

Mini-Qs™ in Psychology

Unit 1

Why Is It So Hard to Put Down Our Phones?

MINI-Q™ LESSON PLAN

NOTE: Time required to do a Mini-Q varies greatly with skill level, grade, and DBQ experience. Time range is generally two to five 45-minute class periods.

1 to 2 DAYS: 45–90 minutes

Step One: The Hook Refer to the Step One teacher notes in the Mini-Q. Read the directions aloud. The purpose is to get students engaged, talking, and wanting to do the Mini-Q.

Step Two: Background Essay Refer to the Step Two teacher notes in the Mini-Q. Students can write out answers to the BGE questions, or the questions can simply be discussed.

Step Three: Understanding the Question The task of recognizing and defining key words in the question is a crucial habit of mind. The second task of pre-bucketing based on clues in the question is an important categorization skill.

2 DAYS: 90 minutes

Step Four: Document Analysis Model Document A with the whole class, showing the kind of thinking and detail you expect in student answers to the Document Analysis questions. Working in pairs or groups of three, students proceed to examine the remaining documents and write answers to the Document Analysis questions or, alternatively, fill out the Document Analysis Sheet located in the Toolkit. Conclude by asking volunteer pairs to present the remaining documents to the class by going through the Document Analysis questions and discussing their answers.

1 DAY: 45 minutes

Step Five: Bucketing, Chickenfoot & Thrash-out Have students complete the bucketing and chickenfoot work page. This step will help students clarify their thesis and road map. Then do a Thrash-out.

1 DAY: 45 minutes (Optional)

Step Six: The Essay Conduct an in-class Writing Workshop. You may want to use the Outline Guide Sheet or the Guided Essay in the Toolkit. The Guided Essay is especially helpful for students needing extra support.

MINI-Q™ LESSON PLAN: CLEAN VERSION OPTION

If students are ready, use the Clean Version of the Mini-Q, which requires them to handle more of the analysis on their own. Estimated time to complete is 2 to 3 class periods.

TEACHER DOCUMENT LIST (EV)

There are six documents in this Mini-Q. Students are provided with the same document list, but it is not divided into analytical categories or buckets. Students may develop categories that are different from these. It is often a good idea to use evidence from one document in more than one category or bucket.

Smartphones Reward Us

Document A: Skinner's Four Schedules of Reinforcement (infographic)

Document B: "The Psychology of Smartphone Addiction"

Smartphones Are Designed to Capture Our Attention

Document C: "Bad Is Stronger Than Good"

Document D: How Social Media Algorithms Work

Smartphones Meet Our Need for Social Connection

Document E: The Need to Belong (infographic)

Document F: "Teens' Experiences on TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat" (graph)

AP Psychology Connections

AP-Style Prompt

Develop and support a claim about why smartphones are so difficult to put down. In your response, apply at least three psychological concepts or theories and use evidence to justify your argument.

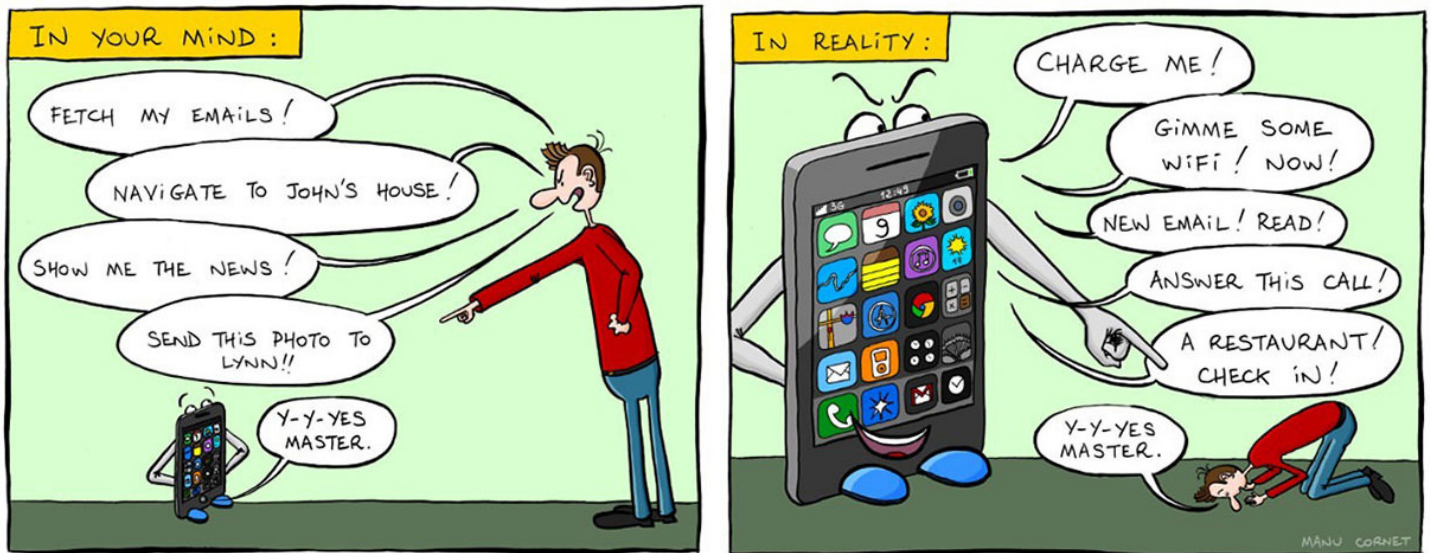
Where This Fits

This Mini-Q aligns primarily with Unit 3: Development & Learning, with additional connections to Unit 1: Biological Bases of Behavior, Unit 2: Cognition, and Unit 4: Social Psychology & Personality. It can be used to introduce or reinforce operant conditioning, reinforcement schedules, dopamine, attention, motivation, and the need to belong.

Flexible Implementation

- **Introduce the topic:** Use Documents A, C, and E before direct instruction to explore how rewards, attention, and social connection influence smartphone use.
- **Review for the AP Exam:** Analyze all six documents and respond to the AP-style prompt above.
- **Develop scientific argumentation:** Complete the full Mini-Q, including document analysis, bucketing, discussion, and argumentative writing.

Why Is It So Hard to Put Down Our Phones?



"Mobile Relationship" by Manu Cornet, Bonkers World (2012)

Overview: You planned to check one notification. Twenty minutes later, you're still scrolling. Why can smartphones be so hard to put down? Psychologists have discovered that smartphones tap into powerful mental processes that influence our behavior, attention, and relationships. This Mini-Q will explore how these psychological processes help explain why it is so hard to put down our phones.

Documents:

- Document A: Skinner's Four Schedules of Reinforcement (infographic)
- Document B: "The Psychology of Smartphone Addiction"
- Document C: "Bad Is Stronger Than Good"
- Document D: How Social Media Algorithms Work
- Document E: The Need to Belong (infographic)
- Document F: "Teens' Experiences on TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat" (graph)

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Step One: The Hook

Teacher Note: The purpose of the Hook Exercise is to spark curiosity about the driving question and encourage students to notice patterns in everyday smartphone use. Divide students into pairs and give them 5 to 10 minutes to examine the infographic and answer the discussion questions. Encourage students to support their answers with evidence from the data. A whole-class discussion should follow before moving to the Background Essay.

The infographic shows that smartphones have become deeply woven into many people's daily routines. But **why** do so many people find it difficult to stop checking their phones? That is what this Mini-Q attempts to answer.

Suggested Responses:

1. Which statistic surprises you the most? Explain why.

Answers will vary. Students should support their choice with a reason. Many may mention that Americans check their phones 186 times a day, that nearly 85 percent check their phones within 10 minutes of waking up, or that nearly half consider themselves addicted to their phones.

2. What patterns do you notice about when and how people use their smartphones?

Students should recognize that smartphones are used throughout the day, from shortly after waking up to bedtime. Many people also use them during everyday activities, suggesting that phones have become a regular part of daily routines.

3. Which two statistics provide the strongest evidence that many people find it difficult to be without their phones?

Answers will vary. Students may point to the percentage of people who feel uneasy leaving their phone at home, those who check their phone soon after waking, those who sleep with their phone, or those who consider themselves addicted. Any pair of statistics is acceptable if supported with evidence.

4. Based on the infographic, what question(s) might a psychologist ask about smartphone use?

Students may ask why people check their phones so often, why many people feel uncomfortable without them, why people sleep with their phones nearby, or why smartphones have become such an important part of daily life. Their questions should focus on explaining the behaviors shown in the data.

Hook Exercise: How Often Do We Use Our Phones?

Directions: Smartphones have become part of everyday life. Many people use them from the moment they wake up until they go to sleep. The infographic below summarizes the results of a national survey about cellphone habits in the United States.

Your Task: Study the infographic. Then, with a partner, discuss the questions below. As you discuss your answers, think about what the statistics suggest about the role smartphones play in people's daily lives.



Discussion Questions

1. Which statistic surprises you the most? Why?
2. What patterns do you notice about when and how people use their smartphones?
3. Which two statistics provide the strongest evidence that many people find it difficult to be without their phones?
4. Based on the infographic, what question(s) might a psychologist ask about smartphone use?

Step Two: Background Essay

General Instructions

- Review the timeline on the Background Essay questions page.
- Pre-teach the boldfaced vocabulary.
- Have students read (or listen to) the Background Essay.
- Have students answer the Background Essay questions.

Specific Considerations

The main purpose of the Background Essay is to provide the historical context students need before analyzing the documents. It introduces the major events, people, and vocabulary for this unit. The Background Essay should prepare students to investigate the documents without answering the Mini-Q for them.

Time: Unlike many Mini-Qs, this Background Essay is not tied to a single historical period. Instead, it introduces modern smartphone use and connects it to psychological processes that have evolved over thousands of years. Emphasize that smartphones are a recent invention, but the ways humans respond to rewards, attention, and social connection are not. The documents will explore how today's technology takes advantage of these natural psychological tendencies.

Place: Although smartphones are used almost everywhere, psychologists study them in many different settings, including schools, homes, and online environments. Point out that researchers use different methods to answer different questions. Some studies examine behavior in controlled experiments, while others observe how people use smartphones in everyday life.

Story: The Background Essay introduces the idea that smartphones are effective not simply because they are entertaining, but because they appeal to fundamental psychological processes. Students learn that psychologists explain behavior by studying motivation, attention, learning, and social relationships. Remind students that the Background Essay introduces these concepts, while the documents provide the evidence needed to explain why smartphones can be difficult to put down.

Vocabulary and Concepts

You may want to pre-teach the seven boldfaced terms in the Background Essay. Our approach to vocabulary is that some pre-teaching is good, but keep the word list short. Encourage students to use context clues to discover meaning.

Reading Strategy: Marking Up the Text

As students read through the Background Essay, ask them to mark up the text by

REWARD words: Box words or phrases that explain why people repeat behaviors.

ATTENTION words: Circle words or phrases that explain how smartphones capture or hold people's focus.

CONNECTION words: Underline words or phrases that explain why people seek relationships or belonging.

Place a star (★) next to one sentence that best explains why psychologists think smartphones are so difficult to put down.

Why Is It So Hard to Put Down Our Phones?

Imagine waking up one morning to discover that your phone has disappeared. No texts. No videos. No music. No games. No notifications. How long would it take before you reached into your pocket to check for it anyway? A few minutes? An hour? A day? For many people, the answer is “not very long.” The average teenager receives about 237 notifications each day and checks a phone more than 100 times.

Many people think smartphones are difficult to put down simply because they are entertaining. Entertainment is certainly part of the story, but psychologists believe something much deeper is happening. The surprising part isn't that smartphones have changed the human brain. It's that they are so successful because they take advantage of psychological tendencies that have helped humans survive and live together for thousands of years.

Psychologists study **motivation**, the force that energizes and directs people's behavior. Some motivations help us meet basic physical needs like food, water, and sleep. Others involve psychological and social needs, such as learning new things, accomplishing goals, and building relationships. Psychologist Abraham Maslow argued that once people's basic physical needs are met, they become increasingly motivated by needs like **belonging** and self-esteem. Although psychologists continue to debate parts of Maslow's theory, most agree that people have a strong desire to connect with others.

Your brain is built to notice things that matter. The **amygdala** helps direct your attention toward information that is surprising or emotionally important. The brain's reward system uses a chemical messenger called **dopamine** to help you learn from experiences that feel rewarding. Finding food, solving a problem, receiving praise, or hearing from a friend can all activate this system. These brain processes helped humans survive long before smartphones existed.



As phones gained more features, they became better at rewarding users, capturing attention, and keeping people connected

Today's smartphones were designed with these natural tendencies in mind. Apps often provide small **rewards**, such as a new message, an interesting video, or a “like” on a post. Notifications and endless scrolling compete for your **attention** by constantly offering something new. Social media also makes it easy to communicate with friends, family, and people who share your interests. Behind many of these features are computer programs called **algorithms**, which recommend content based on what is most likely to keep your attention and encourage you to keep using the app.

Psychologists do not believe there is one simple reason people have a hard time putting down their phones. Instead, they study how learning, attention, motivation, and relationships work together to influence behavior. Our brains did not evolve for smartphones, but today's smartphones are remarkably good at taking advantage of how our brains naturally learn, pay attention, and connect with other people.

Your Task: Examine the documents that follow to determine what psychological factors make smartphones difficult to stop using. As you read, consider how the roles of rewards, attention, and the need to belong shape human behavior, and how they work together to influence smartphone use. In other words, *Why Is It So Hard to Put Down Our Phones?*

EV

Step Two: Background Essay (continued)

Answers to the Background Essay Questions

1. Why do many people find it hard to put down their phones?

Smartphones are designed to take advantage of the way people naturally learn, pay attention, and connect with others.

2. What is motivation? Give one example of something that motivates people.

Motivation is what causes people to act or make choices. Answers may include food, sleep, reaching a goal, or spending time with friends.

3. According to Abraham Maslow, what psychological needs become more important after people's basic needs are met?

Maslow believed people become more motivated by needs like belonging, relationships, and feeling good about themselves.

4. What do the amygdala and dopamine help your brain do?

The amygdala helps you notice important or surprising things. Dopamine helps you learn from experiences that feel rewarding.

5. What is an algorithm, and what does it do?

An algorithm is a computer program that recommends content that is most likely to keep your attention and encourage you to keep using an app.

6. What are three reasons psychologists think smartphones are hard to put down?

rewards, attention, and the need to belong (or social connection)

7. Define these key terms:

motivation: the force that causes an individual to act or make choices

belonging: the feeling of being accepted and connected to others

amygdala: a part of the brain that helps you notice important or emotional information

dopamine: a brain chemical that helps you learn from experiences that feel rewarding

rewards: things that make a behavior more likely to happen again

attention: focusing your mind on a person, object, or idea

algorithms: computer programs that recommend content based on your interests and behavior

- ✓ Write a two- or three-sentence summary of the Background Essay describing reward, connection, and attention.

Smartphones are hard to put down because they take advantage of the way our brains work. They offer rewards, capture our attention, and make it easy to connect with other people. Psychologists study these behaviors to understand why people use their phones so often.

Background Essay Questions

1. Why do many people find it hard to put down their phones?
2. What is motivation? Give one example of something that motivates people.
3. According to Abraham Maslow, what psychological need becomes more important after people's basic needs are met?
4. What do the amygdala and dopamine help your brain do?
5. What is an algorithm, and what does it do?
6. What are three reasons psychologists think smartphones are hard to put down?
7. Define these key terms:

motivation

belonging

amygdala

dopamine

rewards

attention

algorithms

- ✓ Write a two- or three-sentence summary of the Background Essay describing reward, connection, and attention.
-

Timeline

1876 – Alexander Graham Bell patents the telephone.

1983 – The first commercial cell phone goes on sale.

1992 – The first text message is sent.

2001 – 3G wireless networks expand.

2007 – Apple releases the first iPhone.

2010 – Instagram launches (followed by rapid growth of mobile social media).

2016 – Apps increasingly use algorithms to personalize each user's feed.

Step Three: Understanding the Question

Understanding the Question

1. What is the analytical question asked by this Mini-Q?

Why is it so hard to put down our phones?

2. What terms in the question need to be defined?

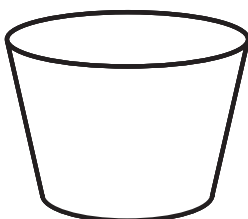
“so hard,” “put down”

3. Rewrite the question in your own words.

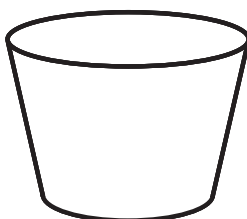
What psychological factors make smartphones difficult to stop using?

Pre-Bucketing

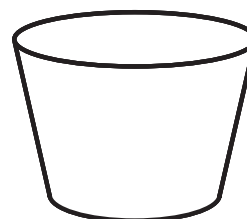
Note: As students suggest their bucket labels, draw bucket sets on the board. At this stage, students are simply looking for generic labels that provide a framework for organizing the essay.



Reason #1



Reason #2



Reason #3

Suggestions for Differentiation

1. Give the students all or some of the final bucket labels: smartphones reward us, smartphones are designed to capture our attention, and smartphones meet our need for social connection.
2. Ask students to use the Background Essay and the Hook to predict what the bucket labels might be. As they read the documents, they can see whether their predictions were correct.

Understanding the Question and Pre-Bucketing

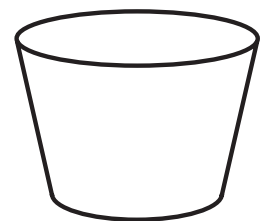
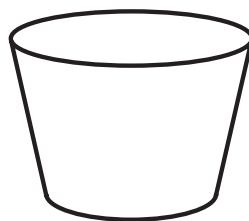
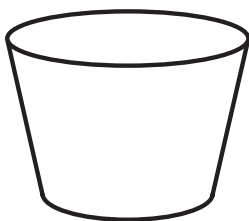
Understanding the Question

1. What is the analytical question asked by this Mini-Q?
2. What terms in the question need to be defined?
3. Rewrite the question in your own words.

Pre-Bucketing

Bucketing is designed to help you sort evidence from the documents into groups or categories. These buckets eventually become your body paragraphs.

Directions: Using clues from the Mini-Q question, think of logical analytical categories and label the buckets. We suggest a three-bucket strategy. At this point, your bucket labels should be very general. Later, as you read through the documents and start filling your buckets with evidence, the labels will become more specific.



Step Four: Document Analysis

Document A: Skinner's Four Schedules of Reinforcement

Content Notes:

- B.F. Skinner (1904–1990) was one of the most influential psychologists of the twentieth century and a leading figure in behaviorism. Through experiments with rats and pigeons, Skinner showed that behavior is shaped by its consequences. His work on operant conditioning helped explain how rewards and consequences influence learning and everyday behavior.
- Operant conditioning is the idea that people and animals learn from the consequences of their actions. Behaviors followed by rewards are more likely to be repeated, while behaviors followed by unpleasant consequences are less likely to occur. Skinner argued that learning is influenced not only by whether rewards are given, but also by *when* and *how often* they are given.
- Skinner discovered that the pattern of rewards can affect how long a behavior continues. Behaviors rewarded on predictable schedules often stop when the rewards end. Behaviors rewarded on unpredictable schedules—especially variable-ratio schedules—tend to last much longer because people never know when the next reward will come.
- Imagine a teacher gives a homework pass after every tenth homework assignment. Students know exactly when the reward is coming. Now imagine the teacher occasionally surprises students with a homework pass for excellent effort, but never announces when it will happen. Many students would continue putting forth strong effort because they know a reward is possible, even if they do not know exactly when it will come.

Teaching Tips:

- Discuss the Document Analysis questions:
 1. According to Skinner, what does operant conditioning explain?

Operant conditioning explains that behaviors followed by rewards are more likely to happen again.

2. Which two reinforcement schedules provide rewards at unpredictable times or after an unpredictable number of responses?

The two reinforcement schedules are Variable Ratio (VR) and Variable Interval (VI).

3. What is the main difference between a fixed schedule and a variable schedule?

A fixed schedule gives rewards at predictable times or after a set number of responses. A variable schedule gives rewards at unpredictable times or after an unpredictable number of responses.

4. Based on Skinner's research, why might a person continue a behavior longer when rewards are unpredictable?

Because people do not know when the next reward will come, they keep repeating the behavior in hopes of getting another reward.



Skill Builder: Chart Analysis

Inform students that the purpose of a chart is to organize information into visual form. Have students explore the chart and do the following:

Step 1: Make Predictions

Have students locate and read the title of the chart. Have students predict what information might be in the chart based on the title. You may wish to define any terms students are not familiar with.

Step 2: Examine Chart and Select Evidence

Explain to students that charts divide information into categories using columns and rows. Have students convert the information in each row into a sentence.

Step 3: Make Inferences

Based on the information in a particular sentence, have students make an inference about reinforcement.

Step 4: Make Arguments

Ask students to select one or two pieces of evidence from the chart that could be used to answer the Mini-Q question.

Document A

Source: Adapted from B.F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior*. New York: Macmillan, 1953.

Note: Psychologist B.F. Skinner studied how rewards influence behavior. He developed the theory of operant conditioning, which explains that behaviors followed by rewards are more likely to happen again. Skinner discovered that **when** and **how often** rewards are given can have a powerful effect on how long people continue a behavior.

EV

Four Schedules of Reinforcement B.F. Skinner discovered that the timing and pattern of rewards strongly influence how behaviors are learned and repeated.		
SCHEDULE	WHEN IS THE REWARD GIVEN?	EVERYDAY EXAMPLE
 FIXED RATIO (FR)	The reward is given after a set number of responses.	 Buy 10 coffees, get 1 free.
 VARIABLE RATIO (VR)	The reward is given after an unpredictable number of responses.	 Winning on a slot machine.
 FIXED INTERVAL (FI)	The reward is given after a set amount of time.	 Getting paid every Friday.
 VARIABLE INTERVAL (VI)	The reward is given after an unpredictable amount of time.	 Waiting for an important phone call or text.

Document Analysis

1. According to Skinner, what does operant conditioning explain?
2. Which two reinforcement schedules provide rewards at unpredictable times or after an unpredictable number of responses?
3. What is the main difference between a fixed schedule and a variable schedule?
4. Based on Skinner's research, why might a person continue a behavior longer when rewards are unpredictable?

Step Four: Document Analysis (continued)

Document B: “The Psychology of Smartphone Addiction”

Content Notes:

- Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that helps the brain learn from rewarding experiences. Although it is often called the brain’s “feel-good chemical,” researchers now believe dopamine is more closely linked to motivation and learning than to pleasure itself. When a rewarding experience follows a behavior, dopamine helps reinforce that behavior, making it more likely to happen again.
- Researchers often explain habits as a three-step cycle: cue → behavior → reward. A notification, a moment of boredom, or a feeling of curiosity can serve as the cue. Checking a phone is the behavior, and receiving a message, an interesting video, or social interaction becomes the reward. As this cycle repeats, the habit grows stronger.
- Connecting Skinner’s research to modern neuroscience helps explain both the behavior and the biology behind repeated actions. Skinner showed that rewards strengthen behavior, while neuroscience explains that dopamine helps reinforce the brain’s memory of those rewarding experiences. Together, they help explain why some habits become difficult to break.
- The source uses the term “smartphone addiction,” but psychologists continue to debate that label. While excessive phone use can resemble addictive behaviors, it is not officially classified as an addiction in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR)*. Encourage students to evaluate the evidence presented in the document rather than accepting the title alone.

Teaching Tips:

- Discuss the Document Analysis questions:
 1. According to the author, what role does dopamine play in the brain?
Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that helps the brain learn from rewarding experiences and makes rewarded behaviors more likely to happen again.
 2. According to the author, why do people continue checking and using their smartphones?
Using a smartphone releases dopamine, which encourages people to keep checking their phones.
 3. Which reinforcement schedule from Document A could help explain repeated smartphone checking?
Variable Ratio (VR) best describes repeated smartphone checking. (Some phone-checking behavior can be interpreted as variable interval—for example, checking to see whether a message has arrived after an unpredictable amount of time—while scrolling or repeatedly refreshing for an unpredictable rewarding post can resemble variable ratio.)
 4. Why does that reinforcement schedule best describe this behavior?
People never know when the next rewarding post, video, or notification will appear, so they keep checking their phones.
 5. Based on Documents A and B, why is it so hard for many people to put down their phones?
Smartphones provide unpredictable rewards that activate the brain’s reward system. Because people never know when the next reward will come, they keep checking their phones.

Document B

Source: The University of Texas Permian Basin, “The Psychology of Smartphone Addiction,” *UTPB Online*, accessed July 12, 2026.

The Psychology of Smartphone Addiction**EV**

The problem is dopamine. Commonly referred to as the “feel-good” hormone, dopamine is the brain’s major reward and pleasure neurotransmitter. Anything that causes pleasure triggers a dopamine release. While it’s a common misconception that dopamine makes you happy, the hormone actually reinforces *behaviors* that make you happy.

Smartphones are so addictive because everytime we use them—to like an Instagram post, watch a YouTube video, or play Wordle—it triggers a surge of dopamine. After an initial rush of dopamine, there’s a dip like a craving: What goes up must come down. If a person isn’t addicted, the craving passes, but if they continue bingeing, the brain compensates with lower and lower dips.

By then, the brain is hooked. It needs more dopamine; it needs to feel like it felt the first time it engaged with the stimulus. The brain is now dependent on diminishing dopamine returns, and like many addicts, the smartphone user is chasing a high they’ll never reach.

Document Analysis

1. According to the author, what role does dopamine play in the brain?
2. According to the author, why do people continue checking and using their smartphones?
3. Which reinforcement schedule from Document A could help explain repeated smartphone checking?
4. Why does that reinforcement schedule best describe this behavior?
5. Based on Documents A and B, why is it so hard for many people to put down their phones?

Step Four: Document Analysis (continued)

Document C: “Bad Is Stronger Than Good”

Content Notes:

- Published in 2001, *Bad Is Stronger Than Good* reviewed hundreds of previous studies from many areas of psychology. Rather than reporting one new experiment, the authors identified a consistent pattern: negative experiences generally have a stronger psychological impact than positive ones. It is considered a landmark study in psychology.
- Although the phrase “negativity bias” appears only briefly in the article, it has become the common term for the tendency to notice, remember, and respond more strongly to negative information than to positive information. Researchers have found this bias in attention, memory, learning, and decision-making.
- The authors argue that humans evolved to pay close attention to possible dangers because overlooking a threat could have serious consequences. Missing a positive opportunity might lead to regret, but missing a danger could threaten survival. This evolutionary explanation helps explain why “bad is stronger than good.”
- The amygdala, a small structure deep within the brain, helps detect emotionally significant events, especially potential threats. Working with brain regions involved in attention and memory, it helps explain why emotionally negative information often captures attention more quickly and is remembered more easily than neutral information.
- Since this article was published, researchers have found evidence for negativity bias in neuroscience, behavioral economics, and communication studies. Studies suggest people are more likely to notice, remember, and share information that is negative, surprising, or emotionally intense, including much of today’s online content.

Teaching Tips:

- Discuss the Document Analysis questions:
 - According to the authors, why did humans evolve to pay more attention to bad things?
Paying attention to possible dangers is more likely to lead to survival.

- According to the authors, why is it more dangerous to ignore a bad outcome than a good outcome?

Ignoring a positive opportunity may lead to disappointment or regret, but ignoring a danger could result in injury or death. Because of this, humans developed to respond more strongly to bad outcomes.

- According to the authors, how do bad events affect people differently than good events?

Bad events usually produce stronger emotions, have a greater impact on people’s thoughts and behavior, and last longer than positive events.

- How has paying attention to negative information helped humans survive?

Early humans who noticed threats were more likely to avoid danger and stay alive. Over time, this made people naturally more attentive to negative or threatening information.

- Based on this document, what types of events or information are most likely to capture a person’s attention?

Answers may vary. Negative, threatening, or emotionally important information is most likely to capture a person’s attention because people naturally respond more strongly to bad events than good ones.



Skill Builder: Sentence Strips

- Break students into groups of three or four.
- Assign each group one or two sentences from the passage to translate into their own words.
- Give each group a teacher-created glossary for the vocabulary that will prove to be a challenge for students (e.g. *evolutionary*, *adaptive*, *significant*, *maimed*, *indicate*).
- Have students translate their passage into a sentence strip.
- Each group will present its sentence strip translation to the class, adding it to the sentence before until the passage is reassembled.
- Read the old passage together as a class. Read the translated passage together as a class.

Document C

Source: Roy F. Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer, and Kathleen D. Vohs, “Bad Is Stronger Than Good,” *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 4, December 2001.

Note: In this research review, Roy Baumeister (1953–) and his colleagues examined hundreds of studies to understand whether positive or negative experiences have a greater psychological impact on people’s attention.

EV

Bad is Stronger than Good

From our perspective, it is evolutionary adaptive for bad to be stronger than good. We believe that throughout our evolutionary history, organisms that were better attuned to bad things would have been more likely to survive threats and, consequently, would have increased probability of passing along their genes.... A person who ignores the possibility of a positive outcome may later experience significant regret at having missed an opportunity for pleasure or advancement, but nothing directly terrible is likely to result. In contrast, a person who ignores danger (the possibility of a bad outcome) even once may end up maimed or dead. Survival requires urgent attention to possible bad outcomes, but it is less urgent with regard to good ones. Hence, it would be adaptive to be psychologically designed to respond to bad more strongly than good....

All lives contain both good and bad events. If bad is stronger than good, then bad events will have longer lasting and more intense consequences than good events. In particular, the effects of good events should dissipate more rapidly than the effects of bad events....

Most findings indicate that people react more strongly to bad than good events. The evidence covers everything from minor everyday events and brief experimental exposure to adverse odors to major life events and traumas. Bad events produce more emotion, have bigger effects on adjustment measures, and have longer lasting effects.

Document Analysis

1. According to the authors, why did humans evolve to pay more attention to bad things?
2. According to the research review, why is it more dangerous to ignore a bad outcome than a good outcome?
3. According to the authors, how do bad events affect people differently than good events?
4. How has paying attention to negative information helped humans survive?
5. Based on this document, what types of events or information are most likely to capture a person’s attention?

Step Four: Document Analysis (continued)

Document D: How Social Media Algorithms Work

Content Notes:

- Research such as *Bad Is Stronger Than Good* helps explain why recommendation algorithms often promote emotional or negative content. People naturally pay closer attention to information that is threatening, surprising, or emotionally charged. As algorithms learn what captures attention, they are more likely to recommend similar content because it keeps users engaged.
- Recommendation algorithms recognize patterns in user behavior, not whether content is true, helpful, or important. They analyze actions such as watch time, scrolling speed, likes, comments, and shares to predict what users are most likely to engage with next. As a result, emotionally charged posts often spread more widely than calm or neutral information.
- Social media did not always rely on recommendation algorithms. Facebook introduced its algorithmic News Feed in 2006, replacing simple chronological posts with content selected to increase engagement. Twitter (now X) later adopted algorithmically recommended timelines, Instagram switched from chronological posts to an algorithmic feed in 2016, and TikTok built its “For You” page almost entirely around personalized recommendations from the start. These changes marked a shift from showing users the newest content to showing content in which they were most likely to engage.
- Social media companies rely on engagement because longer viewing times increase advertising opportunities and revenue. Recommendation algorithms can help users discover content they enjoy, but they also encourage longer sessions by continually presenting material that is most likely to capture and hold attention.

Teaching Tips:

- Discuss the Document Analysis questions:
 1. According to the author, what is the main goal of social media recommendation systems?
The main goal is to keep users engaged and on the platform as long as possible.
 2. According to the document, what types of content are algorithms most likely to recommend?
The types of content that algorithms are most likely to recommend are threatening, shocking, emotional, or provocative content.
 3. How do recommendation algorithms decide what content to show users?
They track users’ activity and recommend similar content that keeps their attention.
 4. How do social media algorithms take advantage of the way people naturally pay attention to information?
Algorithms recommend emotional and negative content because it is more likely to capture people’s attention.
 5. Based on Documents C and D, why is it so hard to put down our phones?
People naturally pay attention to emotional and negative information. Social media algorithms recommend more of this content, making it difficult to stop scrolling.

Document D

Source: Brandon Batarse, “The Empathy Crisis: How Social Media Algorithms Drive Emotional Numbing,” *Psychiatric Times*, February 16, 2026.

Note: Early social media platforms displayed posts in simple chronological order. Over time, companies such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok introduced computer algorithms that recommended content based on each user’s activity.

EV

How the Social Media Algorithm Works

Social media platforms today use recommendation systems designed to reinforce whatever keeps the user on their platform. These systems maximize engagement and attention, rather than user well-being. Decades of media psychology research show that threatening, shocking, and morally provocative material captures attention more reliably than neutral content. Using this principle, platforms create a reinforcement loop that gradually shifts users’ feeds toward more intense or provocative content over time.... The algorithms infer “interest” from micro-engagement, such as slowing down when scrolling, replaying videos, or hovering. Over time, algorithms can move users from benign content to high-arousal material and eventually to graphic or extreme videos.... In other words, the system detects vulnerability and amplifies whatever sustains engagement because that is what benefits the platform.

Document Analysis

1. According to the author, what is the main goal of social media recommendation systems?
2. According to the document, what types of content are algorithms most likely to recommend?
3. How do recommendation algorithms decide what content to show users?
4. How do social media algorithms take advantage of the way people naturally pay attention to information?
5. Based on Documents C and D, why is it so hard to put down our phones?

Step Four: Document Analysis (continued)

Document E: The Need to Belong

Content Notes:

- Roy Baumeister is one of the most influential social psychologists of the past fifty years, known for research on self-control, motivation, relationships, and human behavior. Mark Leary (1954–) is a leading psychologist whose work focuses on interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and social belonging. Their 1995 article, published in the peer-reviewed journal *Psychological Bulletin*, remains one of the most widely cited papers in social psychology.
- Baumeister and Leary argued that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation, similar to needs such as hunger or sleep. They proposed that people naturally seek meaningful relationships because belonging promotes psychological well-being. A lack of belonging can lead to loneliness, anxiety, depression, and other negative outcomes. Decades of research have largely supported this theory.
- The authors argued that belonging requires more than simply being around other people. Two conditions must be met: people need frequent, positive interactions and stable, lasting relationships in which individuals care about one another. Brief encounters with strangers or large numbers of online contacts do not necessarily satisfy the need to belong if meaningful relationships are absent.
- The need to belong helps explain a wide range of everyday behaviors. People join clubs and teams, maintain friendships, stay connected with family, and participate in communities because these activities strengthen social bonds. Understanding belonging as a basic psychological need provides a useful framework for examining why many modern technologies—including smartphones and social media—are so effective at capturing and maintaining people's attention.

Teaching Tips:

- Discuss the Document Analysis questions:
 1. According to Baumeister and Leary, what is the “belongingness hypothesis”?
People have a basic drive to form and maintain lasting, positive, and meaningful relationships.

2. According to the authors, what two things are necessary for people to satisfy their need to belong?

People need (1) frequent, positive interactions with others and (2) stable, lasting relationships in which people care about one another.

3. According to the authors, what can happen when people's need to belong is not met?

People may experience loneliness, emotional distress, or other negative effects because they lack meaningful relationships.

4. Based on both the excerpt and the flow chart, what kinds of activities or behaviors might people choose if they are trying to build or maintain relationships with others? Explain your reasoning using evidence from the document.

Answers will vary. Students will likely mention things like spending time with family, joining sports teams or clubs, talking to friends, texting, joining group chats, or “keeping in touch.”



Skill Builder: Examining Information from Multiple Documents

When students are presented information from more than one source as a single document in a Mini-Q, their first instinct is to analyze the information as completely separate pieces of information. The trick is that once they have analyzed the documents separately, they need to make connections between the documents.

Questions to Consider:

What is the most significant piece of evidence about the need to belong in the text and the most significant detail in the graphic?

Why do you think all of this information is being presented as a single document, The Need to Belong?

What is the relationship between the text and the graphic?

What similarities and differences can you find between the text and the graphic?

How do these combined sources help you answer the Mini-Q question?

Document E

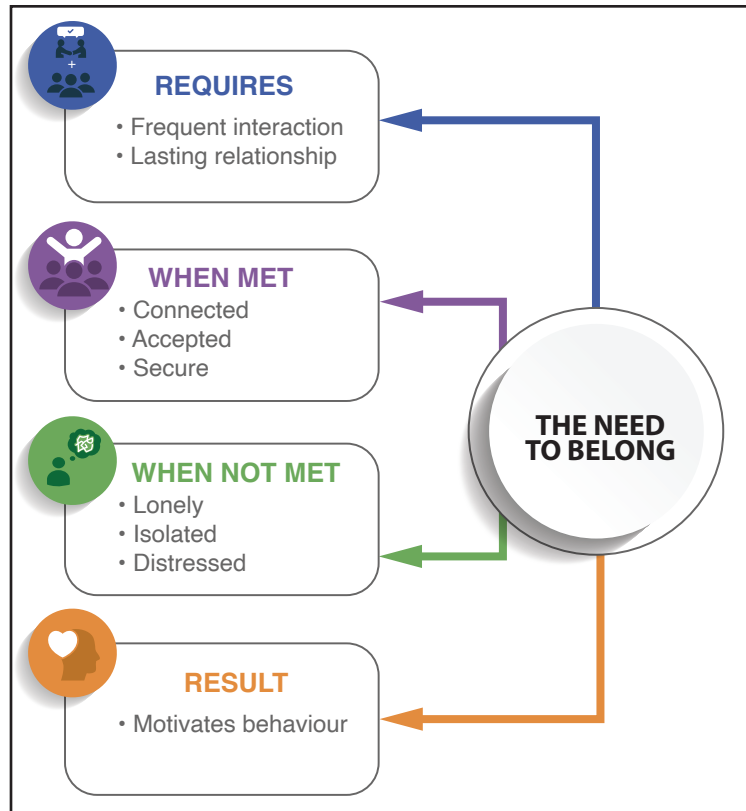
Source: Roy F. Baumeister & Mark R. Leary, “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 117, No. 3, May 1995.

Note: In 1995, psychologists Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary introduced the “belongingness hypothesis,” a theory that sought to explain why relationships with other people are so important. The excerpt below introduces their idea.

EV

The Need to Belong

... the belongingness hypothesis is that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships. Satisfying this drive involves two criteria: First, there is a need for frequent, affectively pleasant interactions with a few other people, and, second, these interactions must take place in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other’s welfare.... A lack of belongingness should constitute severe deprivation and cause a variety of ill effects. Furthermore, a great deal of human behavior, emotion, and thought is caused by this foundational interpersonal motive.



Document Analysis

1. According to Baumeister and Leary, what is the “belongingness hypothesis”?
2. According to the authors, what two things are necessary for people to satisfy their need to belong?
3. According to the authors, what can happen when people’s need to belong is not met?
4. What kinds of activities or behaviors might people choose if they are trying to build or maintain relationships with others?

Step Four: Document Analysis (continued)

Document F: “Teens’ Experiences on TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat”

Content Notes:

- The Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan research organization known for producing high-quality surveys on social trends, technology, and public opinion. Its studies use nationally representative samples and rigorous survey methods, making Pew one of the most trusted sources for understanding how Americans use technology and social media.
- Baumeister and Leary argued that people are motivated to seek meaningful relationships because belonging is a basic psychological need. The survey results in this document provide a modern example of that theory by showing that many teens use social media to stay connected with friends, family, and people who share their interests.
- Social media platforms teens use have changed dramatically over the past decade. Facebook, once the dominant platform among teenagers, has largely been replaced by YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. While the platforms continue to evolve, one motivation has remained remarkably consistent: staying connected with friends, family, and communities.
- Teens’ attitudes toward social media have become more mixed in recent years. In 2025, nearly half of U.S. teens said social media has a mostly negative effect on people their age, up substantially from 2022. At the same time, many of those same teens continue to use social media to stay connected with others, illustrating the powerful appeal of social connection.

Teaching Tips:

- Discuss the Document Analysis questions:
 1. According to the graph, what are the three most common reasons teens say they use Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok?
Teens use these platforms as entertainment, to know what’s going on with friends and family, and to connect with others.
 2. Which two reasons shown in the graph provide the strongest evidence that social media helps people build or maintain relationships?
The two reasons are “to know what’s going on with friends and family” and “to connect with others who share their interests.”

3. How do the two reasons you identified help satisfy the need to belong described by Baumeister and Leary in Document E?

These activities satisfy people’s need to belong by strengthening social connections.

4. Based on Documents E and F, why might people continue checking social media even after they have finished looking for entertainment?

People may continue checking social media because they are also looking for social connection. Seeing messages, updates, or interactions with others helps satisfy their need to belong.

5. Based on Documents E and F, why is it so hard to put down our phones?

Baumeister and Leary argue that people have a basic need to belong by forming and maintaining meaningful relationships. Because smartphones help satisfy this need to belong, people are motivated to keep checking and using them.



Skill Builder: Analyzing a Graph

Have students look at the graph title and labels. Tell them that these tell you what the chart is about and what the dots represent. Then instruct students to:

Compare the data: The dots on each line represent data. The farther to the right, the higher the percentage. See which categories have the highest percentage of users.

Notice any patterns: Are the data dots generally increasing or decreasing as you move down to each line? Are there any surprising data points that stick out?

Follow-up questions:

Can you write a sentence describing the main finding of the graph?

What questions do you still have about the information shown?

Are there any clues that this graph could be misinterpreted?

How can this data help you answer the Mini-Q question?

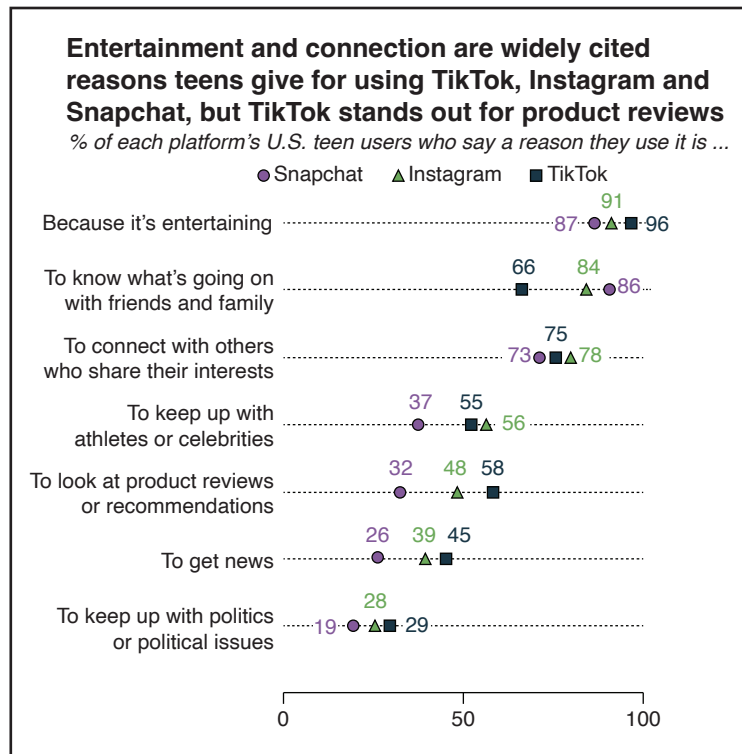
Document F

Source: Michelle Faverio, Eugenie Park, and Jeffrey Gottfried, “Teens’ Experiences on TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat,” Pew Research Center, April 15, 2026.

Note: In 2025, the Pew Research Center surveyed U.S. teens ages thirteen to seventeen about why they use three of the most popular social media platforms: Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok. The graph below shows the percentage of users on each platform who said each reason was a major or minor reason they use it.

EV

Teens’ Experiences on TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat



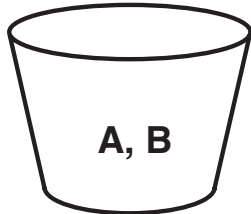
Document Analysis

1. According to the graph, what are the three most common reasons teens say they use Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok?
2. Which two reasons shown in the graph provide the strongest evidence that social media helps people build or maintain relationships?
3. How do the two reasons you identified help satisfy the need to belong described by Baumeister and Leary in Document E?
4. Based on Documents E and F, why might people continue checking social media even after they have finished looking for entertainment?
5. Based on Documents E and F, why is it so hard to put down our phones?

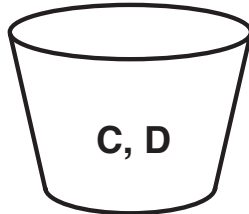
Step Five: Bucketing, Chickenfoot & Thrash-out

Task One: Bucketing

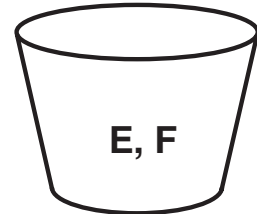
Here is an example of how students might bucket. Students may develop different buckets from these. The key is, whatever bucket labels students come up with, they need to be able to support them with evidence from the documents.



Smartphones
Reward Us



Smartphones Capture
Our Attention

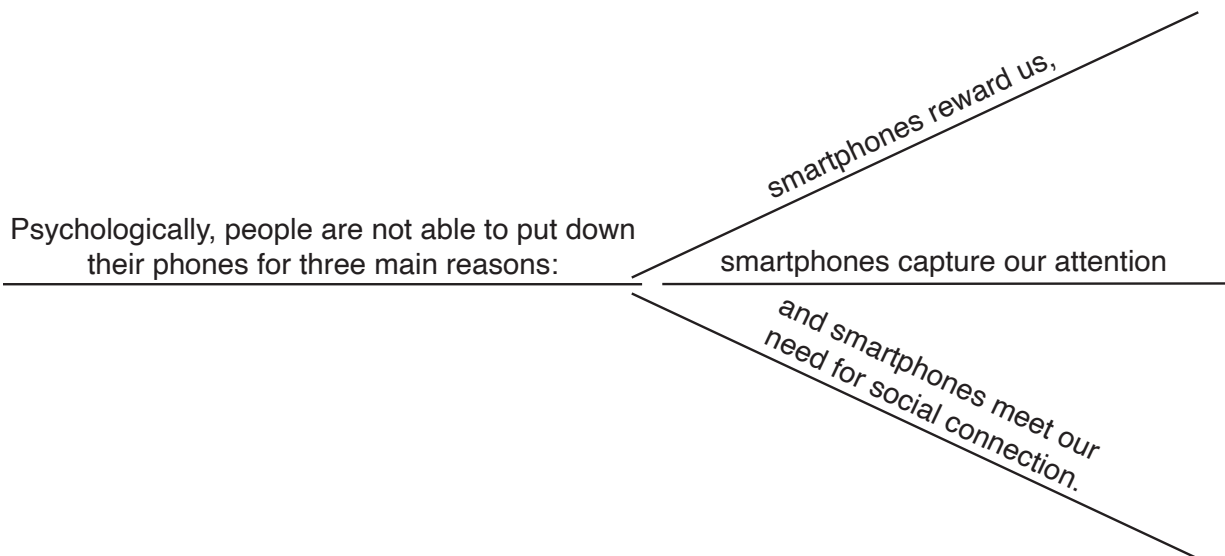


Smartphones Meet Our
Need for Social Connection

Task Two: Thesis Development and Road Map

The Chickenfoot

Once students decide on their buckets and the order of the buckets, have them transfer the bucket labels onto the “toes” of the chickenfoot. The “leg” of the chickenfoot should address the Mini-Q question. In the outline, students should refer to the chickenfoot to write their thesis and road map.



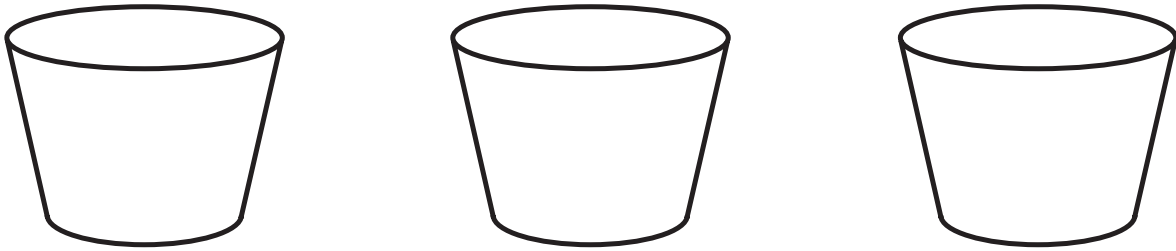
Thrash-out

Students benefit from discussing, or “thrashing out,” their responses to the Mini-Q question before they write. This can be an informal debate or discussion. Students join a team or a group and then explain to their peers how the documents in the Mini-Q can be used to answer the question. This activity can be done any time before the students write. ***For this Mini-Q, we suggest a Socratic Seminar or fishbowl discussion as opposed to a more formal debate structure.***

Bucketing—Getting Ready to Write

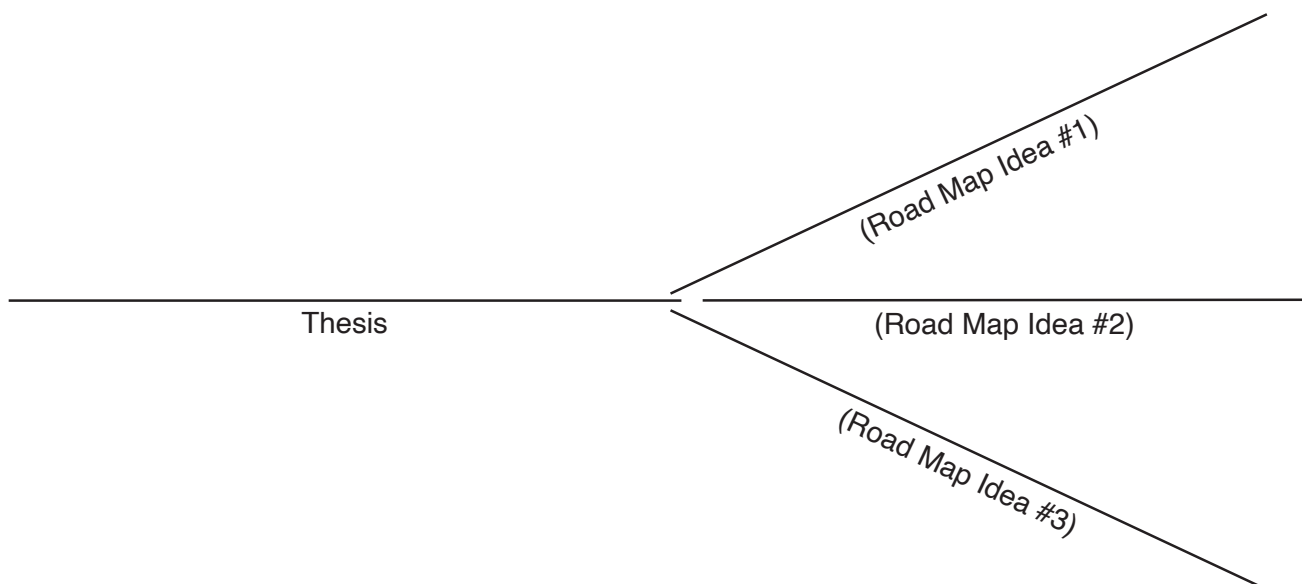
Bucketing

Look over all the documents and organize them into your final buckets. Write labels under each bucket and place the letters of the documents in the buckets where they belong. You can put a document in more than one bucket (multi-bucketing), but you need a good reason for doing so. Remember, your buckets are going to become your body paragraphs.



Thesis Development and Road Map

On the chickenfoot below, write your thesis and your road map. Your thesis is always an opinion that answers the Mini-Q question. The road map is created from your bucket labels and lists the topic areas you will examine in order to prove your thesis.



Step Six: The Essay

Mini-Q Essay Outline Guide

Working Title: Why Is It So Hard to Put Down Our Phones?

Introductory Paragraph

Grabber: It starts with one notification. A few minutes later, you're still scrolling.

Background: Smartphones are difficult to put down because they take advantage of the way our brains naturally work. They offer rewards, capture our attention, and make it easy to connect with other people. Psychologists study these behaviors to understand why people use their phones so often.

Restatement of question: What psychological factors make smartphones difficult to stop using?

Thesis and road map: Psychologically, people cannot put down their phones for three main reasons: smartphones reward us, they capture our attention, and they meet our need for social connection.

Body Paragraph #1

Baby Thesis: People have a hard time putting down their phones because they reward us.

Evidence:

- Operant conditioning explains that behaviors followed by rewards are more likely to happen again. (Doc A)
- Using a smartphone releases dopamine, which encourages people to keep checking their phones. (Doc B)

Argument: Smartphones provide unpredictable rewards, which activate the brain's reward system. Because people do not know when the next reward comes, they keep checking their phones.

Body Paragraph #2

Baby Thesis: Another reason why people have a hard time putting down their phones is that they capture our attention.

Evidence:

- Ignoring a positive opportunity may lead to disappointment; ignoring a danger could be really bad. (Doc C)
- Algorithms designed to recommend emotional/negative content capturing our attention. (Doc D)

Argument: People naturally pay attention to emotional or negative content. Social media algorithms tap into that by recommending more of this information to a user, making it difficult to stop scrolling.

Body Paragraph #3

Baby Thesis: The third reason why it is so hard is that they meet our social needs.

Evidence:

- People have a basic drive to form and maintain positive and meaningful relationships. (Doc E)
- Two of the three most common reasons why teens say they use social media are "to know what is going on with friends and family" and to "connect with others." (Doc F)

Argument: Smartphones satisfy the need humans have to belong by providing a quick and easy way to stay connected. This need motivates people to keep checking and using their phones.

Conclusion

Although smartphones can be useful tools for learning, communication, and entertainment, they are difficult to put down because they reward us, capture our attention, and help meet our need to belong.

IMPORTANT

For students new to DBQs, young students, and students needing extra writing support, see the Guided Essay form in the Teacher's Toolkit.

From Thesis to Essay Writing

Mini-Q Essay Outline Guide

Working Title:

Introductory Paragraph

Grabber:

Background:

Restatement of question:

Thesis and road map:

Body Paragraph #1

Baby Thesis for bucket #1:

Evidence: supporting detail from documents with document citation

Argument: connecting evidence to the thesis

Body Paragraph #2

Baby Thesis for bucket #2:

Evidence:

Argument:

Body Paragraph #3

Baby Thesis for bucket #3:

Evidence:

Argument:

Conclusion

“Although” statement followed by restatement of your main idea

Mini-Q Sample Essay: Non-Proficient
Why Is It So Hard to Put Down Our Phones?

Everybody has a smartphone except maybe my grandpa because he still has a flip phone and somehow survives. People say phones are hard to put down, but I think you can just turn them off. Anyway, the documents had some reasons why.

One reason is rewards. They did experiments where animals got rewards for doing things. (Doc A) This proves that phones are rewarding. I like getting Snapchats because it's fun when somebody finally answers me.

People pay attention to bad things. (Doc C) I don't really know what an algorithm is, but it probably means it keeps showing you stuff so you don't leave. My friends send a lot of memes, so I have to check my phone or I won't know what everyone is laughing about the next day.

So that's basically why phones are hard to put down. I still think people could just put their phone in another room, but maybe that's harder than it sounds.

Mini-Q Sample Essay: Basic Proficiency
Why Is It So Hard to Put Down Our Phones?

It starts with one notification. A few minutes later, you're still scrolling. Smartphones are a useful part of everyday life, but many people have trouble putting them down. Psychologists believe this happens because smartphones take advantage of the way people naturally think and behave. Smartphones are difficult to stop using because they reward us, capture our attention, and help us stay connected with other people.

One reason people have a hard time putting down their phones is that smartphones reward them. B. F. Skinner found that actions followed by rewards are more likely to happen again, especially when the rewards are unpredictable. (Doc A) Smartphones work this way because people never know when they will get a new message, notification, or "like." Since people enjoy these rewards, they keep checking their phones.

Another reason smartphones are difficult to put down is that they capture our attention. People pay attention to things that seem important or emotional because those things helped humans survive. (Doc C) Social media companies use algorithms that recommend content based on what keeps a person's attention the longest. (Doc D) As people continue watching or scrolling, it becomes easier to keep using the app instead of putting the phone away.

A third reason smartphones are hard to stop using is that they help people feel connected to others. Psychologists argue that people have a basic need to belong. (Doc E) Many teenagers say they use social media to keep up with friends or connect with people who have similar interests. Smartphones make it easy to communicate with others whenever people want. Because people enjoy feeling connected, they often return to their phones throughout the day.

Smartphones are useful tools, but they are also designed to work with the way people naturally behave. They reward us, capture our attention, and help us connect with other people. These psychological factors make smartphones difficult to put down, which is why so many people use them throughout the day.

Student Mini-Q Lined Paper

Lined paper area for student response.

EV

Mini-Q Sample Essay: Higher Proficiency

Why Is It So Hard to Put Down Our Phones?

It starts with one notification. You check a message, watch one short video, or open an app for just a minute. Before you know it, much more time has passed than you expected. Smartphones have become an important part of everyday life, but psychologists believe there is more to their popularity than entertainment alone. Smartphones are difficult to put down because they take advantage of the way our brains naturally work. Psychologically, people have a hard time putting down their phones for three main reasons: smartphones reward us, they capture our attention, and they satisfy our need for social connection.

One reason smartphones are difficult to put down is that they reward us. Psychologist B. F. Skinner found that behaviors followed by rewards are more likely to happen again, especially when those rewards are unpredictable. (Doc A) Smartphones work in much the same way. Every time someone checks a phone, they might find an interesting message, a funny video, or a new “like.” Because people never know exactly when the next reward will appear, they keep checking. The brain also releases dopamine when people experience something rewarding. (Doc B) Dopamine helps people learn from rewarding experiences, making them more likely to repeat the same behavior. Together, unpredictable rewards and dopamine strengthen the habit of checking a smartphone again and again.

Smartphones also keep people engaged by capturing their attention. Humans naturally notice information that seems surprising, emotional, or threatening because paying attention to important events helped our ancestors survive. (Doc C) Social media companies build on this natural tendency. Modern algorithms study what people watch, pause on, or interact with and recommend similar content that is more likely to keep their attention. (Doc D) Instead of showing posts in simple chronological order, many apps continuously personalize what each user sees. Emotional, shocking, or controversial content often receives the most attention, so algorithms frequently recommend more of it. As a result, people continue scrolling because there is always something new competing for their attention.

A third reason smartphones are so difficult to put down is that they help satisfy one of our most basic social needs. Psychologists Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary argued that people have a fundamental need to form and maintain positive relationships with others. (Doc E) The desire to belong influences many of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Survey data from the Pew Research Center shows that many teenagers say they use social media to keep up with friends and family or to connect with people who share their interests. (Doc F) Smartphones make these connections fast and convenient. Every message, comment, or shared photo can strengthen feelings of belonging, encouraging people to return to their phones throughout the day.

Although smartphones provide many benefits, such as communication, entertainment, and access to information, psychologists suggest that their success comes from appealing to natural human behavior rather than changing it. Smartphones reward us, attract our attention, and make it easy to connect with other people. These psychological processes work together, making it much harder to put a phone down than any one factor could by itself. Understanding these influences can help people make more thoughtful choices about how and when they use their smartphones.

Student Mini-Q Lined Paper

Lined paper area for student response.

EV

TEACHER DOCUMENT LIST (CV)

There are six documents in this Mini-Q. Students are provided with the same document list, but it is not divided into analytical categories or buckets. Students may develop categories that are different from these. It is often a good idea to use evidence from one document in more than one category or bucket.

Smartphones Reward Us

Document A: Skinner's Four Schedules of Reinforcement (infographic)

Document B: "The Psychology of Smartphone Addiction"

Smartphones Are Designed to Capture Our Attention

Document C: "Bad Is Stronger Than Good"

Document D: How Social Media Algorithms Work

Smartphones Meet Our Need for Social Connection

Document E: The Need to Belong (infographic)

Document F: "Teens' Experiences on TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat" (graph)

AP Psychology Connections

AP-Style Prompt

Develop and support a claim about why smartphones are so difficult to put down. In your response, apply at least three psychological concepts or theories and use evidence to justify your argument.

Where This Fits

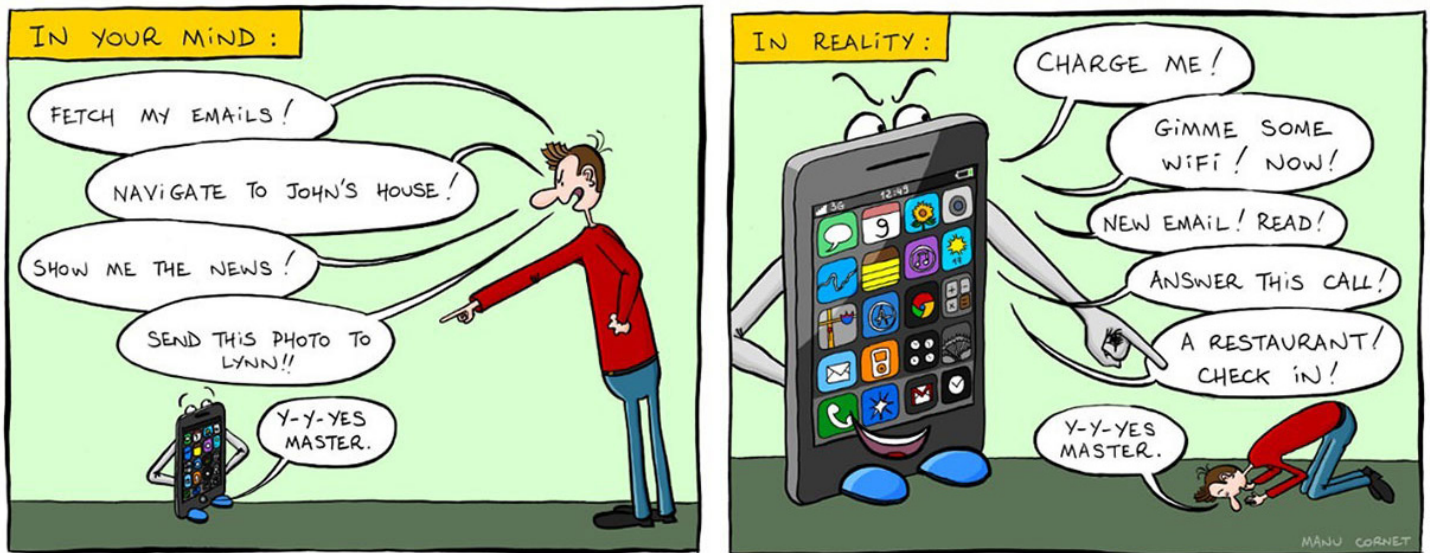
This Mini-Q aligns primarily with Unit 3: Development & Learning, with additional connections to Unit 1: Biological Bases of Behavior, Unit 2: Cognition, and Unit 4: Social Psychology & Personality. It can be used to introduce or reinforce operant conditioning, reinforcement schedules, dopamine, attention, motivation, and the need to belong.

Flexible Implementation

- **Introduce the topic:** Use Documents A, C, and E before direct instruction to explore how rewards, attention, and social connection influence smartphone use.
- **Review for the AP Exam:** Analyze all six documents and respond to the AP-style prompt above.
- **Develop scientific argumentation:** Complete the full Mini-Q, including document analysis, bucketing, discussion, and argumentative writing.

Why Is It So Hard to Put Down Our Phones?

CV



"Mobile Relationship" by Manu Cornet, Bonkers World (2012)

Overview: You planned to check one notification. Twenty minutes later, you're still scrolling. Why can smartphones be so hard to put down? Psychologists have discovered that smartphones tap into powerful mental processes that influence our behavior, attention, and relationships. This Mini-Q will explore how these psychological processes help explain why it is so hard to put down our phones.

Documents:

- Document A: Skinner's Four Schedules of Reinforcement (infographic)
- Document B: "The Psychology of Smartphone Addiction"
- Document C: "Bad Is Stronger Than Good"
- Document D: How Social Media Algorithms Work
- Document E: The Need to Belong (infographic)
- Document F: "Teens' Experiences on TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat" (graph)

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

The Hook

Teacher Note: The purpose of the Hook Exercise is to spark curiosity about the driving question and encourage students to notice patterns in everyday smartphone use. Divide students into pairs and give them 5 to 10 minutes to examine the infographic and answer the discussion questions. Encourage students to support their answers with evidence from the data. A whole-class discussion should follow before moving to the Background Essay.

The infographic shows that smartphones have become deeply woven into many people's daily routines. But **why** do so many people find it difficult to stop checking their phones? That is what this Mini-Q attempts to answer.

Suggested Responses:

1. Which statistic surprises you the most? Explain why.

Answers will vary. Students should support their choice with a reason. Many may mention that Americans check their phones 186 times a day, that nearly 85 percent check their phones within 10 minutes of waking up, or that nearly half consider themselves addicted to their phones.

2. What patterns do you notice about when and how people use their smartphones?

Students should recognize that smartphones are used throughout the day, from shortly after waking up to bedtime. Many people also use them during everyday activities, suggesting that phones have become a regular part of daily routines.

3. Which two statistics provide the strongest evidence that many people find it difficult to be without their phones?

Answers will vary. Students may point to the percentage of people who feel uneasy leaving their phone at home, those who check their phone soon after waking, those who sleep with their phone, or those who consider themselves addicted. Any pair of statistics is acceptable if supported with evidence.

4. Based on the infographic, what question(s) might a psychologist ask about smartphone use?

Students may ask why people check their phones so often, why many people feel uncomfortable without them, why people sleep with their phones nearby, or why smartphones have become such an important part of daily life. Their questions should focus on explaining the behaviors shown in the data.

Hook Exercise: How Often Do We Use Our Phones?

Directions: Smartphones have become part of everyday life. Many people use them from the moment they wake up until they go to sleep. The infographic below summarizes the results of a national survey about cellphone habits in the United States.

Your Task: Study the infographic. Then, with a partner, discuss the questions below. As you discuss your answers, think about what the statistics suggest about the role smartphones play in people's daily lives.



Discussion Questions

1. Which statistic surprises you the most? Why?
2. What patterns do you notice about when and how people use their smartphones?
3. Which two statistics provide the strongest evidence that many people find it difficult to be without their phones?
4. Based on the infographic, what question(s) might a psychologist ask about smartphone use?

Background Essay

General Instructions

- Review the timeline on the Background Essay questions page.
- Pre-teach the boldfaced vocabulary.
- Have students read (or listen to) the Background Essay.
- Have students answer the Background Essay questions.

Specific Considerations

The main purpose of the Background Essay is to provide the historical context students need before analyzing the documents. It introduces the major events, people, and vocabulary for this unit. The Background Essay should prepare students to investigate the documents without answering the Mini-Q for them.

Time: Unlike many Mini-Qs, this Background Essay is not tied to a single historical period. Instead, it introduces modern smartphone use and connects it to psychological processes that have evolved over thousands of years. Emphasize that smartphones are a recent invention, but the ways humans respond to rewards, attention, and social connection are not. The documents will explore how today's technology takes advantage of these natural psychological tendencies.

Place: Although smartphones are used almost everywhere, psychologists study them in many different settings, including schools, homes, and online environments. Point out that researchers use different methods to answer different questions. Some studies examine behavior in controlled experiments, while others observe how people use smartphones in everyday life.

Story: The Background Essay introduces the idea that smartphones are effective not simply because they are entertaining, but because they appeal to fundamental psychological processes. Students learn that psychologists explain behavior by studying motivation, attention, learning, and social relationships. Remind students that the Background Essay introduces these concepts, while the documents provide the evidence needed to explain why smartphones can be difficult to put down.

Vocabulary and Concepts

You may want to pre-teach the seven boldfaced terms in the Background Essay. Our approach to vocabulary is that some pre-teaching is good, but keep the word list short. Encourage students to use context clues to discover meaning.

Reading Strategy: Marking Up the Text

As students read through the Background Essay, ask them to mark up the text by

REWARD words: Box words or phrases that explain why people repeat behaviors.

ATTENTION words: Circle words or phrases that explain how smartphones capture or hold people's focus.

CONNECTION words: Underline words or phrases that explain why people seek relationships or belonging.

Place a star (★) next to one sentence that best explains why psychologists think smartphones are so difficult to put down.

Why Is It So Hard to Put Down Our Phones?

Imagine waking up one morning to discover that your phone has disappeared. No texts. No videos. No music. No games. No notifications. How long would it take before you reached into your pocket to check for it anyway? A few minutes? An hour? A day? For many people, the answer is “not very long.” The average teenager receives about 237 notifications each day and checks a phone more than 100 times.

Many people think smartphones are difficult to put down simply because they are entertaining. Entertainment is certainly part of the story, but psychologists believe something much deeper is happening. The surprising part isn't that smartphones have changed the human brain. It's that they are so successful because they take advantage of psychological tendencies that have helped humans survive and live together for thousands of years.

Psychologists study **motivation**, the force that energizes and directs people's behavior. Some motivations help us meet basic physical needs like food, water, and sleep. Others involve psychological and social needs, such as learning new things, accomplishing goals, and building relationships. Psychologist Abraham Maslow argued that once people's basic physical needs are met, they become increasingly motivated by needs like **belonging** and self-esteem. Although psychologists continue to debate parts of Maslow's theory, most agree that people have a strong desire to connect with others.

Your brain is built to notice things that matter. The **amygdala** helps direct your attention toward information that is surprising or emotionally important. The brain's reward system uses a chemical messenger called **dopamine** to help you learn from experiences that feel rewarding. Finding food, solving a problem, receiving praise, or hearing from a friend can all activate this system. These brain processes helped humans survive long before smartphones existed.



As phones gained more features, they became better at rewarding users, capturing attention, and keeping people connected

Today's smartphones were designed with these natural tendencies in mind. Apps often provide small **rewards**, such as a new message, an interesting video, or a “like” on a post. Notifications and endless scrolling compete for your **attention** by constantly offering something new. Social media also makes it easy to communicate with friends, family, and people who share your interests. Behind many of these features are computer programs called **algorithms**, which recommend content based on what is most likely to keep your attention and encourage you to keep using the app.

Psychologists do not believe there is one simple reason people have a hard time putting down their phones. Instead, they study how learning, attention, motivation, and relationships work together to influence behavior. Our brains did not evolve for smartphones, but today's smartphones are remarkably good at taking advantage of how our brains naturally learn, pay attention, and connect with other people.

Your Task: Examine the documents that follow to determine what psychological factors make smartphones difficult to stop using. As you read, consider how the roles of rewards, attention, and the need to belong shape human behavior, and how they work together to influence smartphone use. In other words, *Why Is It So Hard to Put Down Our Phones?*

Document Analysis

Document A: Skinner's Four Schedules of Reinforcement

Content Notes:

- B.F. Skinner (1904–1990) was one of the most influential psychologists of the twentieth century and a leading figure in behaviorism. Through experiments with rats and pigeons, Skinner showed that behavior is shaped by its consequences. His work on operant conditioning helped explain how rewards and consequences influence learning and everyday behavior.
- Operant conditioning is the idea that people and animals learn from the consequences of their actions. Behaviors followed by rewards are more likely to be repeated, while behaviors followed by unpleasant consequences are less likely to occur. Skinner argued that learning is influenced not only by whether rewards are given, but also by *when* and *how often* they are given.
- Skinner discovered that the pattern of rewards can affect how long a behavior continues. Behaviors rewarded on predictable schedules often stop when the rewards end. Behaviors rewarded on unpredictable schedules—especially variable-ratio schedules—tend to last much longer because people never know when the next reward will come.
- Imagine a teacher gives a homework pass after every tenth homework assignment. Students know exactly when the reward is coming. Now imagine the teacher occasionally surprises students with a homework pass for excellent effort, but never announces when it will happen. Many students would continue putting forth strong effort because they know a reward is possible, even if they do not know exactly when it will come.

Teaching Tips:

- Discuss the Document Analysis questions:
 1. According to Skinner, what does operant conditioning explain?

Operant conditioning explains that behaviors followed by rewards are more likely to happen again.

2. Which two reinforcement schedules provide rewards at unpredictable times or after an unpredictable number of responses?

The two reinforcement schedules are Variable Ratio (VR) and Variable Interval (VI).

3. What is the main difference between a fixed schedule and a variable schedule?

A fixed schedule gives rewards at predictable times or after a set number of responses. A variable schedule gives rewards at unpredictable times or after an unpredictable number of responses.

4. Based on Skinner's research, why might a person continue a behavior longer when rewards are unpredictable?

Because people do not know when the next reward will come, they keep repeating the behavior in hopes of getting another reward.



Skill Builder: Chart Analysis

Inform students that the purpose of a chart is to organize information into visual form. Have students explore the chart and do the following:

Step 1: Make Predictions

Have students locate and read the title of the chart. Have students predict what information might be in the chart based on the title. You may wish to define any terms students are not familiar with.

Step 2: Examine Chart and Select Evidence

Explain to students that charts divide information into categories using columns and rows. Have students convert the information in each row into a sentence.

Step 3: Make Inferences

Based on the information in a particular sentence, have students make an inference about reinforcement.

Step 4: Make Arguments

Ask students to select one or two pieces of evidence from the chart that could be used to answer the Mini-Q question.

Document A

Source: Adapted from B.F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior*. New York: Macmillan, 1953.

Note: Psychologist B.F. Skinner studied how rewards influence behavior. He developed the theory of operant conditioning, which explains that behaviors followed by rewards are more likely to happen again. Skinner discovered that **when** and **how often** rewards are given can have a powerful effect on how long people continue a behavior.

Four Schedules of Reinforcement B.F. Skinner discovered that the timing and pattern of rewards strongly influence how behaviors are learned and repeated.		
SCHEDULE	WHEN IS THE REWARD GIVEN?	EVERYDAY EXAMPLE
 FIXED RATIO (FR)	The reward is given after a set number of responses.	 Buy 10 coffees, get 1 free.
 VARIABLE RATIO (VR)	The reward is given after an unpredictable number of responses.	 Winning on a slot machine.
 FIXED INTERVAL (FI)	The reward is given after a set amount of time.	 Getting paid every Friday.
 VARIABLE INTERVAL (VI)	The reward is given after an unpredictable amount of time.	 Waiting for an important phone call or text.

CV

Document Analysis (continued)

Document B: “The Psychology of Smartphone Addiction”

Content Notes:

- Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that helps the brain learn from rewarding experiences. Although it is often called the brain’s “feel-good chemical,” researchers now believe dopamine is more closely linked to motivation and learning than to pleasure itself. When a rewarding experience follows a behavior, dopamine helps reinforce that behavior, making it more likely to happen again.
- Researchers often explain habits as a three-step cycle: cue → behavior → reward. A notification, a moment of boredom, or a feeling of curiosity can serve as the cue. Checking a phone is the behavior, and receiving a message, an interesting video, or social interaction becomes the reward. As this cycle repeats, the habit grows stronger.
- Connecting Skinner’s research to modern neuroscience helps explain both the behavior and the biology behind repeated actions. Skinner showed that rewards strengthen behavior, while neuroscience explains that dopamine helps reinforce the brain’s memory of those rewarding experiences. Together, they help explain why some habits become difficult to break.
- The source uses the term “smartphone addiction,” but psychologists continue to debate that label. While excessive phone use can resemble addictive behaviors, it is not officially classified as an addiction in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR)*. Encourage students to evaluate the evidence presented in the document rather than accepting the title alone.

Teaching Tips:

- Discuss the Document Analysis questions:
 1. According to the author, what role does dopamine play in the brain?
Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that helps the brain learn from rewarding experiences and makes rewarded behaviors more likely to happen again.
 2. According to the author, why do people continue checking and using their smartphones?
Using a smartphone releases dopamine, which encourages people to keep checking their phones.
 3. Which reinforcement schedule from Document A could help explain repeated smartphone checking?
Variable Ratio (VR) best describes repeated smartphone checking. (Some phone-checking behavior can be interpreted as variable interval—for example, checking to see whether a message has arrived after an unpredictable amount of time—while scrolling or repeatedly refreshing for an unpredictable rewarding post can resemble variable ratio.)
 4. Why does that reinforcement schedule best describe this behavior?
People never know when the next rewarding post, video, or notification will appear, so they keep checking their phones.
 5. Based on Documents A and B, why is it so hard for many people to put down their phones?
Smartphones provide unpredictable rewards that activate the brain’s reward system. Because people never know when the next reward will come, they keep checking their phones.

Document B

Source: The University of Texas Permian Basin, “The Psychology of Smartphone Addiction,” *UTPB Online*, accessed July 12, 2026.

The Psychology of Smartphone Addiction

The problem is dopamine. Commonly referred to as the “feel-good” hormone, dopamine is the brain’s major reward and pleasure neurotransmitter. Anything that causes pleasure triggers a dopamine release. While it’s a common misconception that dopamine makes you happy, the hormone actually reinforces *behaviors* that make you happy.

Smartphones are so addictive because everytime we use them—to like an Instagram post, watch a YouTube video, or play Wordle—it triggers a surge of dopamine. After an initial rush of dopamine, there’s a dip like a craving: What goes up must come down. If a person isn’t addicted, the craving passes, but if they continue bingeing, the brain compensates with lower and lower dips.

By then, the brain is hooked. It needs more dopamine; it needs to feel like it felt the first time it engaged with the stimulus. The brain is now dependent on diminishing dopamine returns, and like many addicts, the smartphone user is chasing a high they’ll never reach.

CV

Document Analysis (continued)

Document C: “Bad Is Stronger Than Good”

Content Notes:

- Published in 2001, *Bad Is Stronger Than Good* reviewed hundreds of previous studies from many areas of psychology. Rather than reporting one new experiment, the authors identified a consistent pattern: negative experiences generally have a stronger psychological impact than positive ones. It is considered a landmark study in psychology.
- Although the phrase “negativity bias” appears only briefly in the article, it has become the common term for the tendency to notice, remember, and respond more strongly to negative information than to positive information. Researchers have found this bias in attention, memory, learning, and decision-making.
- The authors argue that humans evolved to pay close attention to possible dangers because overlooking a threat could have serious consequences. Missing a positive opportunity might lead to regret, but missing a danger could threaten survival. This evolutionary explanation helps explain why “bad is stronger than good.”
- The amygdala, a small structure deep within the brain, helps detect emotionally significant events, especially potential threats. Working with brain regions involved in attention and memory, it helps explain why emotionally negative information often captures attention more quickly and is remembered more easily than neutral information.
- Since this article was published, researchers have found evidence for negativity bias in neuroscience, behavioral economics, and communication studies. Studies suggest people are more likely to notice, remember, and share information that is negative, surprising, or emotionally intense, including much of today’s online content.

Teaching Tips:

- Discuss the Document Analysis questions:
 - According to the authors, why did humans evolve to pay more attention to bad things?
Paying attention to possible dangers is more likely to lead to survival.

- According to the authors, why is it more dangerous to ignore a bad outcome than a good outcome?

Ignoring a positive opportunity may lead to disappointment or regret, but ignoring a danger could result in injury or death. Because of this, humans developed to respond more strongly to bad outcomes.

- According to the authors, how do bad events affect people differently than good events?

Bad events usually produce stronger emotions, have a greater impact on people’s thoughts and behavior, and last longer than positive events.

- How has paying attention to negative information helped humans survive?

Early humans who noticed threats were more likely to avoid danger and stay alive. Over time, this made people naturally more attentive to negative or threatening information.

- Based on this document, what types of events or information are most likely to capture a person’s attention?

Answers may vary. Negative, threatening, or emotionally important information is most likely to capture a person’s attention because people naturally respond more strongly to bad events than good ones.



Skill Builder: Sentence Strips

- Break students into groups of three or four.
- Assign each group one or two sentences from the passage to translate into their own words.
- Give each group a teacher-created glossary for the vocabulary that will prove to be a challenge for students (e.g. *evolutionary*, *adaptive*, *significant*, *maimed*, *indicate*).
- Have students translate their passage into a sentence strip.
- Each group will present its sentence strip translation to the class, adding it to the sentence before until the passage is reassembled.
- Read the old passage together as a class. Read the translated passage together as a class.

Document C

Source: Roy F. Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer, and Kathleen D. Vohs, “Bad Is Stronger Than Good,” *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 4, December 2001.

Note: In this research review, Roy Baumeister (1953–) and his colleagues examined hundreds of studies to understand whether positive or negative experiences have a greater psychological impact on people’s attention.

Bad is Stronger than Good

CV

From our perspective, it is evolutionary adaptive for bad to be stronger than good. We believe that throughout our evolutionary history, organisms that were better attuned to bad things would have been more likely to survive threats and, consequently, would have increased probability of passing along their genes.... A person who ignores the possibility of a positive outcome may later experience significant regret at having missed an opportunity for pleasure or advancement, but nothing directly terrible is likely to result. In contrast, a person who ignores danger (the possibility of a bad outcome) even once may end up maimed or dead. Survival requires urgent attention to possible bad outcomes, but it is less urgent with regard to good ones. Hence, it would be adaptive to be psychologically designed to respond to bad more strongly than good....

All lives contain both good and bad events. If bad is stronger than good, then bad events will have longer lasting and more intense consequences than good events. In particular, the effects of good events should dissipate more rapidly than the effects of bad events....

Most findings indicate that people react more strongly to bad than good events. The evidence covers everything from minor everyday events and brief experimental exposure to adverse odors to major life events and traumas. Bad events produce more emotion, have bigger effects on adjustment measures, and have longer lasting effects.

Document Analysis (continued)

Document D: How Social Media Algorithms Work

Content Notes:

- Research such as *Bad Is Stronger Than Good* helps explain why recommendation algorithms often promote emotional or negative content. People naturally pay closer attention to information that is threatening, surprising, or emotionally charged. As algorithms learn what captures attention, they are more likely to recommend similar content because it keeps users engaged.
- Recommendation algorithms recognize patterns in user behavior, not whether content is true, helpful, or important. They analyze actions such as watch time, scrolling speed, likes, comments, and shares to predict what users are most likely to engage with next. As a result, emotionally charged posts often spread more widely than calm or neutral information.
- Social media did not always rely on recommendation algorithms. Facebook introduced its algorithmic News Feed in 2006, replacing simple chronological posts with content selected to increase engagement. Twitter (now X) later adopted algorithmically recommended timelines, Instagram switched from chronological posts to an algorithmic feed in 2016, and TikTok built its “For You” page almost entirely around personalized recommendations from the start. These changes marked a shift from showing users the newest content to showing content in which they were most likely to engage.
- Social media companies rely on engagement because longer viewing times increase advertising opportunities and revenue. Recommendation algorithms can help users discover content they enjoy, but they also encourage longer sessions by continually presenting material that is most likely to capture and hold attention.

Teaching Tips:

- Discuss the Document Analysis questions:
 1. According to the author, what is the main goal of social media recommendation systems?
The main goal is to keep users engaged and on the platform as long as possible.
 2. According to the document, what types of content are algorithms most likely to recommend?
The types of content that algorithms are most likely to recommend are threatening, shocking, emotional, or provocative content.
 3. How do recommendation algorithms decide what content to show users?
They track users’ activity and recommend similar content that keeps their attention.
 4. How do social media algorithms take advantage of the way people naturally pay attention to information?
Algorithms recommend emotional and negative content because it is more likely to capture people’s attention.
 5. Based on Documents C and D, why is it so hard to put down our phones?
People naturally pay attention to emotional and negative information. Social media algorithms recommend more of this content, making it difficult to stop scrolling.

Document D

Source: Brandon Batarse, “The Empathy Crisis: How Social Media Algorithms Drive Emotional Numbing,” *Psychiatric Times*, February 16, 2026.

Note: Early social media platforms displayed posts in simple chronological order. Over time, companies such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok introduced computer algorithms that recommended content based on each user’s activity.

How the Social Media Algorithm Works

CV

Social media platforms today use recommendation systems designed to reinforce whatever keeps the user on their platform. These systems maximize engagement and attention, rather than user well-being. Decades of media psychology research show that threatening, shocking, and morally provocative material captures attention more reliably than neutral content. Using this principle, platforms create a reinforcement loop that gradually shifts users’ feeds toward more intense or provocative content over time.... The algorithms infer “interest” from micro-engagement, such as slowing down when scrolling, replaying videos, or hovering. Over time, algorithms can move users from benign content to high-arousal material and eventually to graphic or extreme videos.... In other words, the system detects vulnerability and amplifies whatever sustains engagement because that is what benefits the platform.

Document Analysis (continued)

Document E: The Need to Belong

Content Notes:

- Roy Baumeister is one of the most influential social psychologists of the past fifty years, known for research on self-control, motivation, relationships, and human behavior. Mark Leary (1954–) is a leading psychologist whose work focuses on interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and social belonging. Their 1995 article, published in the peer-reviewed journal *Psychological Bulletin*, remains one of the most widely cited papers in social psychology.
- Baumeister and Leary argued that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation, similar to needs such as hunger or sleep. They proposed that people naturally seek meaningful relationships because belonging promotes psychological well-being. A lack of belonging can lead to loneliness, anxiety, depression, and other negative outcomes. Decades of research have largely supported this theory.
- The authors argued that belonging requires more than simply being around other people. Two conditions must be met: people need frequent, positive interactions and stable, lasting relationships in which individuals care about one another. Brief encounters with strangers or large numbers of online contacts do not necessarily satisfy the need to belong if meaningful relationships are absent.
- The need to belong helps explain a wide range of everyday behaviors. People join clubs and teams, maintain friendships, stay connected with family, and participate in communities because these activities strengthen social bonds. Understanding belonging as a basic psychological need provides a useful framework for examining why many modern technologies—including smartphones and social media—are so effective at capturing and maintaining people’s attention.

Teaching Tips:

- Discuss the Document Analysis questions:
 - According to Baumeister and Leary, what is the “belongingness hypothesis”?

People have a basic drive to form and maintain lasting, positive, and meaningful relationships.

- According to the authors, what two things are necessary for people to satisfy their need to belong?

People need (1) frequent, positive interactions with others and (2) stable, lasting relationships in which people care about one another.

- According to the authors, what can happen when people’s need to belong is not met?

People may experience loneliness, emotional distress, or other negative effects because they lack meaningful relationships.

- Based on both the excerpt and the flow chart, what kinds of activities or behaviors might people choose if they are trying to build or maintain relationships with others? Explain your reasoning using evidence from the document.

Answers will vary. Students will likely mention things like spending time with family, joining sports teams or clubs, talking to friends, texting, joining group chats, or “keeping in touch.”



Skill Builder: Examining Information from Multiple Documents

When students are presented information from more than one source as a single document in a Mini-Q, their first instinct is to analyze the information as completely separate pieces of information. The trick is that once they have analyzed the documents separately, they need to make connections between the documents.

Questions to Consider:

What is the most significant piece of evidence about the need to belong in the text and the most significant detail in the graphic?

Why do you think all of this information is being presented as a single document, *The Need to Belong*?

What is the relationship between the text and the graphic?

What similarities and differences can you find between the text and the graphic?

How do these combined sources help you answer the Mini-Q question?

Document E

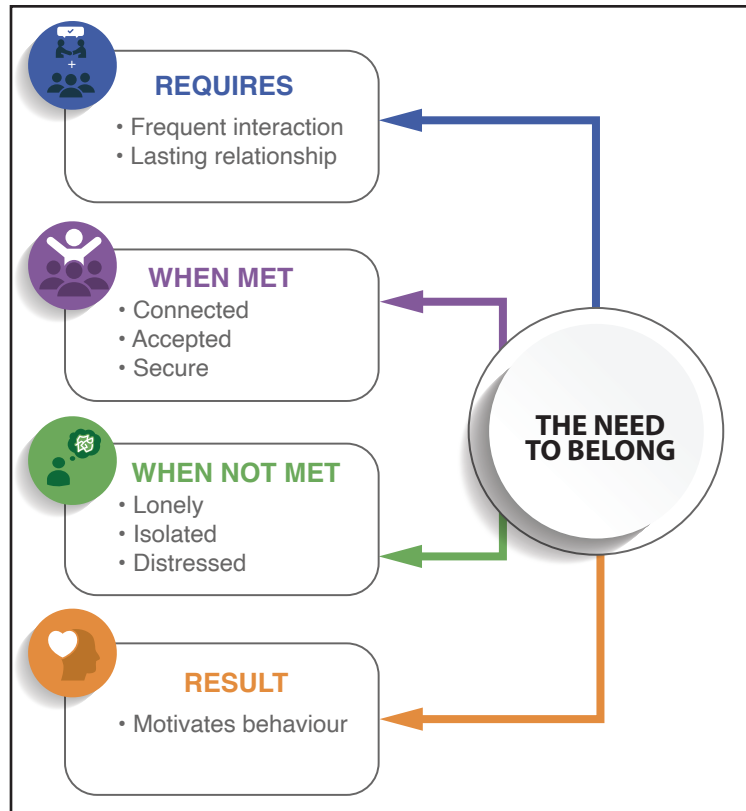
Source: Roy F. Baumeister & Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 117, No. 3, May 1995.

Note: In 1995, psychologists Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary introduced the "belongingness hypothesis," a theory that sought to explain why relationships with other people are so important. The excerpt below introduces their idea.

The Need to Belong

CV

... the belongingness hypothesis is that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships. Satisfying this drive involves two criteria: First, there is a need for frequent, affectively pleasant interactions with a few other people, and, second, these interactions must take place in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other's welfare.... A lack of belongingness should constitute severe deprivation and cause a variety of ill effects. Furthermore, a great deal of human behavior, emotion, and thought is caused by this foundational interpersonal motive.



Document Analysis (continued)

Document F: “Teens’ Experiences on TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat”

Content Notes:

- The Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan research organization known for producing high-quality surveys on social trends, technology, and public opinion. Its studies use nationally representative samples and rigorous survey methods, making Pew one of the most trusted sources for understanding how Americans use technology and social media.
- Baumeister and Leary argued that people are motivated to seek meaningful relationships because belonging is a basic psychological need. The survey results in this document provide a modern example of that theory by showing that many teens use social media to stay connected with friends, family, and people who share their interests.
- Social media platforms teens use have changed dramatically over the past decade. Facebook, once the dominant platform among teenagers, has largely been replaced by YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. While the platforms continue to evolve, one motivation has remained remarkably consistent: staying connected with friends, family, and communities.
- Teens’ attitudes toward social media have become more mixed in recent years. In 2025, nearly half of U.S. teens said social media has a mostly negative effect on people their age, up substantially from 2022. At the same time, many of those same teens continue to use social media to stay connected with others, illustrating the powerful appeal of social connection.

Teaching Tips:

- Discuss the Document Analysis questions:
 1. According to the graph, what are the three most common reasons teens say they use Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok?
Teens use these platforms as entertainment, to know what’s going on with friends and family, and to connect with others.
 2. Which two reasons shown in the graph provide the strongest evidence that social media helps people build or maintain relationships?
The two reasons are “to know what’s going on with friends and family” and “to connect with others who share their interests.”

3. How do the two reasons you identified help satisfy the need to belong described by Baumeister and Leary in Document E?

These activities satisfy people’s need to belong by strengthening social connections.

4. Based on Documents E and F, why might people continue checking social media even after they have finished looking for entertainment?

People may continue checking social media because they are also looking for social connection. Seeing messages, updates, or interactions with others helps satisfy their need to belong.

5. Based on Documents E and F, why is it so hard to put down our phones?

Baumeister and Leary argue that people have a basic need to belong by forming and maintaining meaningful relationships. Because smartphones help satisfy this need to belong, people are motivated to keep checking and using them.



Skill Builder: Analyzing a Graph

Have students look at the graph title and labels. Tell them that these tell you what the chart is about and what the dots represent. Then instruct students to:

Compare the data: The dots on each line represent data. The farther to the right, the higher the percentage. See which categories have the highest percentage of users.

Notice any patterns: Are the data dots generally increasing or decreasing as you move down to each line? Are there any surprising data points that stick out?

Follow-up questions:

Can you write a sentence describing the main finding of the graph?

What questions do you still have about the information shown?

Are there any clues that this graph could be misinterpreted?

How can this data help you answer the Mini-Q question?

Document F

Source: Michelle Faverio, Eugenie Park, and Jeffrey Gottfried, “Teens’ Experiences on TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat,” Pew Research Center, April 15, 2026.

Note: In 2025, the Pew Research Center surveyed U.S. teens ages thirteen to seventeen about why they use three of the most popular social media platforms: Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok. The graph below shows the percentage of users on each platform who said each reason was a major or minor reason they use it.

Teens’ Experiences on TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat

CV

