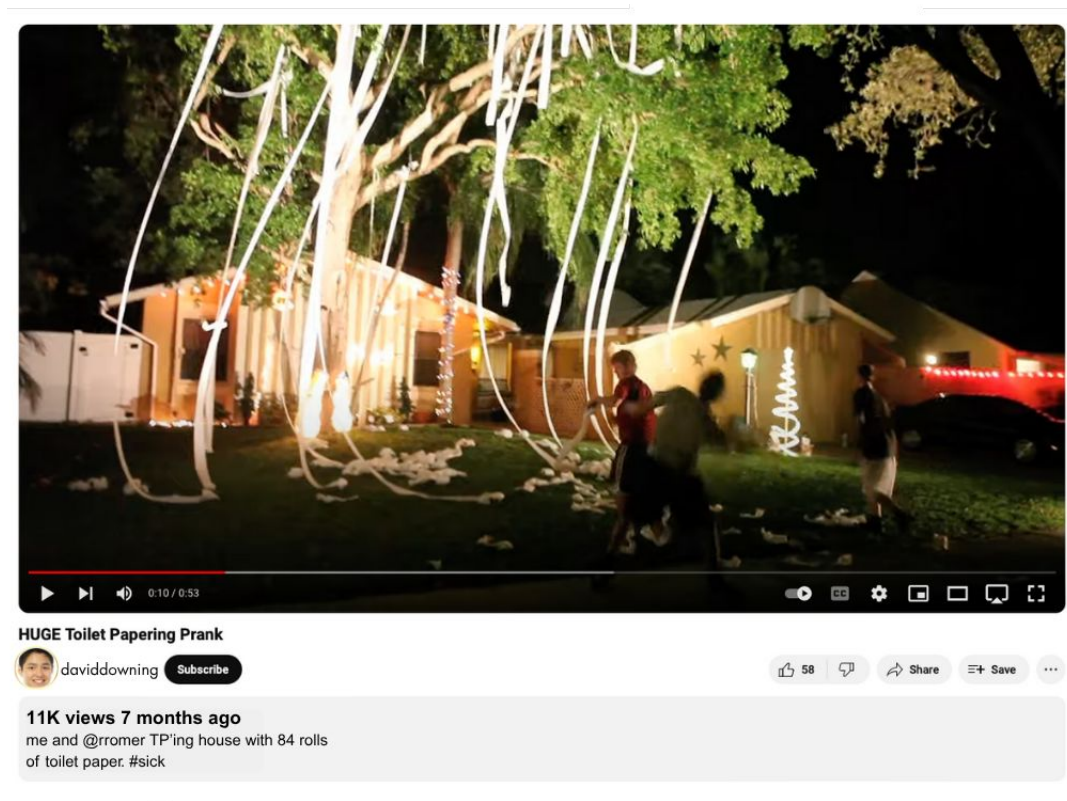
A web search found candidate's name mentioned in an online newspaper article.



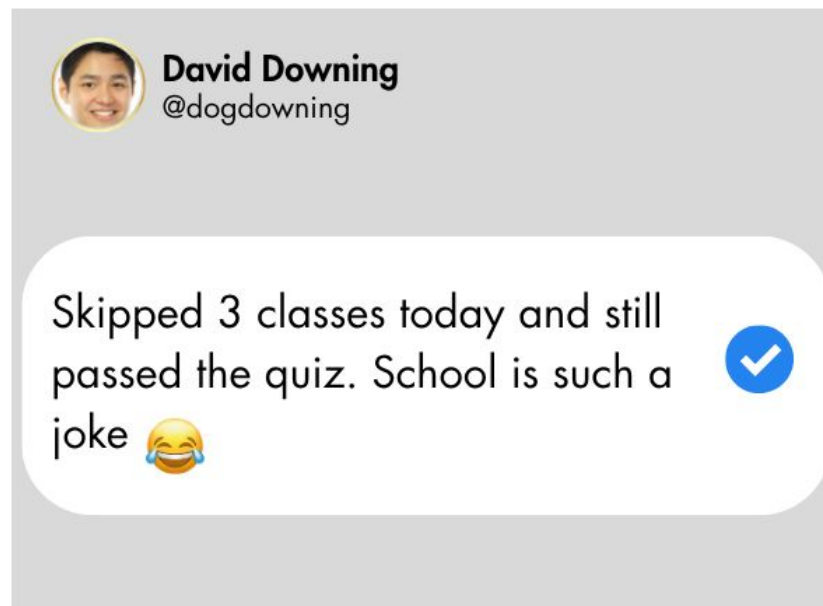
Candidate liked and commented on a controversial post in which an activist damaged artwork in an effort to draw attention to environmental issues.



Candidate posted a video that shows him and a friend toilet papering a house.



Candidate posted this on social media.



In a chat on a popular server, classmates discuss David. Chat was shared by the group on other social media apps.

 #science-group-chat

****astro_girl101**** [4:22 PM]:

ugh I'm not doing all the slides again 😞 David didn't even show up last time

****skaterboy88**** [4:22 PM]:

we should just tell Ms. R that he didn't help

****data_dave12**** [4:23 PM]:

yo chill lol. he said he had soccer tryouts 😞

****astro_girl101**** [4:23 PM]:

still. not an excuse. This is worth 20% of our grade 🙄

****skaterboy88**** [4:24 PM]:

ok but let's not make drama I'll do the intro slide. Can someone do conclusion?

****data_dave12**** [4:25 PM]:

I got it.

Candidate #2: Email to Admissions Office

New message

← → ↺

Q Sarah Ann Adams

☆ ≡

To... Admissions Committee

Subject... Sarah Adams College Application

Hello Admissions Committee,

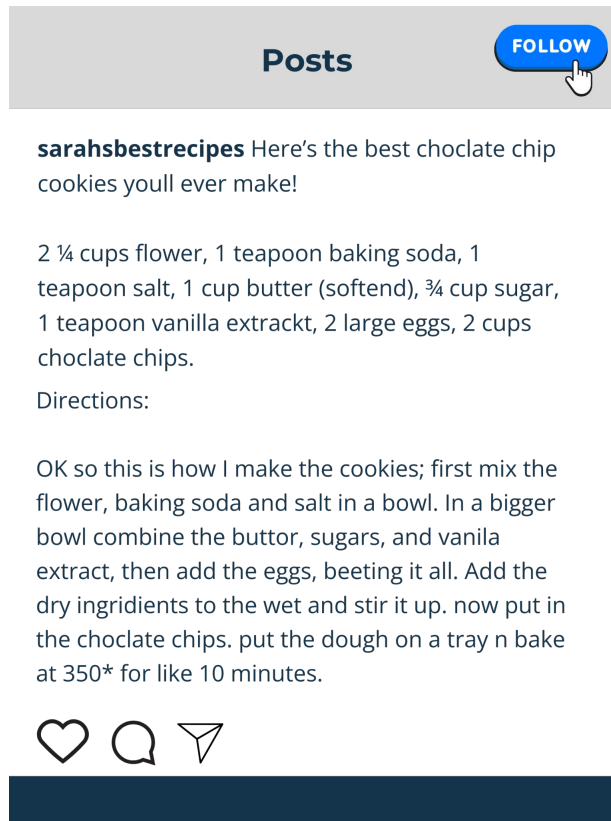
I'm Sarah Adams and I am excited to apply to your college! As an aspiring writer, I plan to major in English. I already have a good start, with over 4K people following me online to read my recipes! I'm also on Honor Roll at my school, and I spend many afternoons tutoring kids in English and pride myself in being an excellent role model.

Looking forward to hearing from you,
Sarah Ann Adams

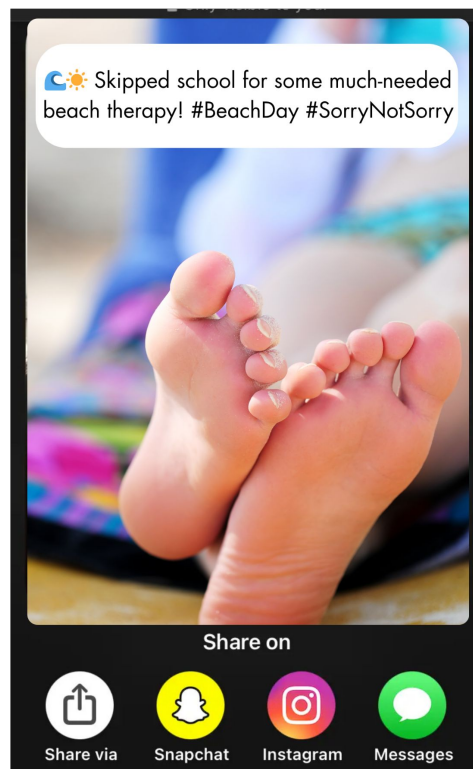
SEND

Candidate #2: Digital Background

Candidate posted a recipe on her popular “sarahsbestrecipes” account.



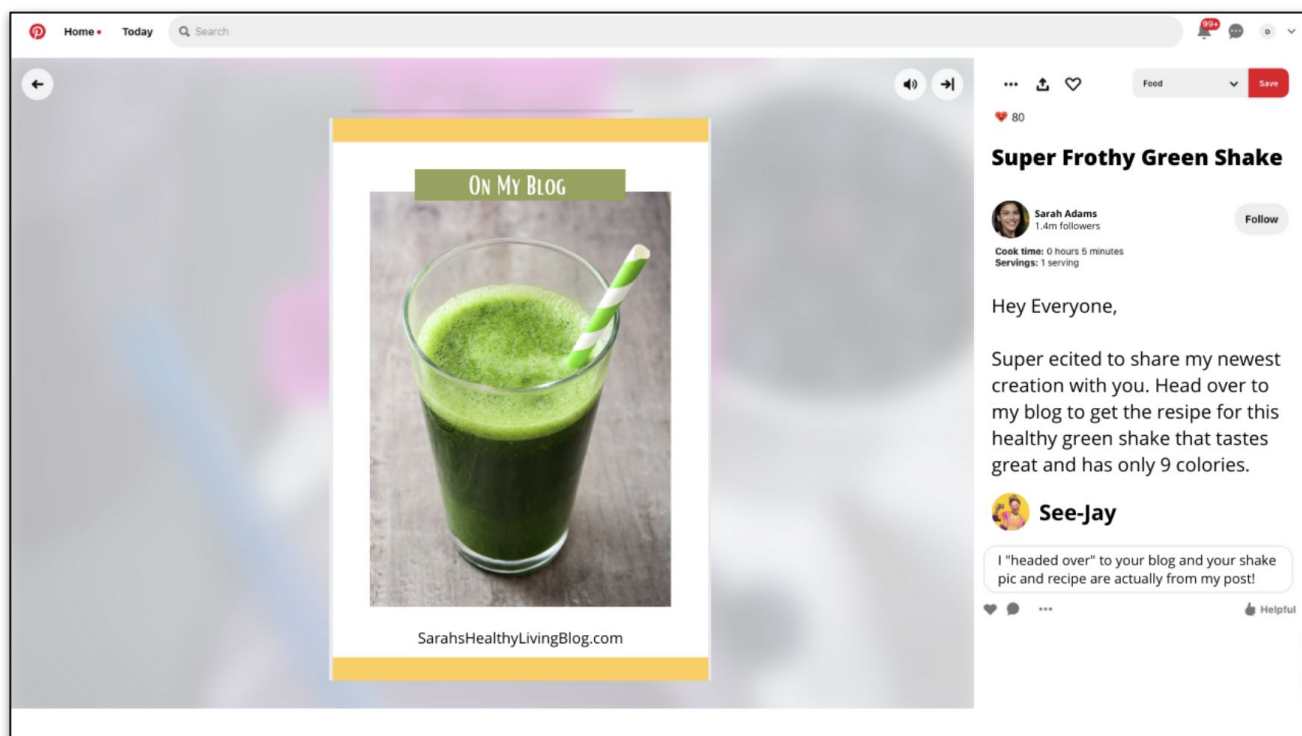
Candidate posted this on a social media account.



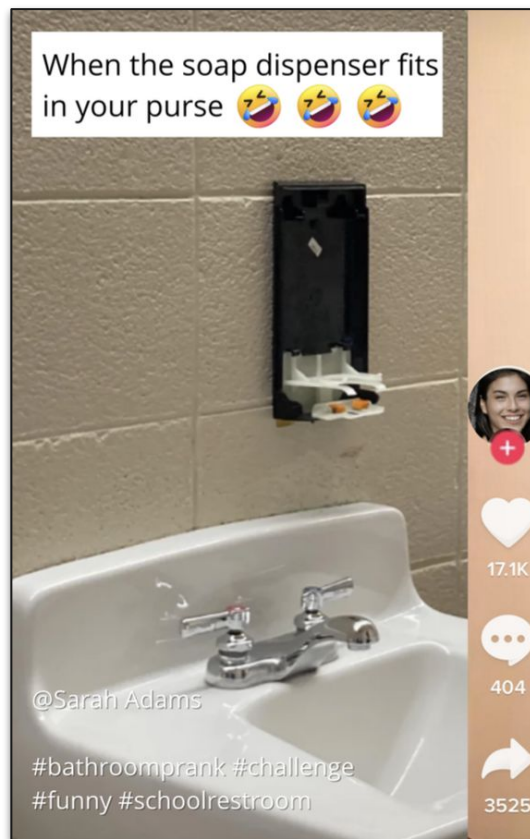
The candidate's school website shows students on the Honor Roll.



Candidate shared an image from one of her recipes. Note comment.



Candidate posted about participating in a viral challenge.



An anonymous review about the candidate on the [Tutors.com](https://www.tutors.com) website.

Tutors.com



Sarah Adams
Availability: 12 hrs./wk. Sat., Sun., Tue., Thurs.
Cost per Lesson: 4 tokens
Subjects: English
Overall Rating (12 ratings): ★★★★★

Promptness ★★★	Teaching Ability ★★★	Attitude ★★★★★
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Reviews

Although very friendly and outgoing, Sarah was consistently late for her tutoring sessions with our daughter, Amy. When she finally did arrive, she was often unprepared even though we had carefully explained the tutoring help Amy needed.

Your Name(s): _____

"DIGITAL BACKGROUND CHECK" ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

1. What inconsistencies did you find between Candidate #1's letter and his digital reputation?

2. What inconsistencies did you find between Candidate #2's letter and her digital reputation?

3. Which candidate would you like to award the scholarship to (*based on their honesty, maturity, and moral character?*).

4. Explain why:
