This is a tutorial from the librarians at Lone Star College – North Harris. The purpose of this tutorial is to teach users how to evaluate information.

A lot of the information that you encounter may be incorrect. Some may be out of date, some might be biased, some might be unintentionally wrong, and some might be outright lies. When evaluating information, it pays to be skeptical about its accuracy. As an old proverb puts it “Believe half of what you see and none of what you hear.”

Here are four principles to keep in mind when evaluating information: authority, currency, objectivity, and verifiability. Let’s examine each one in detail.

The first principle is authority. Pictured on the right is Stephen Hawking, who was an expert in the field of astrophysics. If you’re writing a paper about astrophysics, Hawking would be considered an authoritative source. Someone with little or no background in physics would not be as authoritative a source as Hawking because he or she would not have as much educational expertise or professional experience in physics as Hawking.

So when evaluating a source of information, ask yourself “Does this person have any idea what he or she is talking about?” Does this author have the educational or professional qualifications that indicate a sound knowledge of the subject? Has the author published widely on the subject, or engaged in projects related to the subject?

The second principle is currency. Your information should be current, especially if you are writing about anything which changes over time, such as scientific knowledge or politics. When evaluating an information source, ask yourself “Is this information up-to-date?” For example, if you’re looking at information about heart disease from two years ago, it’s probably still accurate. But if your source is twenty years old, or in the case of the picture to the left, five hundred years old, then the information might not be accurate because human knowledge on the subject has grown or changed since that time.

You can check the date in which the source was published to get a good idea of how old is the information. But you should also check the author’s sources. Is he or she using current sources? A book written a year ago, but using sources more than twenty years old might not be current.

The third principle is objectivity. All of us have particular opinions and perspectives that color how we see the world. Although it might be possible to be truly objective, and some authors try to be objective, you should assume that every author and every publication has an agenda to push, or a bias to advocate.
As an example, read the quotations on the right side of the page. Which do you think is more objective?

If you said that Jill Marsh at Machining Today is more objective, you’d probably be right. After all, Jim Tucker’s company would make more money if people believed that his drill presses were superior. And Jill Marsh wouldn’t make more money, so she doesn’t have a bias.

Or does she? Is Jill Marsh objective? Let’s say that the Acme Corporation has paid for a very expensive, full-page advertisement in Machining Today. Her magazine stands to financially gain from Acme, and might feel disinclined to give Acme drill presses a negative review.

So bias is not always obvious. Sometimes it’s subtle and hidden. Assume that every source that you encounter has an agenda—don’t assume that an author is being objective.

The fourth principle is verifiability. This means that you can verify the factual claims that author is making. Ideally, an information source will be written like a research paper—with extensive citations showing the reader where each piece of information came from. Does your source have a bibliography showing where the author found his/her information? If you’re reading a newspaper article, does the author quote people by name—whose claims can be verified—or anonymously—whose claims (or even existence) cannot be verified. If you’re reading a scientific study, is the research methodology explained in detail?

Authors, even scholars, may engage in sloppy research or even just make stuff up. Just because you see text in print or on a screen doesn’t mean that it’s true, and you should prefer information that you can verify.

Be skeptical. Not all of the information that you encounter will be accurate. When encountering information, ask yourself, “Does this author know what he or she is talking about? Is this information up-to-date, or is it obsolete? Does this author have a bias and is that bias coloring the information? Can I verify the sources of this information?”

Don’t assume that everything that you read and hear is true, whether you’re talking with friends, reading on the Internet, or doing school research. As the proverb says, “Believe half of what you see and none of what you hear.”
Now take this short quiz about what you’ve learned in this video.