



Battle of the Experts

Student Handout #6: **FactCheck.org's Guide to Testing Evidence**

1. Is the source highly regarded and widely accepted? There are a number of long-standing organizations we know we can count on for reliable unbiased information. For instance, for job statistics, the Bureau of Labor Statistics is every economist's basic source.
2. Is the source an advocate? Claims made by political parties, candidates, lobbying groups, salesmen and other advocates may be true but are usually self-serving and as a result may be misleading; they require special scrutiny. Always compare their information with other sources.
3. What is the source's track record? Look for previous experience.
4. What method is used? Good research will employ methods that are commonly accepted in the discipline. Many studies will have to rely on estimates; good studies will minimize those estimates and will, to the extent possible, draw on large, random samples of information in a uniform way.
5. Does the source "show its work"? Good researchers always explain how they arrived at their conclusions.
6. Is the sample random? News organizations and Web sites are fond of conducting "unscientific" polls. Viewers or visitors are asked to express a preference, and the results are reported. This is just a marketing method designed to draw interest; the results are utterly meaningless because the sample is self-selected, not random. Some such polls have been intentionally rigged.
7. Is there a control group? Good scientific procedure requires a "control" to provide a valid basis for comparison. For example, in tests of new drugs one group gets a placebo, with no active ingredients, to provide a point of comparison with the group that gets the actual drug.
8. Does the source have the requisite skill? A trained epidemiologist should be trusted more than a newspaper headline writer to evaluate whether a cluster of cancer cases was caused by something in the water or was just a statistical fluke.
9. Have the results been replicated or contradicted? Sometimes one study tells a story that isn't backed up by later research. Have the results been repeated in similar studies? Do other researchers agree, or do they come up with contrary findings?

Adapted from "FactCheck.org's Guide to Testing Evidence," in "unSpun," Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (New York: Random House, 2007), pp. 121-22.