

Slurs, Offensive Jokes and How to Respond

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

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



Web Related Connections

Lessons

[Swastikas and Other Hate Symbols](#)

[Online Hate and Harassment and What We Can Do About It](#)

[When You are a Target: How to Respond to and Challenge Bias](#)

[Words Can Hurt, Help and Heal](#)

[The N-Word: Its History, Use and Impact](#)

[Intent Vs. Impact: Why Does it Matter?](#)

Other Resources

[Challenging Biased Language](#)

[Responding to Jokes and Slurs](#)

[When 'Just Joking' is No Joke: How to Respond](#)

[When Students' Jokes are Biased or Offensive](#)

[Slurs and Biased Language \(en Español\)](#)

[When it Comes to Bias, We Must Prioritize Impact Over Intent](#)

LESSON OVERVIEW

In 2017, a Florida state senator resigned his office because of a controversy that involved him using slurs in the presence of two other lawmakers, specifically using racial slurs for Black people, derogatory language about women and engaging in other vulgar language. In his resignation letter, Senator Frank Artiles wrote: "My actions and my presence in government is now a distraction to my colleagues, the legislative process, and the citizens of our great State. I am responsible and I am accountable and effective immediately, I am resigning from the Florida State Senate." This is just one example that got media attention; however, it seems that slurs, epithets and offensive jokes are part of our everyday lives and many people are unsure what to say or do when confronted with this offensive language.

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

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

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- *Post-it*® Notes or index cards (2–3 per student)
- Here I Stand statement signs (prepared in advance): “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “In between/not sure,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree.”
- “[Miami lawmaker resigns over racial slur scandal](#)” (one copy for each student)
- [Pyramid of Hate](#) (to project on board/smart board or one copy for each student)

PROCEDURES

What are slurs?

1. Ask students: *What is a slur?* Define **slur** as an insulting, offensive or degrading remark, often based on an identity group such as race, ethnicity, religion, ethnicity, gender/gender identity or sexual orientation.
2. Explain that in 2017, a Florida state senator resigned his office because of a controversy that involved him using slurs in the presence of two other lawmakers, specifically using racial slurs for Black people, derogatory language about women and engaging in other vulgar language. Explain that they will read more about this later in the lesson.
3. Have students turn and talk with a person sitting next to them and discuss slurs, offensive language or jokes they have heard, either directed at them or someone else, or ones they have heard in songs, movies or TV shows. Explain that students should not say the slur aloud but instead spell it out or say something like “the n-word” or “the f-word”.
4. Working on their own, have students think about other slurs or offensive language they have heard about. They can jot down some notes but again, explain to them they should not write the slur out as slurs are very harmful and upsetting to hear aloud or read in writing. They can write, “slur about disabled people, slur about Hispanic people,” etc.
5. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions. Remind them while we are discussing the use of slurs, they should not say the slur aloud.
 - What thoughts and feelings do you have when thinking about slurs you have seen or heard?
 - Where do you typically hear these words?
 - What impact do you think slurs have on the people the slur is about? What impact does the use of slurs have on others and on society?
 - Why is it important to understand the impact of slurs?
 - Where do these slurs come from?
 - How are slurs connected to stereotypes?

Key Words (cont.)

conservatism
disparage
doctrine
dominance
egalitarian
espouse
extremist
ideology
implicit
infiltrate
mainstream
multiculturalism
pluralism
propaganda
radical
revere
think tank
trolling



Reading Activity

1. Distribute a copy to each student of the article “[Miami lawmaker resigns over racial slur scandal](#)” and give students 10 minutes to read it silently. (You can also distribute the night before to read for homework.)
2. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What happened?
 - How do you think Senator Aviles’ language impacted the people he was with?
 - Why do you think he decided to resign?
 - Why do you think an apology “wasn’t enough?”
 - What would you have done if you were in his presence while he used those slurs?
 - Why do you think, in his letter of resignation, he said he was “responsible” and “accountable?”
 - What message does his resignation send?
 - What would you have advised him to do next? Is the impact of his words different because he is an elected official? Please explain.

Here I Am Activity

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

Note: As an alternative, you can have students use thumbs up for agree, thumbs down for disagree and thumbs to the side for in between/not sure. Or, if you are teaching this lesson online, use [Mentimeter](#) (“Scales”) to create the continuum and provide the same selection of words—agree, disagree, etc., inviting students to select a response based on each statement.

3. Read some or all the statements below—one at a time—requesting students to take some time to decide where they want to be in the continuum, move silently to that place and observe where others choose to be. Following each statement, after everyone has chosen their spot, have one or two students from each group share their reasons for being where they are. Allow students to move upon hearing the reasons.
4. Read some or all of the statements below, requesting students take a few minutes to decide where they be in the continuum. Have them walk silently to that place and observe where others choose to stand. Following each statement, after everyone has chosen their spot, have students spend 2–3 minutes talking amongst themselves about why they are just being where they are. If time permits, have some students share with the rest of the class their thinking.
 - When I walk through the hallways of our school, I hear a lot of slurs and ethnic/racial jokes.
 - Adults should act as role models and not use slurs.
 - When someone makes a racial joke, you should just laugh it off.
 - Slurs and jokes are okay but should only be said in private among friends.
 - I see a lot of slurs and offensive jokes online.
 - When you hear slurs or jokes about your group, you should say something.

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

Pyramid of Hate (Optional)

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

Closing

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

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

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

Common Core Standards

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

CASEL's SEL Competencies

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

Establishing Classroom Guidelines

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

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

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

Miami Lawmaker Resigns Over Racial Slur Scandal

By Patricia Mazzei and Mary Ellen Klas, April 21, 2017

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TALLAHASSEE — Sen. Frank Artiles resigned from the Florida Legislature on Friday, consumed by a scandal that [erupted three days earlier](#) over a diatribe of insults the Miami Republican unleashed against two lawmakers at a Tallahassee bar.

In a letter to Senate President Joe Negron, Artiles said he was stepping down immediately for the sake of his family and the institution of the Senate, whose work [ground to a near halt](#) this week as Republican leaders grappled with Artiles' political future.

Read Artiles' resignation letter here

"My actions and my presence in government is now a distraction to my colleagues, the legislative process, and the citizens of our great State," Artiles wrote in a letter hand-delivered by his staff. "I am responsible and I am accountable and effective immediately, I am resigning from the Florida State Senate.

"It's clear there are consequences to every action, and in this area, I will need time for personal reflection and growth."

Negron [forced Artiles to apologize](#) Wednesday on the Senate floor for his alcohol-fueled tirade against Sen. Audrey Gibson, D-Jacksonville in which he called her a "bitch" and a "girl" and referred to some Republicans as "niggas." But outraged black lawmakers said his apology was not enough: They formally sought his expulsion from the Senate.

Negron, R-Stuart, whom Artiles had derided in his rant as a "pussy," ordered an investigation. On Friday, he commended Artiles for putting an end to the controversy.

"He made the right decision," Negron said in a last-minute Friday afternoon press conference outside the Senate. "All of us are accountable for our actions and comments."

"Despite the events of the last week, Senator Artiles has a long and proud record of public service," Negron had said earlier in a statement. "We all owe him a debt of gratitude for serving our country in the United State Marine Corps, where he fought for our freedom in the Global War on Terror. Additionally, his years of service in the Florida House and Senate demonstrate a commitment to helping others that will not end with his departure from the Senate. My Senate colleagues and I wish Senator Artiles and his family well."

Negron's office did not know the whereabouts of Artiles, a married father of two who turns 44 on Saturday.

As a result of the resignation, Sen. Perry Thurston, D-Fort Lauderdale, who filed the complaint accusing Artiles of violating Senate conduct rules, withdrew his charges.

"We regret that this action was necessary, but we believe it was the right action to take," Thurston said in a statement. "The actions of this Senate, and those of the multitude of Floridians who stood up in objection to the events of this week are to be lauded. They underscored the critical lesson that words can be painful, they can be hurtful, and they can have consequences."

"This has been an ordeal that no one should have to endure," Gibson said in a statement that didn't even mention Artiles by name.

Artiles, known for his combative style, had [hired a sharp-elbowed lawyer](#) and vowed to fight. He chose as his attorney Steven R. Andrews, one of the most feared lawyers in Tallahassee for his reputation as an opposition researcher, his ability to use public records to fight political battles and extract settlements from those he has sued, including Gov. Rick Scott.

In a letter Thursday to Negrón, Andrews asked that an independent prosecutor with no association with the Senate be named to conduct the investigation. Then, in what appeared to be an overt threat, he twisted the knife, naming the senators Artiles would call to answer questions under oath.

But the Senate process does not allow for Artiles to question lawmakers, and Negrón simply overlooked the letter, ordering Senate General Counsel Dawn Roberts to continue her investigation as planned.

Pressure mounted for Artiles to resign as the state's two top Republicans suggested he should step down. Speaking to reporters Thursday, Scott said if he had an employee "who said what he said, I would fire him." Attorney General Pam Bondi also urged Artiles to quit.

By Thursday afternoon, even Artiles' friends in the state Capitol, convinced he couldn't possibly redeem himself, had begun to say privately that he had to go. The most evident sign of his looming exit: Political hounds started chatting about his competitive seat soon becoming open.

By Friday, fellow Miami Republican lawmakers were openly relieved about Artiles' decision, and uniformly praised him for making it.

"Frank has acted honorably in his decision, and my prayers are with him as he moves on from this process," future House Speaker Jose Oliva of Miami Lakes, a longtime Artiles friend, said Friday morning. In his letter of resignation Friday, Artiles was more contrite than he sounded when he addressed the full chamber.

"This experience has allowed me to see that for too many years I have sacrificed what I hold most dear in my life, my wife and my two young daughters," he said. "While I take full responsibility for using language that was vulgar and inappropriate, my family has fallen victim to a political process that can distort the truth for the sole purpose of political gain."

A Miami-Dade County police officer, Orlando Fleites, [parked across the street](#) from Artiles' West Kendall home Friday and told a reporter who went to knock on his door that the former senator was not giving any interviews. Two trucks were parked outside the house, including one sporting a state legislator tag.

Friends of Artiles, who said he spent the last few days outside of the Capitol seeking their counsel, said he had been angry and indignant at what he saw as a double standard: colleagues whose own behavior, in his mind, has not risen to the standards they held him to. In the end, the friends persuaded him that he would not weather the storm of public opinion and, even if he overcame the expulsion threat, his return to the Senate would become a drag on an already-divided GOP caucus.

Weighing on Artiles were past incidents of [using crude language](#) and demonstrating aggressive behavior, including when a college student [accused him of punching him](#) in the face two years ago. An earlier fracas with another lawmaker's legislative aide drew laughs when outgoing Rep. Doug Holder [teased Artiles about it](#) on the House floor in 2014.

But the more collegial Senate operates differently, and Artiles had not made the same loyal friendships in the more deliberative chamber.

Last month, Artiles was feted at the Daytona 500 where he sported a brown jacket emblazoned with "NextEra," the parent company of Florida Power & Light, and started the annual truck race. As one of his first acts as chair of the Senate committee overseeing public utilities, Artiles then boosted a pair of bills sought by FPL.

"I take no pleasure in these unfortunate events," Democratic Leader Oscar Braynon of Miami Gardens said in a statement. "But I urge that we learn from them. In our communities, our state, and our country, there should be a

message of hope, of tolerance, of unity. We cannot afford the high cost words of divisiveness and cruelty leave in their wake.”

Artiles insisted after his public apology Wednesday that he had no intention of leaving the seat.

“If every time a senator made a mistake or someone made a mistake that they were going to resign, we’d have half the Senate gone for whatever reason,” he told reporters.

Asked a second time, Artiles dug in his heels: “Absolutely not. As a matter of fact, I’m not only [not] going to resign, but I’m also going to file for 2018 and win my election.”

Artiles’ resignation completes a stunningly swift fall from grace. After six years in the state House — in his first year he was forced to admit he didn’t live in his district — Artiles ran for the Senate last year and was considered an underdog in a Southwest Miami-Dade district that strongly supported President Barack Obama in 2012.

But the district, which includes Kendall, South Miami and Westchester, also is 67 percent Hispanic. That favored Artiles, a Cuban-American, against Sen. Dwight Bullard, an African-American, who struggled to compete with the Republicans’ vaunted fundraising apparatus.

Backed by the Republican Party and by political committees controlled by key GOP senators, Artiles overwhelmed Bullard in fundraising. He raised \$850,000 compared to Bullard’s \$199,000 and won easily, with 51 percent of the vote. Bullard had 41 percent, and an independent candidate got the rest. Hillary Clinton defeated Donald Trump in the district by 57-40 percent.

Artiles’ campaign had a “military feel,” Negrón [said in admiration](#) after Election Day. “He won us over by earning it on the ground.”

Partly at the direction of future Senate President Bill Galvano of Bradenton, the Florida Republican Senate Campaign Committee spent \$1.9 million to help Artiles’ campaign. And Galvano used a political committee he manages called Innovate Florida to invest another \$275,000 directly into Artiles’ campaign.

“I regret this situation but I don’t regret the decision to engage in that race,” Galvano said Friday. “We picked up a seat. I found Frank to be the best organized candidate we had in the election cycle and as a member of the Republican Caucus, I felt like we did the right thing in supporting him and getting him elected.”

With Artiles’ resignation, his constituents will have no Senate representation for the last two critical weeks of the annual lawmaking session, though his staff will keep providing constituent services until a new senator is elected. What happens to his legislation will depend on each bill’s co-sponsor. Senate Republicans will now be down two votes; Sen. Dorothy Hukill of Port Orange has been out all session recovering from cancer.

Artiles’ demise recalls another case in which a Miami-Dade lawmaker was forced from office for racist language involving alcohol. Former Rep. Ralph Arza, a Hialeah Republican, resigned in 2006 after he left crude, threatening and racially charged messages on a colleague’s cell phone. Arza pleaded guilty in 2007 to two misdemeanor counts of tampering with a witness and received 18 months probation.

Gov. Scott will call a special election to replace Artiles. Potential candidates [are already lining up](#).

On the Republican side, the likely list so far includes state Rep. Jose Felix Diaz; former state Sen. Alex Diaz de la Portilla; former congressional candidate and early Donald Trump supporter Lorenzo Palomares-Starbuck; former U.S. Rep. David Rivera, who was spotted in Tallahassee on Thursday, and former County Commissioner Juan C. Zapata. State Rep. Jeanette Nuñez, who doesn’t live in the district, said “there will be plenty of time” after session ends to make decisions “on political scenarios that may pan out.”

As for Democrats, Bullard said he may try for a comeback. Bullard’s friend Annette Taddeo, who also lives in the district, said she would consult with Bullard and other black lawmakers before deciding on a run. Freshman state Rep. Robert Asencio said he might also be interested. Former state Rep. Ana Rivas Logan said her interest

depends on when the special election takes place. Another possible contender: Marisel Losa, who heads the Health Council of South Florida.

The Florida and Miami-Dade Democratic parties used Artiles' resignation to ask supporters for money via email Friday.

"GONE," the state party's fundraising pitch read.

Herald/Times reporters Michael Auslen, Steve Bousquet, Kristen M. Clark and Jeremy Wallace contributed to this report. Herald staff writer Lance Dixon contributed from Miami.

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