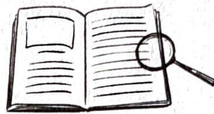
THE WRITER'S PRACTICE



Building Confidence in Your Nonfiction Writing

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PENGUIN BOOKS

Why Should I Trust This?

(Understanding Sources)

In a study conducted between January and June 2016, researchers at Stanford University tested the "civic online reasoning ability" of more than 7,800 middle school and high school students across twelve states.

The study defined "civic online reasoning" as "The ability to evaluate digital content and reach warranted conclusions about social and political issues: (1) identifying who's behind the information presented, (2) evaluating the evidence presented, and (3) investigating what other sources say" (http://www.aft.org/ae/fall2017/mcgrew_ortega_breakstone_wineburg).

The Stanford researchers found the results "disturbing."

Essentially, they found these middle school and high school students to be easily fooled by misinformation. In one task, fewer than 10 percent of those tested were able to identify a website presenting itself as a neutral source on minimum-wage laws and regulations as what was in reality the product of a partisan group linked to the US restaurant industry.

These findings are not surprising, and the difficulty of navigating the flood of content on the Internet is not limited to middle school and high school students. Much of the information we encounter on the Internet presents itself as true without offering any obvious way

to judge its veracity. Factor in the influence of "confirmation bias," our willingness to accept something as true as long as it aligns with our existing beliefs, and we have an online atmosphere that makes it very difficult to discern what is true and what is not.

It is important to be able to make these distinctions, because, in the words of the Stanford researchers, "Credible information is to civic engagement what clean air and water are to public health."

Determining the accuracy and trustworthiness of online information benefits from a process called "lateral reading," which involves leaving the source you're trying to assess.

This experience has two purposes:

1. To practice a process for checking online information for accuracy.
2. To spread the word to others about *how* to do this, by describing the process you used to determine whether a particular fact or source was reliable or unreliable.

AUDIENCE

Imagine someone has come to you with a source or fact, and they're not sure if it's true or not. They've asked you for help in determining its accuracy but also in better understanding *why* they should trust or not trust the information. Your piece should leave the audience better armed to engage in their own online fact-checking process having learned from your example.

PROCESS

1. Find a source you want to check.

Potentially dubious sources are pretty easy to locate. They frequently circulate on social media. A good way to potentially

identify one is to be alert to a moment when your own confirmation bias may have kicked in: when you see information you desperately want to be true, but that desire is so intense, it may be overriding the rational part of your brain.

2. Examine the questionable claim.

Rather than examining the source itself for clues to its validity, use the tools of the Internet to find out as much as you can about the claim and the source.

Mike Caulfield, a professor and director of blended and networked learning at Washington State University Vancouver, recommends a three-step process (http://hapgood.us/2017/03/04/how-news-literacy-gets-the-web-wrong):

1. Check for previous fact-checking work
2. Go upstream from the source
3. Read laterally

The quickest way to check on a questionable claim is to see if someone else had a similar suspicion and if they've already studied the issue. A quick web search asking if something you're not sure about is true may lead you to a fact-checking website that discusses the claim and the evidence. While this may not be sufficient to satisfy the whole question, you're in the midst of an ongoing discussion about the claim rather than isolated, trying to assess the claim only by looking at the original source.

By going "upstream," Caulfield means tracing the claim to its original source. If we can find the original source, we stand a better chance of understanding the origins of the claim.

For example, you may have heard a factoid floating around saying something like 65 percent of children will work in jobs that don't yet exist. Benjamin Doxtdator, a teacher and education

researcher, got curious about the origin of this claim, questioning its validity. After examining dozens of sources that made that claim or something similar, he found that the original idea of children stepping into a world of jobs that don't yet exist dates at least to the 1960s. The 65 percent figure is frequently cited as being from a source that doesn't actually contain that claim.

This is a factoid that circulates like an urban legend, sounding true enough that people don't question it (http://www.longviewoneducation.org/field-guide-jobs-dont-exist-yet).

But they should. Good writers question everything.

"Read laterally" means reading what other people say about the source of the claim. With the proliferation of digital media, it can be difficult to stay on top of every last source of information and be aware of any potential biases. Some sites are even specifically designed to be deceptive. Learn what you can about the site and the author making the claim in order to help assess the credibility. If you have a hard time finding lateral information about a source or author, that may tell you something important.

Ultimately, you're looking to surround the claim and be able to convey as much background about it as possible for the benefit of your audience. If the claim turns out to be true, you'll want to be convincing as to why it's true. If it's not true, you may need to tell your audience what is true.

3. Plan your case.

Your job is to report your findings. This involves informing your audience as to what you set out to do, and then walking them through what you did, and finishing with your conclusions. You will obviously be making claims of your own about the information you're checking, so you want to be very careful about tracking your own process. At every turn, the audience will be asking, "How do you know that?" Once you have answers ready for every

time they will be tempted to ask this question, you're ready to report.

4. Write your report.

Write a report that meets your audience's needs while attending to their attitudes and knowledge. The attitudes and knowledge may be especially important. In an era when long-standing mainstream journalistic outlets are sometimes criticized as "fake news," you may need to go as far as to explain why—even though they sometimes make mistakes—we believe these institutions to be trustworthy.

5. Test your report.

Give your report to an audience that may be unsure about the truth of the claim you're checking. If they're not already familiar with the claim, show (or explain) it to them before giving them your report.

Are they convinced by your report? If so, ask them what they found most persuasive. If not, what else do they need to know?

6. Revise, edit, polish report.

Revise your work until your audience finds it convincing.

Edit and polish it in case you have future need for it. If you believe you've done a good job, it may be worth putting it on the Internet so others who run across the same questionable information can benefit from your hard work.