

Before Wonka: the original rip-off events that left children in tears

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

- a. Read the definitions below. Has someone ever tried to con you? What happened? Discuss.

con (*n*) a trick; the act of cheating somebody
a con artist (*n*) a person who regularly cheats others

2 Key words

- a. Write the correct words from the wordpool to complete the definitions below. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

adjacent	crappiness	go viral	hideous	immersive
merchandise	pioneer	ratty	rip-off	scam
sheer	sparsely	sullen	virtuoso	warehouse

1. _____ when a piece of information, video, image, or social media post is sent rapidly over the internet and seen by many people in a short time
2. _____ a clever and dishonest plan for making money
3. _____ a person who shows very great skill at doing something
4. _____ a person who is the first to study and develop a particular area of knowledge, culture, etc. that other people then continue to develop
5. _____ with only small amounts or numbers of something, often spread over a large area
6. _____ a building where large quantities of goods are stored, especially before they are sent to shops to be sold
7. _____ in a bad mood and not speaking, either on a particular occasion or because it is part of your character
8. _____ very ugly or unpleasant
9. _____ something that is not worth what you pay for it
10. _____ describing a game, performance, work of art, etc. that seems to surround the player or viewer so they feel totally involved in the experience, often by using 3D images

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11. _____ in bad condition
12. _____ next to, bordering on, or almost
13. _____ used to emphasise the size, degree, or amount of something
14. _____ goods that are for sale in a shop or that are connected with a particular event or organisation
15. _____ something that is very bad quality

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.

1. _____ in AI are learning more about what it can do every day.
2. This juicer looked durable, but it broke in a day. What a(n) _____!
3. At the football game, there were plenty of places to buy team _____.
4. New product shipments didn't arrive, so the _____ was nearly empty.
5. Have you been to a(n) _____ art exhibition where it feels like you're inside the paintings?
6. The funny video _____ on social media overnight.
7. The _____ size of the Grand Canyon is incredible.
8. Don't click on that email! It's a phishing _____.
9. After news of the redundancies, all the employees became _____.
10. The piano _____ amazed the audience with her performance.
11. The Christmas event was so _____ decorated that it didn't feel festive at all.
12. Ripped jeans may be in style, but these just look _____!

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Willy's Chocolate Experience is a challenger for the worst immersive off-brand experience of all time. But Fortnite Live Norwich and Santas Winter Village were the pioneers

Stuart Heritage

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- 1 If we get to the end of 2024 with a better news story than Willy's Chocolate Experience in Glasgow, I will be very surprised.
- 2 It's the perfect story. You've got high expectations versus miserable reality. You've got an organiser who has samurai-level expertise when it comes to parting people from their money. You've got the fact that he runs a company called House of Illuminati. You've got police involvement. You've got things going viral on TikTok. Best of all, you've got a website so lazily constructed that it promises nonsense using nonsense words. It's perfect. It might be the greatest thing ever to bear Willy Wonka's name.
- 3 However, it is important to remember that no hilariously disappointing scam event exists in a vacuum. To hit this virtuoso level of dreadfulness, House of Illuminati had to build on the work of several brilliant pioneers; pioneers who thought nothing of charging innocent strangers incredible amounts of money to wander around a sparsely decorated warehouse full of sullen workers and crying children. So let's also take a moment to reflect on some of the hideous rip-off immersive experiences that have gone before.
- 4 Obviously, the bulk of the offenders will be festive in nature. Christmas in the late capitalism era is entirely geared towards forcing people to spend more money than they'd like on things they'll never need. When it comes to Christmas events, it is remarkably easy to wildly over-promise and then get out of town before the locals start coming for you. Sometimes, though, organisers can overreach.
- 5 In 2020, the Colannades Shopping Centre in Adelaide charged the public A\$60 (£31) to experience Santas Winter Village, which promised a "snowy trail through an enchanted forest", a "Santa's workshop" and a "polar express train". However, once their money was taken, ticketholders were led to an abandoned industrial unit containing several ratty nylon Christmas trees, a grotto that was clearly made from unpainted cardboard boxes complete with visible shipping stickers and, best of all, a mobility scooter as Santa's sleigh. "The Santa they had was so poorly dressed that my six-year-old began questioning if he was Santa," said one guest.
- 6 There was also a 2022 event in East Lothian, where ticketholders were charged an extra £15 to meet St Nicholas, only to be confronted by a shop mannequin in a Santa outfit. There were rides here but, as one man who claimed to have spent £100 on tickets reported, they weren't very good. "My daughter went on the bungee ropes and the staff member in charge of the area disappeared and was gone for 10 minutes. When she came back my daughter was just standing there wanting off," he said.
- 7 But as Willy's Chocolate Experience proved, you can scam people out of their money at any point of the year. In 2019, the Rialto Theatre in Montreal hosted an adult Harry Potter-adjacent event for 600 people at C\$50 (£29) a time. The event promised "boozy butterbeer", "Luna Love's pudding", a "cornhole snitch toss" and the famous "cobblestone alley". The reality, however, was even more disappointing. Visitors discovered that the attraction where ticketholders could decorate their own wands simply consisted of some disposable chopsticks dumped on a table. Meanwhile, the Platform 9 and 3/4 attraction was a standee of a blank brick wall.
- 8 It's also worth mentioning the 2018 Mario Kart event held in Melbourne, offering gamers a chance to dress up as their favourite Nintendo characters and race go-karts. The event promised "costume hire, snacks, CBD pick up and drop off, up to 20 laps, DJ and after party and games room activities and more." In reality, however, the costumes were dirty, the snack consisted of a single cupcake and the games room consisted of two Nintendo Wiis. Tickets cost a \$100 (£51) each.

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- 9 Perhaps my favourite was the unofficial Fortnite festival that was held in Norwich in 2019, if only for its sheer scale. The organisers sold 10,000 tickets at between £13.52 and £22.14, but would charge extra for further attractions. These included a climbing wall that could only accommodate three people at a time, an “ultimate Fortnite battle royale!” which turned out to be small stage upon which children could floss, and a “cave experience”, described by the Daily Mail as “a tunnel through a trailer with a slide”. It’s also worth pointing out the merchandise stand, which sold hats with “cocaine and caviar” on the front. The first event went down so badly that further events were cancelled, and the company that organised it was closed after the makers of Fortnite brought a claim against them in the high court.
- 10 But this all happened in the past. Willy’s Chocolate Experience has set an incredible new level of crappiness for this sort of thing. The future of rip-off events is here. Hold on to your lollipops, everyone.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. Where was Willy's Chocolate Experience held?
2. What is the name of the company behind the event?
3. What does the article say that "Christmas in the late capitalism era" tries to do?
4. At Santa's Winter Village in 2020, what was used for Santa's sleigh?
5. At the 2022 event in East Lothian, how much extra were people charged to meet St Nicholas and what did it turn out to be?
6. Where was the Harry Potter-adjacent event held?
7. For the Mario Kart event in Melbourne, how did the promise and the reality differ?
8. How many tickets were sold for the unofficial Fortnite festival in 2019?
9. What two things happened after the first unofficial Fortnite event?
10. What does the author think Willy's Chocolate Experience has done for rip-off events?

4 Key language

a. Rephrase the following sentences related to the article using reported speech. Change tenses and parts of speech as needed.

1. The author: "If we get to the end of 2024 with a better news story than Willy's Chocolate Experience in Glasgow, I will be very surprised."

2. A guest at Santa's Winter Village: "The Santa they had was so poorly dressed that my six-year-old began questioning if he was Santa."

3. A guest at a 2022 event in East Lothian: "My daughter went on the bungee ropes and the staff member in charge of the area disappeared and was gone for 10 minutes."

4. Ticketholders at Santa's Winter Village: "We were led to an abandoned industrial unit."

5. The author: "Willy's Chocolate Experience has set an incredible new level of crappiness."

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- b. **Work in pairs.** Ask your classmates about a scam they were victims of or heard about. Take notes if needed.
- c. **Work with a different partner or in small groups.** Report your classmate's story using reported speech.

5 Discussion

- a. **Discuss these statements.**
 - "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."
 - "Some people will sell you a dream and deliver a nightmare."
 - "Sorting fact from fiction on the internet is getting harder."

6 In your own words

- a. **Do some research about recent scams, cons or other rip-offs.**
 - What are some common scams?
 - How do the perpetrators usually contact people or advertise to them?
 - What demographics do they usually target?
 - How can people protect themselves and their loved ones?
- b. **Report your findings to the class and share your opinions. Here are some phrases to help you when you discuss facts.**

According to my research, ...

One example is ...

Some ways to do this are ...

One law / initiative that is in place aims to ...

Another thing people / governments can do is ...

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Here are some phrases to use when stating your opinion.

I think (that) ...

From what I know / have read, ...

From my perspective, ...

In my understanding / opinion, ...

I (dis)agree with ...