



NUDGE OR SLUDGE?

AI Consumer Audit | Teacher Guide + Lesson Plan

SESSION CONNECTION

This lesson demonstrates the session message: AI can help build the inquiry, but students must still analyze evidence, make decisions, justify conclusions, and reflect.

TEACHER DASHBOARD

Time	Grouping	Technology	Student Product
45-55 min demo or two class periods	Pairs recommended	One approved AI tool per pair	Verified audit, evidence verdict, redesign reflection

THE BIG QUESTION

When does a company's attempt to retain a customer become unfair manipulation?

STUDENTS WILL

- Explain nudge, sludge, and legitimate friction.
- Treat AI output as claims that require verification.
- Classify steps before asking AI for a second opinion.
- Defend a final verdict using evidence and uncertainty.

STUDENT PACKET MAP

CHOOSE Service + prediction	PROMPT Capture AI claims	VERIFY Check one claim	AUDIT Judge first + score	VERDICT Compare, decide, redesign
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BEFORE STUDENTS BEGIN

Setup, Safety, and Service Selection

TEACHER SETUP

- Review district or campus AI policy and use an approved tool.
- Preselect 3-5 services with current official help pages or evidence.
- Test the starter prompt on the school network before class.
- Prepare at least one verification source per service if students need support.
- Project or provide the 0-3 scoring key during work time.

PRIVACY AND ACCURACY GUARDRAILS

- Students do not log in to a service, enter payment information, or cancel anything.
- Students do not share names, account details, family subscriptions, or screenshots with personal information.
- AI may describe outdated interfaces. Students must verify claims that could affect the rating.
- The goal is not to shame a company. The goal is to evaluate design choices and evidence.

SUGGESTED SERVICES

Service Type	Useful Evidence	Teaching Opportunity
Streaming or media	Current help page and cancellation FAQ	Retention offers, reminders, confirmation screens
Shopping or delivery membership	Official membership cancellation page	Loss aversion, benefit reminders, button hierarchy
Software or app subscription	Support documentation or terms	Discount offers, plan changes, processing delays
Gym or fitness membership	Current contract or policy excerpt	Offline requirements, notice periods, legitimate friction

FACILITATION PLAN

Run the Inquiry Without Letting AI Take Over

FASTEST CLASSROOM VERSION

Short on time? Preselect one service and give every pair the same AI response. Students still verify one claim, score independently, compare with AI, and defend the final verdict.

Phase	Time	Teacher Move	Student Action
Launch	4-5 min	Frame students as consumer auditors. Do not define a correct answer too early.	Choose a service and make a prediction.
Prompt	6-8 min	Coach students to ask for uncertainty, not more confident detail.	Use the starter prompt and capture AI claims.
Verify	5-7 min	Ask: Would this claim matter if it were wrong?	Verify one consequential claim.
Audit	12-15 min	Require students to score before asking AI for a second opinion.	Classify steps, identify who benefits, and score friction.
Compare + Verdict	10-15 min	Push evidence, disagreement, and uncertainty.	Ask AI for a second opinion and defend final rating.
Redesign / Debrief	8-10 min	Ask whether the redesign protects choice or hides manipulation.	Redesign one step and reflect on human judgment.



PROMPTS AND SCORING

Keep AI in the Right Role

KEY INSTRUCTIONAL MOVE

Students complete their own classification and score before asking AI for a second opinion. Otherwise, the AI answer can anchor their judgment and turn inquiry into answer-copying.

STARTER PROMPT

I am doing a consumer research activity for school. Describe the online cancellation process for [SERVICE NAME] using the most current information available to you. For each step, explain what the consumer may need to do, identify confirmations, delays, required information, or offers to stay, label details as verified, commonly reported, or uncertain, do not invent details, and tell me what to verify using a current company source.

FOLLOW-UP PROMPT

Go deeper on step [NUMBER]. What exactly might the consumer see or have to do? Separate what you can support from what is uncertain. Do not guess. Tell me which detail would be most important to verify before I score this step as sludge.

SECOND-OPINION PROMPT

Here is my audit of the cancellation process for [SERVICE NAME]. Review my classifications and scores as a second opinion. For disputed steps, explain whether the step is sludge, nudge, or legitimate UX; identify who benefits and any cognitive bias; flag claims that still need verification. Do not replace my judgment or make the final verdict for me.

SCORING GUIDE

Score	Guidance	Teacher Question
3 - Heavy sludge	Primarily benefits the company; little or no consumer purpose.	What would the consumer lose if this step disappeared?
2 - Moderate sludge	Adds meaningful friction, but some part may be justified.	Could the same goal be achieved more transparently?
1 - Questionable	Evidence, intention, or benefit is mixed or ambiguous.	What evidence would change your score?
0 - Legitimate / nudge	Protects, informs, or clearly helps the consumer make a voluntary choice.	Does this step support the consumer goal?

0.00 to 0.49 Consumer First	0.50 to 1.24 Shady-ish	1.25 to 2.24 Classic Sludge	2.25 to 3.00 Hall of Shame
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Use average friction score: total friction points divided by number of verified/scorable steps. These bands support discussion, not a scientific measure. Require students to defend the rating with evidence and uncertainty.

SAMPLE REASONING + WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Use this page during circulation or debrief. The goal is not one “right” company rating. The goal is evidence, verification, and student-owned judgment.

Illustrative Step	Possible Classification	Why	Score
Open account settings	Legitimate UX	The consumer needs a reasonable place to manage the account.	0
Required reason dropdown before canceling	Heavy sludge	The company collects retention data and delays the consumer choice.	3
Pause offer with equal-size continue/cancel options	Questionable / nudge	The offer may help some consumers, but it can still influence behavior.	1
Clear final confirmation with exact end date	Legitimate / nudge	The step protects the consumer from accidental cancellation confusion.	0



STRONG STUDENT WORK INCLUDES

- Specific descriptions of friction, not “it was annoying.”
- At least one verified or contradicted AI claim.
- A distinction between current evidence, historical reports, and uncertainty.
- A comparison between student judgment and AI second opinion.
- A final verdict supported by evidence and scoring.

COACHING QUESTIONS

- What would change if this AI claim were wrong?
- Who benefits from this screen or step?
- Is the friction protecting the consumer or delaying them?
- What evidence would change your score?
- Did AI strengthen your thinking or anchor your answer?

TEACHER SUPPORT

Look-Fors, Misconceptions, and Debrief

Look For	Coach Students Away From
Specific evidence such as clicks, fields, button prominence, delays, required calls, or repeated offers.	It was annoying, so it was sludge.
A clear explanation of who benefits and how the design influences behavior.	Treating every retention offer as automatically unethical.
Independent disagreement with AI supported by reasoning.	Copying the AI classification into the table.
Verification of at least one consequential factual claim.	Assuming a confident AI answer is current or accurate.
A redesign that preserves choice, transparency, and equal visibility of options.	Replacing one manipulative design with a different manipulative design.

DEBRIEF QUESTIONS

- Which step created the strongest disagreement? What evidence mattered?
- When is an “Are you sure?” message legitimate protection rather than sludge?
- What did AI get wrong, oversimplify, or state too confidently?
- How did verification change the final score or confidence level?
- Did the redesign remove friction or simply hide the manipulation?

DIFFERENTIATION + OPTIONS

- Short on time: preselect one service and use one shared AI output for all pairs.
- Need support: provide an official help page and one screenshot or excerpt.
- Need challenge: require students to compare historical reports with current evidence.
- No AI access: provide a teacher generated simulated AI response and have students audit it.
- Extension: have students create a fair cancellation screen and explain the design choices.

WHY THIS LESSON WORKS

BRING A PFL TOPIC Behavioral economics, subscriptions, dark patterns, and consumer decision-making.	BUILD THE INQUIRY Authentic problem, ambiguous question, evidence students must interpret.	VERIFY AND REFINE Students check AI claims, examine uncertainty, and revise analysis.	TEACH FOR THINKING Students classify, compare, decide, justify, redesign, and reflect.
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QUICK-START IMPLEMENTATION CHECKLIST

Use this checklist when you bring the lesson back to your campus.

Before Class	During Class	After Class
Choose services with current evidence. Check AI access and school policy. Print student packets or assign digitally.	Frame students as auditors. Require students to judge first. Pause for verification before the verdict.	Debrief disagreement, not just answers. Collect final claims or reflections. Save strong examples for future discussion.
Do not use personal accounts or real payment information.	AI is a thinking partner, not an answer key.	Revise the lesson based on what students misunderstood.
Recommended print setting: actual size, not fit-to-page shrink.	Group size: pairs work best with one approved AI tool.	Next step: connect this to subscriptions, dark patterns, consumer law, or budgeting.

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