

Lancaster Farming

Questions for Evaluating News Sources

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Basics

Does the story have a listed author and date?

Credible stories usually have these. Gauge whether information is still current. A story that has been superseded can still indicate the state of public opinion, a developing situation or scientific thinking at the time of publication.

Is the headline sensational?

A story with a straightforward headline may indicate the story has a more neutral tone than a headline intended to stir emotion.

Does the content of the story match the headline?

If not, or if the headline oversells the content of the story, it may be clickbait.

Were the images generated by artificial intelligence?

Mainstream news outlets do not use AI-generated images (or images that have been digitally altered, such as by erasing someone) since they do not depict how something actually happened.

How does this square with what other news or information sources say?

Finding other information sources that corroborate the material in the story can increase your confidence that the article is trustworthy.

Sources

Does the story cite sources? Are these sources credible?

Mainstream news outlets cite government officials, business groups, researchers and people who are connected to the situation. A credible news story will clearly indicate where its information came from. A lack of clear sources is a red flag.

Do links in the story back up what the story says?

A story could contain links to government websites, other news stories, documents, or academic literature. An article loses credibility if it portrays the linked sources misleadingly.

Does the story acknowledge what is not known?

If the story is about an emergency, a scientific research question or historical events, the desired information may not all be immediately (or ever) available. Credible articles acknowledge what is unknown instead of speculating.

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Balance

Does the story provide the viewpoints of the various sides?

News stories are generally designed to present competing viewpoints on a topic. The inclusion of a particular viewpoint does not mean the reporter agrees with that perspective; it's simply an opinion that is relevant to the topic.

Not every story calls for counterpoint. A story about people liking apples does not need to include comments from someone who hates fruit. Balance also does not mean giving equal weight to absolutely every viewpoint. In a story about algae on a local pond, a reporter will likely not publish a claim that the problem was caused by aliens.

Does the story seem to take one side or the other?

While some information sources are partisan, news stories are generally intended to be neutral. Even so, a news story may also focus on one group or person to make the story interesting or relatable.

A story may concentrate on one side of an issue without taking that side. For example, a story could focus on residents' complaints that ducks are taking over the local park, but the reporter might also include the perspective of someone who likes having so many ducks at the park.

What type of language is used in the story?

Consider the two sentences below. Both describe the same situation, but one uses biased language, and the other is neutral.

The stupid principal unwisely decreed the lunch period would be slashed, but students heroically fought back and overturned this injustice.

The principal reversed a plan to shorten the lunch period by 10 minutes after 100 students signed a petition against it.

Is opinion content clearly labeled?

News outlets routinely publish columns, opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and book or movie reviews that present the perspective of one person or organization. These should be clearly labeled as opinion content so they are easily distinguished from regular news coverage, which takes no position on an issue. News stories labeled as "analysis" provide a bird's-eye view of a current event, providing context and possibly some interpretation by the reporter.

These guidelines are framed with newspaper stories in mind, but the same general principles can be used to evaluate any source of information — books, broadcast news, social media, even personal conversations.