

BREAK THE FAKE: CRITICAL THINKING VS. DISINFORMATION

People who share false or misleading information sometimes use the language of critical thinking and media literacy, telling followers to “do your research” and “think critically” in one breath and then to “trust the plan” in the next.

So how can we tell if we’re really thinking critically?

Ask yourself three questions:

1. WHAT DO I ALREADY THINK OR BELIEVE ABOUT THIS?

We pay attention to things that fit with what we already think is true. That’s not always a bad thing: science, medicine and other subjects all have a *consensus*: what experts believe is most likely true, based on all the evidence that’s been found so far.

It’s important to know what the consensus is on a topic when you’re judging a claim or a new piece of information. And it’s important not to reject something because it doesn’t match what you already think or believe.

One way around this is to use searches that are as neutral as possible when you’re learning about something. *Search engines show you what they think you’re looking for*, so if you search for “are pancakes better than waffles” you’ll mostly get results saying they are. But you’ll get the opposite if you search for “are waffles better than pancakes”! Instead, pick a more neutral phrase like “waffles pancakes comparison.”

2. WHY DO I WANT TO BELIEVE OR DISPROVE THIS?

“Misinformation is misinformation even when it makes you happy.” - Josh Grubbs

It’s good to be skeptical. Sometimes, though, we’re less skeptical of things we want to think are true – and *more* skeptical of things we don’t want to believe. In fact, people on *both* sides of a political issue usually think the media is biased towards the other side.

Before you decide to believe something, take a few moments to ask yourself if you’d make the same decision if it you *didn’t* want it to be true. And make sure you work just as hard to double-check things that you want to believe!

3. WHAT WOULD MAKE ME CHANGE MY MIND?

“To investigate properly, you have to allow yourself to be wrong.” - Jordan Wildon

Imagine you're doing a jigsaw puzzle. Conspiracy theorists already think they know what the puzzle will look like. They only pick the pieces that support their idea and throw away any that suggest it might be wrong.

That's why the most important part of critical thinking is being willing to change your mind based on new information.

Before you verify something, decide what would convince you that it is or isn't true:

- What if a reliable fact-checker confirmed or disproved it? (You can use our fact-checker search, bit.ly/fact-search, to check.)
- What if the source turned out to be a reliable news outlet, or if you learned it was an unreliable source of disinformation? (Remember that you need to find the *original* source of a fact or claim before you verify it. See www.breakthefake.ca for info on how to do that.)

DOING YOUR OWN RESEARCH

If someone tells you to “do your own research,” don't just look at a source they give you or search for a phrase they suggested. Instead, you can start at Wikipedia to find the expert consensus on the topic and then look for other reliable sources to get more information.

A Wikipedia article reflects the consensus of *all* the editors who have worked on an article, but because anyone can do that (with some exceptions) you need to take a few extra steps to make sure it's reliable:

- Look for warning banners. Not all warning banners mean the whole article is unreliable, but they always mean you should take a closer look.
- Check the Talk tab to see what the editors are talking about. If there are disagreements about the consensus, you'll see it here.
 - On the Talk tab you can also see if an article has been locked to stop vandalism.
 - On mobile devices, see the Talk page by typing “Talk:” and the article's name in the Wikipedia search bar. Use the article's web address, which may include underscores, like “Talk:COVID-19_vaccine”.)
- You can also check the article's History page. If a lot of major edits have been made recently, it suggests the article doesn't yet show a consensus.
 - To see the History page, click on View History at the top of the article. On a mobile browser, scroll all the way to the bottom and tap the green bar that says “Last edited.”

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