Raymond James Merrill was the brother of an acquaintance of one of your authors. In his mid-fifties, Merrill still cut a striking figure—tall and lean, with chiseled features, a bushy mustache, and a mane of blond hair. But he had been in a funk. He had broken up with his girlfriend, and he did not want to be alone. Then a website that featured “Latin singles” led him to Regina Rachid, an attractive woman with a seductive smile who lived in San Jose dos Campos, a city in southern Brazil, and suddenly Merrill was in love. Desperately so, it seems. He believed everything Rachid told him and was credulous enough to make three trips to Brazil to be with her, to give her thousands of dollars in cash, and to buy her a $20,000 automobile. He even refused to blame her when thousands of dollars in unexplained charges turned up on his credit card account. Sadly, Rachid was more interested in Merrill’s money than in his affection, and when he went to Brazil the third time, to get married and, he believed, begin a new life, he disappeared. The story ended tragically: Merrill’s strangled and burned body was found in an isolated spot several miles out of town. Rachid and two accomplices are now in jail for the crime, and two accessories are under investigation.
as we write this.* The moral of the story: It can be a horrible mistake to let our needs and desires overwhelm our critical abilities when we are not sure with whom or with what we’re dealing. Our focus in this chapter is on how to determine when a claim or a source of a claim is credible enough to warrant belief.

A second story, less dramatic but much more common, is about a friend of ours named Dave, who not long ago received an email from Citibank. It notified him that there might be a problem with his credit card account and asked him to visit the bank’s website to straighten things out. (These notices often include a threat that if you fail to respond, your account may be closed.) A link was provided to the website. When he visited the site, he was asked to confirm details of his personal information, including account numbers, Social Security number, and his mother’s maiden name. The website looked exactly like the Citibank website he had visited before, with the bank’s logo and other authentic-appearing details. But very shortly after this episode, he discovered that his card had paid for a plasma television, a home theater set, and a couple of expensive car stereos, none of which he had ordered or received.

Dave was a victim of “phishing,” a ploy to identify victims for identity theft and credit card fraud. As this edition goes to press, the number of phishing

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**Real Life**

**The Nigerian Advance Fee 4-1-9 Fraud:**

The Internet’s Longest-Running Scam Is Still Running Strong

If you have an email account, chances are you’ve received an offer from someone in Nigeria, probably claiming to be a Nigerian civil servant, who is looking for someone just like you who has a bank account to which several millions of dollars can be sent—money that results from “overinvoicing” or “double invoicing” oil purchases or otherwise needs laundering outside the country. You will receive a generous percentage of the money for your assistance, but you will have to help a bit at the outset by sending some amount of money to facilitate the transactions, or to show your good faith!

This scam, sometimes called “4-1-9 Fraud,” after the relevant section of Nigeria’s criminal code, is now celebrating more than a quarter century of existence. (It operated by telephone and FAX before the web was up and running.) Its variations are creative and numerous. Critical thinkers immediately recognize the failure of credibility such offers have, but thousands of people have not, and from a lack of critical thinking skills or from simple greed, hundreds of millions of dollars have been lost to the perpetrators of this fraud.

To read more about this scam, check out these websites: <http://www.secretservice.gov/alert419.shtml> and <http://home.rica.net/alphae/419coal/>.

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*The whole story can be found at www.justice4raymond.org.
scams continues to rise, with millions of people receiving phony emails alleging to be from eBay, PayPal, and other Internet companies as well as an assortment of banks and credit card companies. Some of these phishing expeditions threaten to suspend or close the individual’s account if no response is made. Needless to say, a person should give no credibility to an email that purports to be from a bank or other company and asks for personal identifying information via email or a website.

There are two grounds for suspicion in cases where credibility is the issue. The first ground is the claim itself. Dave should have asked himself just how likely it is that Citibank would notify him of a problem with his account by email and would ask him for his personal, identifying information. (Hint: No bank will approach its customers for such information by email or telephone.) The second ground for suspicion is the source of the claim. In this case, Dave believed the source was legitimate. But here’s the point, one that critical thinkers are well aware of these days: On the Internet, whether by website or email, the average person has no idea where the stuff on the computer screen comes from. Computer experts have methods that can sometimes identify the source of an email, but most of us are very easy to mislead.

Dave is no dummy; being fooled by such scams is not a sign of a lack of intelligence. His concern that his account might be suspended caused him to overlook the ominous possibility that the original request might be a fake. In other cases, such as the one described in the “4-1-9 Fraud” box, it may be wishful thinking or a touch of simple greed that causes a person to lower his or her credibility guard.

Every time we revise and update this book, we feel obliged to make our warnings about Internet fraud more severe. And every year we seem to be borne out by events. The level of theft, fraud, duplicity, and plain old vandalism seems to rise like a constant tide. We’ll have some suggestions for keeping yourself, your records, and your money safe later in the chapter. For now, just remember that you need your critical thinking lights on whenever you open your browser.

THE CLAIM AND ITS SOURCE

As indicated in the phishing story, there are two arenas in which we assess credibility: the first is that of claims themselves; the second is the claims’ sources. If we’re told that ducks can communicate by quacking in Morse code, we dismiss the claim immediately. Such claims lack credibility no matter where they come from. (They have no initial plausibility, a notion that will be explained later.) But the claim that ducks mate for life is not at all outrageous; it might be true: it’s a credible claim. Whether we should believe it depends on its source; if we read it in a bird book or hear it from a bird expert, we are much more likely to believe it than if we hear it from our editor, for example.

There are degrees of credibility and incredibility; they are not all-or-nothing kinds of things, whether we’re talking about claims or sources. Consider the claim that the president of the United States has been hypnotized and is acting completely under the spell of wizards who are hiding in warehouses in suburban Washington, D.C. This truly requires a stretch of the imagination; it is very unlikely. But, however unlikely, it is still more credible than the claim that the president is not human at all but a robot constructed and controlled by aliens from another galaxy. Sources (i.e., people) vary in their credibility
just as do the claims they offer. If the next-door neighbor you’ve always liked is arrested for bank robbery, his denials will probably seem credible to you. But he loses credibility if it turns out he owns a silencer and a .45 automatic with the serial numbers removed. Similarly, a knowledgeable friend who tells us about an investment opportunity has a bit more credibility if we learn he has invested his own money in the idea. (At least we could be assured he believed the information himself.) On the other hand, he has less credibility if we learn he will make a substantial commission from our investment in it.

So, there are always two questions to be asked about a claim with which we’re presented. First, when does a claim itself lack credibility—that is, when does its content present a credibility problem? Second, when does the source of a claim lack credibility?

We’ll turn next to the first of these questions, which deals with what a claim actually says. The general answer is

A claim lacks inherent credibility to the extent that it conflicts with what we have observed or what we think we know—our background information—or with other credible claims.

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**In the Media**

**Guaranteeing an Interested Party, or the Fox Audits the Henhouse**

In 2005, an audit program was established by the federal government to root out fraud and waste in the Medicare program. An Atlanta-based auditing firm, PRG-Schultz, was given the job of reviewing Medicare records and searching for mistakes and overcharges in three states. So far, so good.

But the way the program was set up, the auditors were paid only when they found such mistakes and overcharges—they kept a commission of 25 to 30 cents for every dollar determined to be in error. Naturally, this makes the firm a very interested party, since the more fraud and waste it finds, the more money it makes.

As a critical thinker might expect, PRG-Schultz found lots of fraud and waste; they had rejected more than $105 million in Medicare claims by September 2006 and millions more by the time the program came under review by an administrative law judge. As a critical thinker might expect, many of the rejected charges were reversed on appeal; they were found to be legitimate after all.

Remember, putting an interested party in charge of making decisions is an invitation to error—or worse. That’s why the expression “Don’t put the fox in charge of the henhouse” is an important warning.

P.S. Because of the way the law was originally implemented, PRG-Schultz will be allowed to keep the money it received in commissions even though its decisions in many cases were reversed. The fox got away with this one.

Just what this answer means will be explained in the section that follows. After that, we’ll turn our attention to the second question we asked earlier, about the credibility of sources.

**ASSESSING THE CONTENT OF THE CLAIM**

So, some claims stand up on their own; they tend to be acceptable regardless of from whom we hear them. But when they fail on their own, as we’ve said, it’s because they come into conflict either with our own observations or with what we call our “background knowledge.” We’ll discuss each of these in turn.

**Does the Claim Conflict with Our Personal Observations?**

Our own observations provide our most reliable source of information about the world. It is therefore only reasonable to be suspicious of any claim that comes into conflict with what we’ve observed. Imagine that Moore has just come from the home of Mr. Marquis, a mutual friend of his and Parker’s, and has seen his new red Mini Cooper automobile. He meets Parker, who tells him, “I heard that Marquis has bought a new Mini Cooper, a bright blue one.” Moore does not need critical thinking training to reject Parker’s claim about the color of the car, because of the obvious conflict with his earlier observation.

**In the Media**

**Incredible Claims!**

We’ve had a lot of fun with lunatic headlines from supermarket tabloids in past editions. Here is this edition of “Run for Your Life” headlines:

- **Demons Made Jessee Cheat on Sandra!**
  “Possibly the same ones that got hold of Tiger Woods,” says seer.

- **How to Tell if You’ve Been Abducted by Aliens**
  Memory loss, other symptoms can tell for sure, according to Dr. Brad Steiger.

- **Elvis Alive and Working in Vegas as Elvis Impersonator**
  He’s better at it than most of them, reviews say.

- **Beer Can Prevent Prostate Cancer**
  Very few career drinkers die of it, say medicos.

- **Nebraska Doesn’t Exist, Says Author**
  Admission process was botched, according to historian.

We don’t have to make these up.
But observations and short-term memory are far from infallible, or professional dancer Douglas Hall would not have been awarded $450,000 in damages by a New York jury in January 2005.* It seems Dr. Vincent Feldman, twenty minutes after having placed a large “X” on the dancer’s right knee, where the latter had complained of pain, sliced open the patient’s left knee, which had been perfectly healthy up until that moment, and effectively ended his dancing career in the process. Although he had just seen where he was to operate and had marked the spot, he nonetheless managed to confuse the location and the result may have put a serious wrinkle in his own career as well as that of the dancer.

All kinds of factors influence our observations and our recollections of them, and Dr. Feldman may have been affected by one or more of them: tiredness, distraction, worry about an unrelated matter, or emotional upset could easily account for such mistakes. There are also physical conditions that often affect our observations: bad lighting, lots of noise, the speed of events, and more. We are also sometimes prey to measuring instruments that are inexact, temperamental, or inaccurate. Parker once blew out a tire at high speed as a result of a faulty tire-pressure gauge.

It’s also important to remember that people are not all created equal when it comes to making observations. We hate to say it, dear reader, but there are lots of people who see better, hear better, and remember better than you. Of course, that goes for us as well.

Our beliefs, hopes, fears, and expectations affect our observations. Tell someone that a house is infested with rats, and he is likely to believe he sees evidence of rats. Inform someone who believes in ghosts that a house is haunted, and she may well believe she sees evidence of ghosts. At séances staged by the Society for Psychical Research to test the observational powers of people under séance conditions, some observers insist that they see numerous phenomena that simply do not exist. Teachers who are told that the students in a particular class are brighter than usual are very likely to believe that the work those students produce is better than average, even when it is not.

In Chapter 6, we cover a fallacy (a fallacy is a mistake in reasoning) called wishful thinking, which occurs when we allow hopes and desires to influence our judgment and color our beliefs. Most of the people who fall for the 4-1-9 Fraud Internet scam (see box, p. 105) are almost surely victims of wishful thinking. It is very unlikely that somebody, somewhere, wants to send you millions of dollars just because you have a bank account and that the money they ask for really is just to facilitate the transaction. The most gullible victim, with no stake in the matter, would probably realize this. But the idea of getting one’s hands on a great pile of money can blind a person to even the most obvious facts.

Our personal interests and biases affect our perceptions and the judgments we base on them. We overlook many of the mean and selfish actions of the people we like or love—and when we are infatuated with someone, everything that person does seems wonderful. By contrast, people we detest can hardly do anything that we don’t perceive as mean and selfish. If we desperately wish for the success of a project, we are apt to see more evidence for that success than is actually present. On the other hand, if we wish for a project to fail, we are apt to exaggerate flaws that we see in it or imagine flaws that are not there at all. If a job, chore, or decision is one that we wish to avoid, we tend to draw worst-case implications from it and thus come up with reasons for not doing it. However, if we are predisposed to want to do the job or make the decision, we are more likely to focus on whatever positive consequences it might have.

Finally, as we hinted above, the reliability of our observations is no better than the reliability of our memories, except in those cases where we have the means at our disposal to record our observations. And memory, as most of us know, can be deceptive. Critical thinkers are always alert to the possibility that what they remember having observed may not be what they did observe.

But even though firsthand observations are not infallible, they are still the best source of information we have. Any report that conflicts with our own direct observations is subject to serious doubt.
Does the Claim Conflict with Our Background Information?

Reports must always be evaluated against our background information—that immense body of justified beliefs that consists of facts we learn from our own direct observations and facts we learn from others. Such information is “background” because we may not be able to specify where we learned it, unlike something we know because we witnessed it this morning. Much of our background information is well confirmed by a variety of sources. Reports that conflict with this store of information are usually quite properly dismissed, even if we cannot disprove them through direct observation. We immediately reject the claim “Palm trees grow in abundance near the North Pole,” even though we are not in a position to confirm or disprove the statement by direct observation.

Indeed, this is an example of how we usually treat claims when we first encounter them: We begin by assigning them a certain initial plausibility, a rough assessment of how credible a claim seems to us. This assessment depends on how consistent the claim is with our background information—how well it “fits” with that information. If it fits very well, we give the claim some reasonable degree of initial plausibility—there is a reasonable expectation of its being true. If, however, the claim conflicts with our background information, we give it low initial plausibility and lean toward rejecting it unless very strong evidence can be produced on its behalf. The claim “More guitars were sold in the United States last year than saxophones” fits very well with the background information most of us share, and we would hardly require detailed evidence before accepting it. However, the claim “Charlie’s eighty-seven-year-old grandmother swam across Lake Michigan in the

In Depth

Incredible but True

Believe it or not, these two tables are identical in both size and shape. You’ll probably have to check with a ruler or other straight edge to believe this; we did. The illusion was designed by Roger Shepard (1990). (Reproduced with permission of W. H. Freeman and Company.) This illusion shows how easily our observations can be mistaken—in this case, simply because of perspective. As indicated in the text, many other factors can influence what we think we see.

There are three types of men in the world. One type learns from books. One type learns from observation. And one type just has to urinate on the electric fence.

—Dr. Laura Schlessinger
(reported by Larry Englemann)
The authority of experience.
middle of winter” cannot command much initial plausibility because of the obvious way it conflicts with our background information about eighty-seven-year-old people, about Lake Michigan, about swimming in cold water, and so on. In fact, short of observing the swim ourselves, it isn’t clear just what could persuade us to accept such a claim. And even then, we should consider the likelihood that we’re being tricked or fooled by an illusion.

Obviously, not every oddball claim is as outrageous as the one about Charlie’s grandmother. Recently, we read a report about a house being stolen in Lindale, Texas—a brick house. This certainly is implausible—how could anyone steal a home? Yet there is credible documentation that it happened,* and even stranger things occasionally turn out to be true. That, of course, means that it can be worthwhile to check out implausible claims if their being true might be of benefit to you.

Unfortunately, there are no neat formulas that can resolve conflicts between what you already believe and new information. Your job as a critical thinker is to trust your background information when considering claims that conflict with that information—that is, claims with low initial plausibility—

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Real Life

Do Your Ears Stick Straight Out?

According to Bill Cordingley, an expert in psychographicology—that’s face-reading, in case you didn’t know (and we certainly didn’t)—a person’s facial features reveal “the whole rainbow collection” of a person’s needs and abilities. Mr. Cordingley (In Your Face: What Facial Features Reveal About People You Know and Love) doesn’t mean merely that you can infer moods from smiles and frowns. No, he means that your basic personality traits are readable from facial structures you were born with.

Do your ears stick out? That means you have a need to perform in public. The more they stick out, the greater the need. Other features are said to reliably predict features of your personality. It appears that President Obama is fortunate in that he (and his ears) have lots of opportunities to appear in public.

Is there any reason to believe facial features can tell us such things about people? We think not. The fact that Cordingley was once mayor of San Anselmo, California, adds no credibility to the claim.

but at the same time to keep an open mind and realize that further information may cause you to give up a claim you had thought was true. It’s a difficult balance, but it’s worth getting right. For example, let’s say you’ve been suffering from headaches and have tried all the usual methods of relief: aspirin, antihistamines, whatever your physician has recommended, and so on. Finally, a friend tells you that she had headaches that were very similar to yours, and nothing worked for her, either, until she had an aromatherapy treatment. Then, just a few minutes into her aromatherapy session, her headaches went away. Now, we (Moore and Parker) are not much inclined to believe that smelling oils will make your headache disappear, but we think there is little to lose and at least a small possibility of something substantial to be gained by giving the treatment a try. It may be, for example, that the treatment relaxes a person and relieves tension, which can cause headaches. We wouldn’t go into it with great expectations, however.

The point is that there is a scale of initial plausibility ranging from quite plausible to only slightly so. Our aromatherapy example would fall somewhere between the plausible (and in fact true) claim that Parker went to high school with Bill Clinton and the rather implausible claim that Paris Hilton has a Ph.D. in physics.

As mentioned, background information is essential to adequately assess a claim. It is pretty difficult to evaluate a report if you have no background information relating to the topic. This means the broader your background information, the more likely you are to be able to evaluate any given report effectively. You’d have to know a little economics to evaluate assertions about the dangers of a large federal deficit, and knowing how Social Security works can help you know what’s misleading about calling it a savings account. Read widely, converse freely, and develop an inquiring attitude; there’s no substitute for broad, general knowledge.
1. The text points out that physical conditions around us can affect our observations. List at least four such conditions.

2. Our own mental state can affect our observations as well. Describe at least three of the ways this can happen, as mentioned in the text.

3. According to the text, there are two ways credibility should enter into our evaluation of a claim. What are they?

4. A claim lacks inherent credibility, according to the text, when it conflicts with what?

5. Our most reliable source of information about the world is _________.

6. The reliability of our observations is not better than the reliability of _________.

**Exercise 4-2**

In your judgment, are any of these claims less credible than others? Discuss your opinions with others in the class to see if any interesting differences in background information emerge.

1. They've taught crows how to play poker.
2. The center of Earth consists of water.
3. Ray Charles was just faking his blindness.
4. The car manufacturers already can build cars that get more than 100 miles per gallon; they just won't do it because they're in cahoots with the oil industry.
5. If you force yourself to go for five days and nights without any sleep, you'll be able to get by on less than five hours of sleep a night for the rest of your life.
6. It is possible to read other people’s minds through mental telepathy.
7. A diet of mushrooms and pecans supplies all necessary nutrients and will help you lose weight. Scientists don’t understand why.
8. Somewhere on the planet is a person who looks exactly like you.
9. The combined wealth of the world's 225 richest people equals the total annual income of the poorest 2.5 billion people, which is nearly half the world's total population.
10. George W. Bush arranged to have the World Trade Center attacked so he could invade Afghanistan. He wanted to build an oil pipeline across Afghanistan.
11. Daddy longlegs are the world's most poisonous spider, but their mouths are too small to bite.
12. Static electricity from your body can cause your gas tank to explode if you slide across your seat while fueling and then touch the gas nozzle.
13. Japanese scientists have created a device that measures the tone of a dog's bark to determine what the dog's mood is.
14. Barack Obama (a) is a socialist, (b) is a Muslim, (c) was not born in the United States.
THE CREDIBILITY OF SOURCES

We turn now from the credibility of claims themselves to the credibility of the sources from which we get them. We are automatically suspicious of certain sources of information. (If you were getting a divorce, you wouldn’t ordinarily turn to your spouse’s attorney for advice.) We’ll look at several factors that should influence how much credence we give to a source.

Interested Parties

We’ll begin with a very important general rule for deciding whom to trust. Our rule makes use of two correlative concepts, interested parties and disinterested parties:

A person who stands to gain from our belief in a claim is known as an interested party, and interested parties must be viewed with much more suspicion than disinterested parties, who have no stake in our belief one way or another.

Real Life

Not All That Glitters

Since the U.S. dollar began to decline seriously in about 2004, quite a few financial “experts” have claimed that gold is one of the few ways to protect one’s wealth and provide a hedge against inflation. Some of the arguments they make contain some good sense, but it’s worth pointing out that many of the people advocating the purchase of gold turn out to be brokers of precious metals themselves, or are hired by such brokers to sell their product. As we emphasize in the text: Always beware of interested parties!
It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this rule—in fact, if you were to learn only one thing from this book, this might be the best candidate. Of course, not all interested parties are out to hoodwink us, and certainly not all disinterested parties have good information. But, all things considered, the rule of trusting the latter before the former is a crucially important weapon in the critical thinking armory.

We’ll return to this topic later, both in the text and in some exercises.

**Physical and Other Characteristics**

The feature of being an interested or disinterested party is highly relevant to whether he, she, it, or they should be trusted. Unfortunately, we often base our judgments on irrelevant considerations. Physical characteristics, for example, tell us little about a person’s credibility or its lack. Does a person look you in the eye? Does he perspire a lot? Does he have a nervous laugh? Despite being generally worthless in this regard, such characteristics are widely used in siz-

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**Real Life**

**Whom Do You Trust?**

As mentioned in the text, we often make too much of outward appearances when it comes to believing what someone tells us. Would you be more inclined to believe one of these individuals than the other? As a matter of fact, we can think of at least as many reasons for the man on the left telling us something that isn’t true as for the man on the right.
ing up a person’s credibility. Simply being taller, louder, and more assertive can enhance a person’s credibility, according to a recent study.* A practiced con artist can imitate a confident teller of the truth, just as an experienced hacker can cobble up a genuine-appearing website. (“Con,” after all, is short for “confidence.”)

Other irrelevant features we sometimes use to judge a person’s credibility include gender, age, ethnicity, accent, and mannerisms. People also make credibility judgments on the basis of the clothes a person wears. A friend told one of us that one’s sunglasses “make a statement”; maybe so, but that statement doesn't say much about credibility. A person's occupation certainly bears a relationship to his or her knowledge or abilities, but as a guide to moral character or truthfulness, it is less reliable.

Which considerations are relevant to judging someone’s credibility? We shall get to these in a moment, but appearance isn’t one of them. You may have the idea that you can size up a person just by looking into his or her eyes. This is a mistake. Just by looking at someone, we cannot ascertain that person’s truthfulness, knowledge, or character. (Although this is generally true, there are exceptions. See the “Fib Wizards” box on page 113.)

Of course, we sometimes get in trouble even when we accept credible claims from credible sources. Many of us rely, for example, on credible advice from qualified and honest professionals in preparing our tax returns. But qualified and honest professionals can make honest mistakes, and we can suffer the consequences. In general, however, trouble is much more likely if we accept either doubtful claims from credible sources or credible claims from doubtful sources (not to mention doubtful claims from doubtful sources). If a mechanic says we need a new transmission, the claim itself may not be suspicious—maybe the car we drive has many miles on it; maybe we neglected routine maintenance; maybe it isn’t shifting smoothly. But remember that the mechanic is an interested party; if there’s any reason to suspect he would exaggerate the problem to get work for himself, we’d get a second opinion about our transmission.

One of your authors currently has an automobile that the local dealership once diagnosed as having an oil leak. Because of the complexity of the repair, the cost was almost a thousand dollars. Because he’d not seen any oil on his garage floor, your cautious author decided to wait and see how serious the problem was. Well, a year after the “problem” was diagnosed, there was still no oil on the garage floor, and the car used less than half a quart of oil, about what one would have expected to add during the course of a year. What to conclude? The service department at the dealership is an interested party. If they convince your author that the oil leak is serious, they make almost a thousand dollars. This makes it worth a second opinion, or, in this case, one’s own investigation. We now believe his car will never need this thousand-dollar repair.

Remember: Interested parties are less credible than other sources of claims.

*I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. We had a very good dialogue. I was able to sense his soul.

—George W. Bush, commenting on his first meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin

By the end of 2007, Bush had changed his mind about Putin, seeing him as a threat to democracy. So much for the “blink” method of judging credibility.
Expertise

Much of our information comes from people about whom we have no reason to suspect prejudice, bias, or any of the other features that make interested parties such bad sources. However, we might still doubt a source’s actual knowledge of an issue in question. The state of a person’s knowledge depends on a number of factors, especially that person’s level of expertise and experience, either direct (through personal observation) or indirect (through study), with the subject at hand.

Just as you generally cannot tell merely by looking at someone whether he or she is speaking truthfully, objectively, and accurately, you can’t judge his or her knowledge or expertise by looking at surface features. A British-sounding scientist may appear more knowledgeable than a scientist who speaks, say, with a Texas drawl, but his or her accent, height, gender, ethnicity, or clothing doesn’t have much to do with a person’s knowledge. In the municipal park in our town, it can be difficult to distinguish the people who teach at the university from the people who live in the park, based on physical appearance.

So, then, how do you judge a person’s expertise? Education and experience are often the most important factors, followed by accomplishments, reputation, and position, in no particular order. It is not always easy to evaluate the credentials of an expert, and credentials vary considerably from one field to another. Still, there are some useful guidelines worth mentioning.

Education includes, but is not strictly limited to, formal education—the possession of degrees from established institutions of learning. (Some “doctors” of this and that received their diplomas from mail-order houses that advertise on matchbook covers. The title “doctor” is not automatically a qualification.)

Experience—both the kind and the amount—is an important factor in expertise. Experience is important if it is relevant to the issue at hand, but the mere fact that someone has been on the job for a long time does not automatically make him or her good at it.

Real Life

War-Making Policies and Interested Parties

In the 1960s, the secretary of defense supplied carefully selected information to President Lyndon Johnson and to the Congress. Would the Congress have passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which authorized the beginning of the Vietnam War, if its members had known that the secretary of defense was determined to begin hostilities there? We don’t know, but certainly they and the president should have been more suspicious if they had known this fact. Would President Bush and his administration have been so anxious to make war on Iraq if they had known that Ahmad Chalabi, one of their main sources of information about that country and its ruler, Saddam Hussein, was a very interested party? (He hoped to be the next ruler of Iraq if Hussein were overthrown, and much of his information turned out to be false or exaggerated.) We don’t know that either, of course. But it’s possible that more suspicion of interested parties may have slowed our commencement of two costly wars.
Accomplishments are an important indicator of someone’s expertise but, once again, only when those accomplishments are directly related to the question at hand. A Nobel Prize winner in physics is not necessarily qualified to speak publicly about toy safety, public school education (even in science), or nuclear proliferation. The last issue may involve physics, it’s true, but the political issues are the crucial ones, and they are not taught in physics labs.

A person’s reputation is obviously very important as a criterion of his or her expertise. But reputations must be seen in a context; how much importance we should attach to somebody’s reputation depends on the people among whom the person has that reputation. You may have a strong reputation as a pool player among the denizens of your local pool hall, but that doesn’t necessarily put you in the same league with Allison Fisher. Among a group of people who know nothing about investments, someone who knows the difference between a 401[k] plan and a Roth IRA may seem like quite an expert. But you certainly wouldn’t want to take investment advice from somebody simply on that basis.

Most of us have met people who were recommended as experts in some field but who turned out to know little more about that field than we ourselves knew. (Presumably, in such cases those doing the recommending knew even less about the subject, or they would not have been so quickly impressed.) By and large, the kind of reputation that counts most is the one a person has among other experts in his or her field of endeavor.

The positions people hold provide an indication of how well somebody thinks of them. The director of an important scientific laboratory, the head of an academic department at Harvard, the author of a work consulted by other experts—in each case the position itself is substantial evidence that the individual’s opinion on a relevant subject warrants serious attention.

But expertise can be bought. Our earlier discussion of interested parties applies to people who possess real expertise on a topic as well as to the rest of us. Sometimes a person’s position is an indication of what his or her opinion, expert or not, is likely to be. The opinion of a lawyer retained by the National Rifle Association, offered at a hearing on firearms and urban violence, should be scrutinized much more carefully (or at least viewed with more skepticism) than that of a witness from an independent firm or agency that has no stake in the outcome of the hearings. The former can be assumed to be an interested party, the latter not. It is too easy to lose objectivity where one’s interests and concerns are at stake, even if one is trying to be objective.

Experts sometimes disagree, especially when the issue is complicated and many different interests are at stake. In these cases, a critical thinker is obliged to suspend judgment about which expert to endorse, unless one expert clearly represents a majority viewpoint among experts in the field or unless one expert can be established as more authoritative or less biased than the others.

Of course, majority opinions sometimes turn out to be incorrect, and even the most authoritative experts occasionally make mistakes. For example, various economics experts predicted good times ahead just before the Great Depression. The same was true for many advisors right up until the 2008 financial meltdown. Jim Denny, the manager of the Grand Ole Opry, fired Elvis Presley after one performance, stating that Presley wasn’t going anywhere and ought to go back to driving a truck. A claim you accept because it represents the majority viewpoint or comes from the most authoritative expert may turn out to be thoroughly wrong. Nevertheless, take heart: At the time, you were
rationally justified in accepting the majority viewpoint as the most authoritative claim. The reasonable position is the one that agrees with the most authoritative opinion but allows for enough open-mindedness to change if the evidence changes.

Finally, we sometimes make the mistake of thinking that whatever qualifies someone as an expert in one field automatically qualifies that person in other areas. Being a top-notch programmer, for example, surely would not be an indication of top-notch management skills. Indeed, many programmers get good at what they do by shying away from dealing with other people—or so

Real Life

Smoking and Not Paying Attention Can Be Deadly

David Pawlik called the fire department in Cleburne, Texas, in July to ask if the “blue flames” he and his wife were seeing every time she lit a cigarette were dangerous, and an inspector said he would be right over and for Mrs. Pawlik not to light another cigarette. However, anxious about the imminent inspection, she lit up and was killed in the subsequent explosion. (The home was all electric, but there had been a natural gas leak underneath the yard.)

—Fort Worth Star Telegram, July 11, 2007

News of the Weird <http://groups.google.com/group/NewsoftheWeird/>

Sometimes it is crucial that you take the word of an expert.
the stereotype runs. Being a good campaigner does not always translate into being a good office-holder, as anyone who observes politics knows. Even if the intelligence and skill required to become an expert in one field could enable someone to become an expert in any field—which is doubtful—having the ability to become an expert is not the same as actually being an expert. Claims put forth by experts about subjects outside their fields are not automatically more acceptable than claims put forth by nonexperts.

List as many irrelevant factors as you can think of that people often mistake for signs of a person’s truthfulness (for example, the firmness of a handshake).

List as many irrelevant factors as you can think of that people often mistake for signs of expertise on the part of an individual (for example, appearing self-confident).

Expertise doesn’t transfer automatically from one field to another: Being an expert in one area does not automatically qualify a person as an expert (or even as competent) in other areas. Is it the same with dishonesty? Many people think dishonesty does transfer, that being dishonest in one area automatically discredits that person in all areas. For example, when Bill Clinton lied about having sexual encounters with his intern, some said he couldn’t be trusted about anything.

If someone is known to have been dishonest about one thing, should we automatically be suspicious of his or her honesty regarding other things? Discuss.

1. In a sentence, describe the crucial difference between an interested party and a disinterested party.
2. Which of the two parties mentioned in item 1 should generally be considered more trustworthy? Why?
7. a friend who used to own a Panasonic and now owns an LG
8. a salesperson at a store that sells both Panasonic and LG

CREDIBILITY AND THE NEWS MEDIA

You may have heard that newspapers and the print media in general have fallen on hard times in recent years. It’s true: many newspapers are in bankruptcy, with advertising revenue falling 23 percent between 2006 and 2009 and one out of five newspaper journalists losing their jobs between 2001 and 2009.* Much of the losses in both the print media and in broadcast television have been the result of more and more people turning to the Internet for their news and information. During 2008, consumption of news on the Internet increased by some 19 percent, and it has no doubt expanded hugely since. Strangely enough, though, as more and more people turn to the web for news, they give it very low marks for credibility. On the other hand, according to the Pew Project report for 2009, leading newspapers and television news operations had stable credibility ratings during the past presidential election year. However, the ratings held stable at a level that was already pretty low. When evaluating seven print media sources, an average of only 19 percent of those polled said they “believe all or most” of what they read. CNN, which topped the list in believability among television sources, came in at only 30 percent. Why is the level of confidence in our media so low? Let’s look at some likely factors.

Consolidation of Media Ownership

Although it is not well known to most citizens, one reason the quality of news available has decreased is that the media have become controlled by fewer and fewer corporations, the result of many mergers and buyouts over the past three or so decades. Since 2001, when the Federal Communications Commission loosened the regulations regarding ownership of newspapers, radio stations, and television stations, the concentration of media in fewer and fewer hands has been accelerating. From thousands of independent media outlets in the mid-twentieth century, media ownership dropped to only fifty companies by 1983. By late 2004, approximately 90 percent of all media companies in the United States were controlled by just five companies: Time Warner (Warner Bros., Time, Inc., HBO, CNN, etc.), Disney (ABC, ESPN, Miramax Films, etc.), News Corp. (Fox Television, Wall Street Journal, New York Post, etc.), General Electric (NBC, Universal Studios, A & E Television, etc.), and Viacom (Paramount Pictures, MTV, Comedy Central, etc.). The subsidiaries listed in parentheses are only a tiny portion of these companies’ holdings. No matter what you see on television, the great likelihood is that one or more of these companies had a hand in producing it or getting it onto your screen. The fewer hands that control the media, the easier it is for the news we get to be “managed”—either by the owners themselves or by their commercial advertisers or even, as we’ll next see, by the government.

*The State of the News Media, the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009, a biennial report, from which we draw heavily in this section.
Government Management of the News

For a while there, our only known source of fake news was Jon Stewart on The Daily Show. But the federal government got into the fake news business as well. In recent years, a number of fake news reports, paid for by the government, have appeared on television touting the virtues of government schemes from the prescription drug program to airport safety to education programs. No criticism of the programs was included, and no mention was made that these were not legitimate independent news reports but rather were produced by the very same governmental departments that produced the policies in question.

These practices provide material for stations that cannot afford to produce a full plate of news themselves, which includes many, many stations across the country. Unfortunately, many viewers accept as news what is essentially official propaganda.

Leaving aside news reporting, problems also crop up on the op-ed page. Opinion and editorial pages and television commentaries are usually presumed to present the opinions of the writers or speakers who write or speak in them. But, as it turned out, some of those are bought and paid for as well. Our favorite example turned up in 2005: Syndicated columnist Michael McManus was paid $10,000 by the Department of Health and Human Services for writing positively about one of its programs. Ironically enough, his column is entitled “Ethics and Religion.”

The military has its own methods for managing the media, from not allowing photographs to be taken of the coffins of slain American soldiers when they are sent home from Iraq to the more elaborately produced example seen in the box on p. 125, “Saving Private Lynch.” Sometimes management takes the form of simple suppression of news, as when it took a whistle-blower to finally make public the video of a 2007 helicopter attack that killed a news photographer, his driver, and several others.
Bias Within the Media

It is commonly said that the media is biased politically. Conservatives are convinced that it has a liberal bias and liberals are convinced the bias favors conservatives.

The usual basis for the conservative assessment is that, generally speaking, reporters and editors are more liberal than the general population. Indeed, several polls have indicated that this is the case. On the other hand, the publishers and owners of media outlets tend to be conservative—not surprisingly, since they have an orientation that places a higher value on the bottom line: They are in business to make a profit. A book by Eric Alterman* argues

In the Media

Jumping to Conclusions in the News

On March 29, 2010, Fox Nation, the Fox News website, put up a story about a tragedy in Antarctica:

Famed global warming activist James Schneider and a journalist friend were both found frozen to death on Saturday, about 90 miles from the South Pole Station, by the pilot of a ski plane practicing emergency evacuation procedures.

Well, Fox Nation was a bit too quick to jump on a story that fairly dripped with irony—a frozen global warming activist, indeed. However, the joke turned out to be on Fox: they had gotten the story from ecoEnquirer.com, a satirical website featuring spoof articles—James Schneider was a made-up name, not a real person. (Other headlines at the site: “Court Orders Fisherman to Apologize to Eagle,” “Penguins Fed Up with Media Attention.”)

that the “liberal media” has always been a myth and that, at least in private, well-known conservatives like Patrick Buchanan and William Kristol are willing to admit it. On the other hand, Bernard Goldberg, formerly of CBS, argues that the liberal bias of the press is a fact.*

Making an assessment on this score is several miles beyond our scope here. But it is important to be aware that a reporter or a columnist or a broadcaster who draws conclusions without presenting sufficient evidence

is no more to be believed than some guy from down the street, even if the conclusions happen to correspond nicely to your own bias—indeed, especially if they correspond to your own bias!

What is important to remember is that there are many forces at work in the preparation of news besides a desire to publish or broadcast the whole truth. That said, our view is that the major network news organizations are generally credible, exceptions like those noted above notwithstanding. ABC, CBS, and NBC do a generally credible job, as does CNN, and the Public Broadcasting System and National Public Radio are generally excellent. Also in our view, the printed media, the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and other major newspapers are generally credible, even though mistakes are sometimes made here as well. News magazines fall in the same category: usually credible but with occasional flaws.

The rise of the cable news networks has been an influence on what gets broadcast as news. CNN (which stands, unsurprisingly, for “Cable News Network”) began the trend in 1980 as the first twenty-four-hours-a-day news broadcaster. Fox News and MSNBC now also compete for viewers’ attention both day and night. While spreading across the hours of the day, these networks have also spread across the political spectrum. You can now find “news” that satisfies nearly any political bias. What’s more, with the need to fill screens for so many hours, the notion of what actually counts as news has had to be expanded. The result has affected not just the cable networks but traditional news programs as well: “Feature stories” from prison life to restaurant kitchen tours take up more and more space that used to be devoted to so-called hard news. One of our northern California newspapers, the Sacramento Bee, recently did a story on how “silly news” was taking up more and more space in local news programs. Ben Bagdikian, author and former dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, has pointed out that a commercial for Pepsi Cola seems to connect better after a fluff piece or a sitcom than after a serious piece on, say, massacres in Rwanda or an ambush in Afghanistan.

It would be difficult to boil down our advice regarding accepting claims from the news media, but it would certainly include keeping the following points in mind:

1. Like the rest of us, people in the news media sometimes make mistakes; they sometimes accept claims with insufficient evidence or without confirming the credibility of a source.

2. The media are subject to pressure and sometimes to manipulation from government and other news sources.

3. The media, with few exceptions, are driven in part by the necessity to make a profit, and this can bring pressure from advertisers, owners, and managers.

Finally, we might remember that the news media are to a great extent a reflection of the society at large. If we the public are willing to get by with superficial, sensationalist, or manipulated news, then we can rest assured that, eventually, that’s all the news we’ll get.
Talk Radio

On the surface, talk radio seems to offer a wealth of information not available in news reports from conventional sources. And many talk radio hosts scour traditional legitimate news sources for information relevant to their political agenda, and to the extent that they document the source, which they often do, they provide listeners with many interesting and important facts. But radio hosts from all sides are given to distortion, misplaced emphasis, and bias with regard to selection of which facts to report. And, really, the shouting gives us a headache.

Advocacy Television

We mentioned earlier that some cable networks have moved left while others have moved right on the political spectrum, so the news you can expect from them comes with a predictable slant. This is good insofar as it exposes people to opinions different from their own; it is not so good insofar as it simply reinforces what the viewer already believes, especially if there is no evidence offered in support of the opinions.

The Comedy Central channel features The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, which generally approaches the news from a leftist (and completely zany) viewpoint, and The Colbert Report, in which Steve Colbert, in reality a liberal, plays the part of a right-wing host. (Before the show, Colbert reminds his guests that “My on-air character is an idiot.”) It is ironic, because he appears on the Comedy Central channel, but when Jon Stewart isn’t going for the laughs, we think he may be the best, and the toughest, interviewer currently on television. He’s doubtless tougher on guests from the right than the left, but he takes no guff from either.

MSNBC offers The Ed Show, Countdown with Keith Olbermann, and The Rachel Maddow Show, all of which offer a liberal perspective on the news of the day, and all of which editorialize from that perspective.

Fox News features Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Glenn Beck, who represent various conservative constituencies and do something similar from the other side.

We could write an entire chapter on this subject, and maybe, given the influence the media have on American public opinion these days, we should. We could discuss other channels and other organizations (e.g., Accuracy in Media on the right and MoveOn.org on the left, to name just two of a thousand), but we think you get the idea: We remind you to always listen with a skeptical ear (and maybe a jaundiced eye) to political news and commentary. We know it’s difficult, but it’s important to be especially careful about accepting claims (without good evidence), and in particular, those with which you sympathize.

The Internet, Generally

It is getting to be difficult to overestimate the importance of the Internet—that amalgamation of electronic lines and connections that allows nearly anyone with a computer and a modem to link up with nearly any other similarly equipped person on the planet. Although the Internet offers great benefits,
the information it provides must be evaluated with even more caution than information from the print media, radio, or television. We presented two stories at the beginning of the chapter that show just how wrong things can go.

There are basically two kinds of information sources on the Internet. The first consists of commercial and institutional sources; the second, of individual and group sites on the World Wide Web. In the first category, we include sources like the Lexis-Nexis facility, as well as the online services provided by newsmagazines, large electronic news organizations, and government institutions. The second category includes everything else you’ll find on the web—an amazing assortment of good information, entertainment of widely varying quality, hot tips, advertisements, come-ons, fraudulent offers, and outright lies.

Just as the fact that a claim appears in print or on television doesn’t make it true, so it is for claims you run across online. Keep in mind that the information you get from a source is only as good as that source. The Lexis-Nexis information collection is an excellent asset for medium-depth investigation of a topic; it includes information gathered from a wide range of print sources, especially newspapers and magazines, with special collections in areas like the law. But the editorials you turn up there are no more likely to be accurate, fair-minded, or objective than the ones you read in the newspapers—which is where they first appeared anyhow.

In the Media

Evaluating Website Credibility: A Tip from the Professionals

In a study done a few years ago,* it was determined that when it comes to evaluating the credibility of a website, experts in a field go about it much differently than do ordinary consumers. Since, as we’ve indicated, credibility varies hugely on the web, we must do the best job we can in assessing this feature of any website we consider important. Unfortunately, as was shown in the study just mentioned, most ordinary visitors do a much less effective job of evaluating credibility than do people knowledgeable about the field. In particular, while professionals attend most carefully to the information given at a website, most of the rest of us pay more attention to its visual appeal. Layout, typography, color schemes, and animation affect the general public’s estimate of a site’s credibility—54 percent of comments are about these features—whereas the professionals’ interest is more in the quality of the site’s references, the credentials of individuals mentioned, and so on. Only 16 percent of professional evaluators’ comments had to do with a website’s visual design.

What should we take from this? A general rule: Don’t be taken in by how visually attractive a website might be. A flashy design with attractive colors and design features is no substitute for information that is backed up by references and put forward by people with appropriate credentials.

Possibly the fastest-growing source of information in terms of both its size and its influence is the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. “Wiki” refers to a collaborative voluntary association (although the word seems to have been coined by a programmer named Ward Cunningham from the Hawaiian term “wiki-wiki”—“quick-quick”). Begun in 2001 by Larry Sanger and Jimmy Wales, the encyclopedia’s content and structure are determined by its users. This accounts for its major strengths as well as its major weaknesses. Because there are many thousands of contributors, the coverage is immense. There are well over three million articles in English alone, and more than two hundred other languages and dialects are also employed. Because access is available to virtually everybody who has a computer and modem, coverage is often very fast; articles often appear within hours of breaking events.

But also because of this wide access, the quality of the articles varies tremendously. You should be especially wary of recent articles; they are more likely to contain uncorrected errors that will eventually disappear as knowledgeable people visit the page and put right whatever mistakes are present. Not just factual errors, but bias and omission can affect the quality of material found on Wikipedia’s pages. Occasionally, a writer will do a thorough job of reporting the side of an issue that he favors (or knows more about, or both), and the other side will go underreported or even unmentioned. Over time, these types of errors tend to get corrected after visits by individuals who favor the other side of the issue. But at any given moment, in any given Wikipedia entry, there is the possibility of mistakes, omissions, citation errors, and plain old vandalism.

Our advice: We think Wikipedia is an excellent starting point in a search for knowledge about a topic. We use it frequently. But you should always check the sources provided in what you find there; it should never be your sole source of information if the topic is important to you or is to become part of an assignment to be turned in for a class. That said, we add that articles dealing with technical or scientific subjects tend to be more reliable (although errors are often more difficult to spot), with an error rate about the same as that found in the Encyclopedia Britannica.* Such articles and, as mentioned, articles that have been around for a while can be extremely helpful in whatever project you are engaged in.

Now we come to blogs. Blogs are simply journals, the vast majority of them put up by individuals, that are left open to the public on an Internet site. Originally more like public diaries dealing with personal matters, they now encompass specialties of almost every imaginable sort. Up to three million blogs were believed to be up and running by the end of 2004, with a new one added every 5.8 seconds (ClickZ.com, “The Blogosphere by the Numbers”). Nobody knows how many there are now.

You can find blogs that specialize in satire, parody, and outright fabrication. They represent all sides of the political spectrum, including some sides that we wouldn’t have thought existed at all. The Drudge Report is a standard on the right; the Huffington Post is equally well known on the left. On a blog site, like any other website that isn’t run by a responsible organization such as

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most of those previously indicated, you can find anything that a person wants to put there, including all kinds of bad information. You can take advantage of these sources, but you should always exercise caution, and if you’re looking for information, always consult another source, but be especially careful about any that are linked to your first source!

Before we leave the topic of web worthiness, we want to pass along a warning that comes from Barbara Mikkelson, co-founder of Snopes.com. She reminds us that rumors often give people a great sense of comfort; people are quick to reject nuance and facts that are contrary to their own point of view, but quickly accept them when they are agreeable to the hearer. “When you’re looking at truth versus gossip,” Mikkelson says, “truth doesn’t stand a chance.” We hope she’s being unduly pessimistic.

So remember, when you take keyboard and mouse in hand, be on guard. You have about as much reason to believe the claims you find on most sites

In the Media

Webcheckers

Along with other sites we’ve already mentioned, here are some other places where you can go to get to the bottom of an issue you’ve seen brought up on the web. We believe these to be among the most reliable sources currently available; we use them all ourselves.

Snopes.com. The original, and still the best site, for checking out rumors, stories, urban legends, and any other type of strange claim that turns up on the web. Run by Daniel and Barbara Mikkelson since 1996, it classifies as true or false a host of claims that circulate on the Internet. Analysis of the history and nature of the claims under investigation is usually provided.

TruthorFiction.com. A general fact-finding, debunking site. Generally up-to-date findings by owner Rich Buhler. Analyses tend to be less thorough than those found on Snopes, but a generally trustworthy site.

Factcheck.org. Run by Brooks Jackson, a former CNN and Wall Street Journal reporter out of the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Public Policy Center. Completely neutral politically, the site attacks anybody who stretches the truth concerning any topic in politics.

PolitiFact.com. Operated by the St. Petersburg (Florida) Times newspaper. Reporters and editors fact-check claims made by politicians, lobbyists, and interest groups. The website won a Pulitzer Prize in 2009 for its work during the presidential election of 2008.

Consumerreports.com. Evaluates consumer issues (including health care and financial planning) and products. Not to be confused with other organizations with similar names, this site, like the magazine of the same name that sponsors it, accepts no advertising and bends over backwards to avoid bias. Careful evaluation and analysis can be expected. The organization buys products to be evaluated from stores, just like we do, rather than being given them by manufacturers.

For the general evaluation of websites, several checklists are available. You will find Cornell University’s and the University of Maryland’s checklists at www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill26.htm and www.lib.umd.edu/guides/evaluate.html.
as you would if they came from any other stranger, except you can’t look this one in the eye.

See who in the class can find the strangest news report from a credible source. Send it to us at McGraw-Hill. If your entry is selected for printing in our next edition, Moore might send you $100. (In the next chapter you’ll see why we call the word “might” a weaseler in this context.)

Identify at least three factors that can cause inaccuracies or a distortion of reports in the news media.

**ADVERTISING**

Advertising [is] the science of arresting the human intelligence long enough to get money from it.

—Stephen Leacock

If there is anything in modern society besides politics that truly puts our sense of what is credible to the test, it’s advertising. As we hope you’ll agree after reading this section, skepticism is always the best policy when considering any kind of advertising or promotion.

Ads are used to sell many products other than toasters, television sets, and toilet tissue. They can encourage us to vote for a candidate, agree with a political proposal, take a tour, give up a bad habit, or join a Tea Party or the army. They can also be used to make announcements (for instance, about job openings, lectures, concerts, or the recall of defective automobiles) or to create favorable climates of opinion (for example, toward labor unions or offshore oil drilling).

Advertising firms understand our fears and desires at least as well as we understand them ourselves, and they have at their disposal the expertise to exploit them.* Such firms employ trained psychologists and some of the world’s most creative artists and use the most sophisticated and well-researched theories about the motivation of human behavior. Maybe most important, they can afford to spend whatever is necessary to get each detail of an advertisement exactly right. (On a per-minute basis, television ads are the most expensively produced pieces that appear on your tube.) A good ad is a work of art, a masterful blend of word and image often composed in accordance with the exacting standards of artistic and scientific genius [other ads, of course, are just plain silly]. Can untrained laypeople even hope to evaluate such psychological and artistic masterpieces intelligently?

Fortunately, it is not necessary to understand the deep psychology of an advertisement to evaluate it in the way that’s most important to us. When confronted with an ad, we should ask simply: Does this ad give us a good reason to buy this product? And the answer, in general terms, can be simply put:

Because the only good reason to buy anything in the first place is to improve our lives, the ad justifies a purchase only if it establishes that we’d be better off with the product than without it (or that we’d be better off with the product than with the money we would trade for it).

However, do we always know when we’ll be better off with a product than without it? Do we really want, or need, a bagel splitter or an exercise bike? Do people even recognize “better taste” in a cigarette? Do we need Viagra or are we just curious? Advertisers spend vast sums creating within us new desires and fears—and hence a need to improve our lives by satisfying those desires or eliminating those fears through the purchase of advertised products. They are often successful, and we find ourselves needing something we might not have known existed before. That others can instill in us, through word and image, a desire for something we did not previously desire may be a lamentable fact, but it is clearly a fact. Still, we decide what would make us better off, and we decide to part with our money. So, it is only with reference to what in our view would make life better for us that we properly evaluate advertisements.

There are basically two kinds of ads: those that offer reasons and those that do not. Those that offer reasons for buying the advertised product always promise that certain hopes will be satisfied, certain needs met, or certain fears eliminated. (You’ll be more accepted, have a better image, be a better parent, and so on.)

Those ads that do not rely on reasons fall mainly into three categories: (1) those that bring out feelings in us (e.g., through humor, pretty images, scary images, beautiful music, heartwarming scenes); (2) those that depict the product being used or endorsed by people we admire or think of ourselves as being like (sometimes these people are depicted by actors, sometimes not); and (3) those that depict the product being used in situations in which we would like to find ourselves. Of course, some ads go all out and incorporate elements from all three categories—and for good measure also state a reason or two why we should buy the advertised product.

Buying a product (which includes joining a group, deciding how to vote, and so forth) on the basis of reasonless ads is, with one minor exception that we’ll explain shortly, never justified. Such ads tell you only that the product exists and what it looks like (and sometimes where it is available and how much it costs); if an ad tells you much more than this, then it begins to qualify as an ad that gives reasons for buying the product. Reasonless ads do tell us what the advertisers think of our values and sense of humor (not always a pleasant thing to notice, given that they have us pegged so well), but
this information is irrelevant to the question of whether we should buy the product.

Ads that submit reasons for buying the product, or “promise ads,” as they have been called, usually tell us more than that a certain product exists—but not much more. The promise, with rare exception, comes with no guarantees and is usually extremely vague (Gilbey’s gin promises “more gin taste,” Kleenex is “softer”). In other words, the reasons given are almost never good reasons.

Such ads are a source of information about what the sellers of the product are willing to claim about what the product will do, how well it will do it, how it works, what it contains, how well it compares with similar products, and how much more wonderful your life will be once you’ve got one. However, to make an informed decision on a purchase, you almost always need to know more than the seller is willing to claim, particularly because no sellers will tell you what’s wrong with their products or what’s right with those of their competitors. Remember that they are perfect examples of interested parties.

Further, the claims of advertisers are notorious not only for being vague but also for being ambiguous, misleading, exaggerated, and sometimes just plain false. Even if a product existed that was so good that an honest,

Real Life

When Is an Ad Not an Ad? When It’s a Product Placement!

When Katharine Hepburn threw all of Humphrey Bogart’s Gordon’s gin overboard in The African Queen, it was an early example of product placement, since the makers of Gordon’s paid to have their product tossed in the drink, as it were. Readers of a certain age may remember the 1960s television show Route 66, which starred not just Martin Milner and George Maharis but also a new Chevrolet Corvette and probably contributed to more than a few Corvette sales. Reese’s Pieces were centrally placed in the movie E.T. and the sales of Red Stripe beer jumped 50 percent after it appeared prominently in the movie The Firm.

These days, the paid placement of products in both movies and television (and possibly even in novels) is a serious alternative to traditional commercials, and it has the advantage of overcoming the Tivo effect: the viewer records programs and watches them while skipping over the commercials.
unexaggerated, and fair description of it would justify our buying it without considering competing items [or other reports on the same item], and even if an advertisement for this product consisted of just such a description, we would still not be justified in purchasing the product on the basis of that advertisement alone. For we would be unable to tell, simply by looking at the advertisement, that it was un-infl ated, honest, fair, and not misleading. Our suspicions about advertising in general should undercut our willingness to believe in the honesty of any particular advertisement.

Thus, even advertisements that present reasons for buying an item do not by themselves justify our purchase of the item. This is worth repeating, in stronger language: An advertisement never justifies purchasing something. Advertisements are written to sell something; they are not designed to be informative except insofar as it will help with the sales job. Sometimes, of course, an advertisement can provide you with information that can clinch your decision to make a purchase. Sometimes the mere existence, availability, or affordability of a product—all information that an ad can convey—is all you need to make a decision to buy. But if the purchase is justifiable, you must have some reasons, apart from those offered in the ad, for making it. If, for some reason, you already know that you want or need and can afford a car with an electric motor, then an ad that informs you that a firm has begun marketing such a thing would supply you with the information you need to buy one. If you can already justify purchasing a particular brand of microwave oven but cannot find one anywhere in town, then an advertisement informing you that the local department store stocks them can clinch your decision to make the purchase.

For people on whom good fortune has smiled, those who don’t care what kind of what-sit they buy, or those to whom mistaken purchases simply don’t matter, all that is important is knowing that a product is available. Most of us, however, need more information than ads provide to make reasoned purchasing decisions. Of course, we all occasionally make purchases solely on the basis of advertisements, and sometimes we don’t come to regret them. In such cases, though, the happy result is due as much to good luck as to the ad.

On Language

WAY Too Good to Be True!

Since the country fell into a serious recession in 2008, many people have found themselves unable to meet their mortgage payments, and many find themselves saddled with more credit card debt than they can manage. Easy debt-relief schemers to the rescue! Some cable TV and radio ads promise to help get your mortgage paid off, make your credit card debt shrink or disappear altogether, or make you rich by teaching you to make quick killings in real estate.

According to a Consumer Reports Money Adviser article (April 2010), these schemes tend more toward guaranteeing fees for the operators than for debt relief or riches, quick or otherwise, for the client. Many clients wind up worse off than they started after signing up for these plans. Remember: advertising is always designed to help the folks who pay for the ads. If it looks too good to be true, you can bet it is.
A final suggestion on this subject. We know of only one source that main-
tains a fierce independence and still does a good job of testing and reporting
on products. That’s Consumers Union, the publishers of Consumer Reports, a
magazine [mentioned in the box on p. 130] that accepts no advertising and that
buys all the objects it tests and reports on [rather than accepting them for free
from the manufacturers, as do several other “consumer” magazines]. For reli-
able information and fair-mindedness, we recommend them. They’re also on

This list summarizes the topics covered in this chapter.

- Claims lack credibility to the extent they conflict with our observations,
  experience, or background information, or come from sources that lack
  credibility.
- The less initial plausibility a claim has, the more extraordinary it seems;
  and the less it fits with our background information, the more suspicious
  we should be.
- Interested parties should always be viewed with more suspicion than dis-
  interested parties.
- Doubts about sources generally fall into two categories: doubts about the
  source’s knowledge or expertise and doubts about the source’s veracity,
  objectivity, and accuracy.
- We can form reasonably reliable judgments about a person’s knowledge by
  considering his or her education, experience, accomplishments, reputa-
  tion, and position.
- Claims made by experts, those with special knowledge in a subject, are
  the most reliable, but the claims must pertain to the area of expertise and
  must not conflict with claims made by other experts in the same area.
- Major metropolitan newspapers, national newsmagazines, and network
  news shows are generally credible sources of news, but it is necessary to
  keep an open mind about what we learn from them.
- Governments have been known to influence and even to manipulate the
  news.
- Sources like Wikipedia, institutional websites, and news organizations
  can be helpful, but skepticism is the order of the day when we obtain
  information from unknown Internet sources or talk radio.
- Advertising assaults us at every turn, attempting to sell us goods, ser-
  vices, beliefs, and attitudes. Because substantial talent and resources are
  employed in this effort, we need to ask ourselves constantly whether the
  products in question will really make the differences in our lives that
  their advertising claims or hints they will make. Advertisers are always
  more concerned with selling you something than with improving your
  life. They are concerned with improving their own lives.
- What goes for talk radio, above, also goes for advocacy television.
Exercise 4-10

In groups, decide which is the best answer to each question. Compare your answers with those of other groups and your instructor.

1. “SPACE ALIEN GRAVEYARD FOUND! Scientists who found an extra-terrestrial cemetery in central Africa say the graveyard is at least 500 years old! ‘There must be 200 bodies buried there and not a single one of them is human,’ Dr. Hugo Schild, the Swiss anthropologist, told reporters.” What is the appropriate reaction to this report in the *Weekly World News*?
   a. It’s probably true.
   b. It almost certainly is true.
   c. We really need more information to form any judgment at all.
   d. None of these.

2. Is Elvis really dead? Howie thinks not. Reason: He knows three people who claim to have seen Elvis recently. They are certain that it is not a mere Elvis look-alike they have seen. Howie reasons that, since he has absolutely no reason to think the three would lie to him, they must be telling the truth. Elvis must really be alive, he concludes!
   Is Howie’s reasoning sound? Explain.

3. **Voice on telephone:** Mr. Roberts, this is SBC calling. Have you recently placed several long-distance calls to Lisbon, Portugal?
   **Mr. Roberts:** Why, no . . .
   **Voice:** This is what we expected. Mr. Roberts, I’m sorry to report that apparently someone has been using your calling card number. However, we are prepared to give you a new number, effective immediately, at no charge to you.
   **Mr. Roberts:** Well, fine, I guess . . .
   **Voice:** Again let me emphasize that there will be no charge for this service. Now, for authorization, just to make sure that we are calling Mr. Roberts, Mr. Roberts, please state the last four digits of your calling card number, and your PIN number, please.
   Question: What should Mr. Roberts, as a critical thinker, do?

4. On Thanksgiving Day 1990, an image said by some to resemble the Virgin Mary was observed in a stained glass window of St. Dominic’s Church in Colfax, California. A physicist asked to investigate said the image was caused by sunlight shining through the window and reflecting from a newly installed hanging light fixture. Others said the image was a miracle. Whose explanation is more likely true?
   a. The physicist’s
   b. The others’
   c. More information is needed before we can decide which explanation is more likely.

5. It is late at night around the campfire when the campers hear awful grunting noises in the woods around them. They run for their lives! Two
campers, after returning the next day, tell others they found huge footprints around the campfire. They are convinced they were attacked by Bigfoot. Which explanation is more likely true?

a. The campers heard Bigfoot.
b. The campers heard some animal and are pushing the Bigfoot explanation to avoid being thought of as chickens, or are just making the story up for unknown reasons.
c. Given this information, we can’t tell which explanation is more likely.

6. Megan’s aunt says she saw a flying saucer. “I don’t tell people about this,” Auntie says, “because they’ll think I’m making it up. But this really happened. I saw this strange light, and this, well, it wasn’t a saucer, exactly, but it was round and big, and it came down and hovered just over my back fence, and my two dogs began whimpering. And then it just, whoosh! It just vanished.”

Megan knows her aunt, and Megan knows she doesn’t make up stories.

a. She should believe her aunt saw a flying saucer.
b. She should believe her aunt was making the story up.
c. She should believe that her aunt may well have had some unusual experience, but it was probably not a visitation by extraterrestrial beings.

7. According to Dr. Edith Fiore, author of The Unquiet Dead, many of your personal problems are really the miseries of a dead soul who has possessed you sometime during your life. “Many people are possessed by earthbound spirits. These are people who have lived and died, but did not go into the afterworld at death. Instead they stayed on Earth and remained just like they were before death, with the fears, pains, weaknesses and other problems that they had when they were alive.” She estimates that about 80 percent of her more than 1,000 patients are suffering from the problems brought on by being possessed by spirits of the dead. To tell if you are among the possessed, she advises that you look for such telltale symptoms as low energy levels, character shifts or mood swings, memory problems, poor concentration, weight gain with no obvious cause, and bouts of depression [especially after hospitalization]. Which of these reactions is best?

a. Wow! I bet I’m possessed!
b. Well, if a doctor says it’s so, it must be so.
c. If these are signs of being possessed, how come she thinks that only 80 percent of her patients are?
d. Too bad there isn’t more information available, so we could form a reasonable judgment.

8. **EOC—Engine Overhaul in a Can**

Developed by skilled automotive scientists after years of research and laboratory and road tests! Simply pour one can of EOC into the oil in your crankcase. EOC contains long-chain molecules and special thermo-active metallic alloys that bond with worn engine parts. NO tools needed! NO need to disassemble engine.

Question: Reading this ad, what should you believe?
9. ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP)—Roped to her twin sons for safety, Joni Phelps inched her way to the top of Mount McKinley. The National Park Service says Phelps, 54, apparently is the first blind woman to scale the 20,300-foot peak.

This report is

a. Probably true
b. Probably false
c. Too sketchy; more information is needed before we can judge

Exercise 4–11

Within each group of observers, are some especially credible or especially not so?

1. Judging the relative performances of the fighters in a heavyweight boxing match
   a. the father of one of the fighters
   b. a sportswriter for *Sports Illustrated* magazine
   c. the coach of the American Olympic boxing team
   d. the referee of the fight
   e. a professor of physical education

2. You (or your family or your class) are trying to decide whether you should buy an Apple Macintosh computer or a Windows model. You might consult
   a. a friend who owns either a Macintosh or a Windows machine
   b. a friend who now owns one of the machines but used to own the other
   c. a dealer for either Macintosh or Windows computers
   d. a computer column in a big-city newspaper
   e. reviews in computer magazines

3. The Surgical Practices Committee of Grantville Hospital has documented an unusually high number of problems in connection with tonsillectomies performed by a Dr. Choker. The committee is reviewing her surgical practices. Those present during a tonsillectomy are
   a. Dr. Choker
   b. the surgical proctor from the Surgical Practices Committee
   c. an anesthesiologist
   d. a nurse
   e. a technician

4. The mechanical condition of the used car you are thinking of buying
   a. the used-car salesperson
   b. the former owner (who we assume is different from the salesperson)
   c. the former owner’s mechanic
   d. you
   e. a mechanic from an independent garage

5. A demonstration of psychokinesis (the ability to move objects at a distance by nonphysical means)
   a. a newspaper reporter
   b. a psychologist
c. a police detective
d. another psychic
e. a physicist
f. a customs agent
g. a magician

Exercise 4-12

For each of the items below, discuss the credibility and authority of each source relative to the issue in question. Whom would you trust as most reliable on the subject?

1. Issue: Is Crixivan an effective HIV/AIDS medication?
   a. Consumer Reports
   b. Stadtlander Drug Company (the company that makes Crixivan)
   c. the owner of your local health food store
   d. the U.S. Food and Drug Administration
   e. your local pharmacist

2. Issue: Should possession of handguns be outlawed?
   a. a police chief
   b. a representative of the National Rifle Association
   c. a U.S. senator
   d. the father of a murder victim

3. Issue: What was the original intent of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and does it include permission for every citizen to possess handguns?
   a. a representative of the National Rifle Association
   b. a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court
   c. a Constitutional historian
   d. a U.S. senator
   e. the president of the United States

4. Issue: Is decreasing your intake of dietary fat and cholesterol likely to reduce the level of cholesterol in your blood?
   a. Time magazine
   b. Runner's World magazine
   c. your physician
   d. the National Institutes of Health
   e. the New England Journal of Medicine

5. Issue: When does a human life begin?
   a. a lawyer
   b. a physician
   c. a philosopher
   d. a minister
   e. you

Exercise 4-13

Each of these items consists of a brief biography of a real or imagined person, followed by a list of topics. On the basis of the information in the biography,
discuss the credibility and authority of the person described on each of the topics listed.

1. Anne St. Germain teaches sociology at the University of Illinois and is the director of its Population Studies Center. She is a graduate of Harvard College, where she received a B.A. in 1975, and of Harvard University, which granted her a Ph.D. in economics in 1978. She taught courses in demography as an assistant professor at UCLA until 1982; then she moved to the sociology department of the University of Nebraska, where she was associate professor and then professor. From 1987 through 1989, she served as acting chief of the Population Trends and Structure Section of the United Nations Population Division. She joined the faculty at the University of Illinois in 1989. She has written books on patterns of world urbanization, the effects of cigarette smoking on international mortality, and demographic trends in India. She is president of the Population Association of America.

Topics
a. The effects of acid rain on humans
b. The possible beneficial effects of requiring sociology courses for all students at the University of Illinois
c. The possible effects of nuclear war on global climate patterns
d. The incidence of poverty among various ethnic groups in the United States
e. The effects of the melting of glaciers on global sea levels
f. The change in death rate for various age groups in all Third World countries between 1970 and 1990
g. The feasibility of a laser-based nuclear defense system
h. Voter participation among religious sects in India
i. Whether the winters are worse in Illinois than in Nebraska

2. Tom Pierce graduated cum laude from Cornell University with a B.S. in biology in 1973. After two years in the Peace Corps, during which he worked on public health projects in Venezuela, he joined Jeffrey Ridenour, a mechanical engineer, and the pair developed a water pump and purification system that is now used in many parts of the world for both regular water supplies and emergency use in disaster-struck areas. Pierce and Ridenour formed a company to manufacture the water systems, and it prospered as they developed smaller versions of the system for private use on boats and motor homes. In 1981, Pierce bought out his partner and expanded research and development in hydraulic systems for forcing oil out of old wells. Under contract with the federal government and several oil firms, Pierce’s company was a principal designer and contractor for the Alaskan oil pipeline. He is now a consultant in numerous developing countries as well as chief executive officer and chairman of the board of his own company, and he sits on the boards of directors of several other companies.

Topics
a. The image of the United States in Latin America
b. The long-range effects of the Cuban revolution on South America
c. Fixing a leaky faucet
d. Technology in Third World countries  
e. The ecological effects of the Alaskan pipeline  
f. Negotiating a contract with the federal government  
g. Careers in biology

Exercise 4-14

According to certain pollsters, quite a number of people vote for candidates for president not because they especially like those candidates’ policies and programs or their idea of where the country should be going, but because they like the candidates personally. Discuss what features a candidate from the recent past (e.g., George W. Bush, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, John McCain, Sarah Palin) may have that might cause such people to vote for him or her. Which of these features, if any, might be relevant to how good a job the candidate would do as president?

Exercise 4-15

From what you know about the nature of each of the following claims and its source, and given your general knowledge, assess whether the claim is one you should accept, reject, or suspend judgment on due to ambiguity, insufficient documentation, vagueness, or subjectivity (e.g., “Tom Cruise is cute”). Compare your judgment with that of your instructor.

1. “Campbell Soup is hot—and some are getting burned. Just one day after the behemoth of broth reported record profits, Campbell said it would lay off 650 U.S. workers, including 175—or 11% of the workforce—at its headquarters in Camden, New Jersey.”

   —Time

2. [The claim to evaluate is the first one in this passage.] Jackie Haskew taught paganism and devil worship in her fourth-grade classroom in Grand Saline, Texas, at least until she was pressured into resigning by parents of her students. (According to syndicated columnist Nat Hentoff, “At the town meeting on her case, a parent said firmly that she did not want her daughter to read anything that dealt with ‘death, abuse, divorce, religion, or any other issue.’”)

3. “By 1893 there were only between 300 and 1,000 buffaloes remaining in the entire country. A few years later, President Theodore Roosevelt persuaded Congress to establish a number of wildlife preserves in which the remaining buffaloes could live without danger. The numbers have increased since, nearly doubling over the past 10 years to 130,000.”

   —Clifford May, in the New York Times Magazine

4. Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, was responsible for the death of President John F. Kennedy.

   —Conclusion of the Warren Commission on the assassination of President Kennedy

5. “[N]ewly released documents, including the transcripts of telephone conversations recorded by President Lyndon B. Johnson in November and December 1963, provide for the first time a detailed . . . look at why and
how the seven-member Warren [Commission] was put together. Those documents, along with a review of previously released material . . . describe a process designed more to control information than to elicit and expose it.”


6. “Short-sighted developers are determined to transform Choco [a large region of northwestern Colombia] from an undisturbed natural treasure to a polluted, industrialized growth center.”

—Solicitation letter from the World Wildlife Fund

7. “Frantic parents tell shocked TV audience: space aliens stole our son.”

—Weekly World News

8. “The manufacturer of Sudafed 12-hour capsules issued a nationwide recall of the product Sunday after two people in the state of Washington who had taken the medication died of cyanide poisoning and a third became seriously ill.”

—Los Angeles Times

9. “In Canada, smoking in public places, trains, planes or even automobiles is now prohibited by law or by convention. The federal government has banned smoking in all its buildings.”

—Reuters

10. “The list of vanishing commodities in Moscow now includes not only sausage and vodka, long rationed, but also potatoes, eggs, bread, and cigarettes.”

—National Geographic

11. “Maps, files and compasses were hidden in Monopoly sets and smuggled into World War II German prison camps by MI-5, Britain’s counterintelligence agency, to help British prisoners escape, according to the British manufacturer of the game.”

—Associated Press

12. “Cats that live indoors and use a litter box can live four to five years longer.”

—From an advertisement for Jonny Cat litter

13. “A case reported by Borderland Sciences Research Foundation, Vista, California, tells of a man who had attended many of the meetings where a great variety of ‘dead’ people came and spoke through the body mechanism of Mark Probert to the group of interested persons on a great variety of subjects with questions and answers from ‘both sides.’ Then this man who had attended meetings while he was in a body, did what is called ‘die.’ Presumably he had learned ‘while in the body’ what he might expect at the change of awareness called death, about which organized religion seems to know little or nothing.”

—George Robinson, Exploring the Riddle of Reincarnation, undated, no publisher cited

14. “Because of cartilage that begins to accumulate after age thirty, by the time . . . [a] man is seventy his nose has grown a half inch wider and
another half inch longer, his earlobes have fattened, and his ears themselves have grown a quarter inch longer. Overall, his head’s circumference increases a quarter inch every decade, and not because of his brain, which is shrinking. His head is fatter apparently because, unlike most other bones in the body, the skull seems to thicken with age.”

—John Tierney (a staff writer for Esquire)

15. “Gardenias . . . need ample warmth, ample water, and steady feeding. Though hardy to 20°F or even lower, plants fail to grow and bloom well without summer heat.”

—The Sunset New Western Garden Book (a best-selling gardening reference in the West)

16. “Exercise will make you feel fitter, but there’s no good evidence that it will make you live longer.”

—Dr. Jordan Tobin, National Institute on Aging

17. “Your bones are still growing until you’re 35.”

—From a national milk ad by the National Fluid Milk Processor Promotion Board

18. “E. coli 0157:H7 has become common enough to be the current major cause of acute kidney failure in children.” [E. coli is a food-borne toxin originally found in the intestines of cows.]

—Robin Cook, a physician-turned-novelist. This claim was made by a fictional expert on food-borne illnesses in the novel Toxin.

19. “A woman employed as a Santa Claus at a Walmart in Kentucky was fired by Walmart when a child pinched her breast and complained to his mother that Santa was a woman. The woman complained to store managers.”

—Associated Press


—Defamer blog

Exercise 4-16

The following appeared in a local newspaper, criticizing the position on global warming taken by local television weatherman and political activist Anthony Watts. Read it carefully and decide whether anything the author says should affect the credibility of Watts or the project he endorsed. Compare your judgment with those of your classmates.

“[Anthony] Watts endorsed the ‘Petition Project,’ which refutes man-made global warming. Besides many fictitious names submitted, only about one percent of the petition signers had done any climate research.

“The petition was prepared by Frederick Seitz, a scientist who, from 1975 to 1989, was paid $585,000 by the tobacco industry to direct a $45 million scientific effort to hide the health impact of smoking. Does Watts agree that cigarettes are not harmful, as Seitz’s studies showed?”

—Chico News & Review
**Exercise 4-17**

Find five advertisements that give no reasons for purchasing the products they are selling. Explain how each ad attempts to make the product seem attractive.

**Exercise 4-18**

Find five advertisements that give reasons for purchasing the products they are selling. Which of the reasons are promises to the purchaser? Exactly what is being promised? What is the likelihood that the product will fulfill that promise?

**Exercise 4-19**

Watch Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN news programs on the same day. Compare the three on the basis of (1) the news stories covered, (2) the amount of air time given to two or three of the major stories, and (3) any difference in the slant of the presentations of a controversial story. Make notes. Be prepared to discuss in class the differences in coverage on the basis of the three criteria just mentioned.

**Writing Exercises**

1. Although millions of people have seen professional magicians like David Copperfield and Siegfried and Roy perform in person or on television, it’s probably a safe assumption that almost nobody believes they accomplish their feats by means of real magical or supernatural powers—that is, that they somehow “defy” the laws of nature. But even though they’ve never had a personal demonstration, a significant portion of the population believes that certain psychics are able to accomplish apparent miracles by exactly such means. How might you explain this difference in belief?

2. In the text, you were asked to consider the claim “Charlie’s eighty-seven-year-old grandmother swam across Lake Michigan in the middle of winter.” Because of the implausibility of such a claim—that is, because it conflicts with our background information—it is reasonable to reject it. Suppose, however, that instead of just telling us about his grandmother, Charlie brings us a photocopy of a page of a Chicago newspaper with a photograph of a person in a wet suit walking up onto a beach. The caption underneath reads, “Eighty-Seven-Year-Old Grandmother Swims Lake Michigan in January!” Based on this piece of evidence, should a critical thinker decide that the original claim is significantly more likely to be true than if it were backed up only by Charlie’s word? Defend your answer.

3. Turn to the “Essays for Analysis” in Appendix 1, and assess the credibility of an author in a selection identified by your instructor. Based on the blurb about the author, say what you can about the author’s likely expertise and susceptibility to bias on the subject of the essay.

4. Are our schools doing a bad job educating our kids? Do research in the library or on the Internet to answer this question. Make a list (no more than one page long) of facts that support the claim that our schools are not doing as good a job as they should. Then list facts that support the
opposite view (or that rebut the claims of those who say our schools aren’t doing a good job). Again, limit yourself to one page. Cite your sources.

Now, think critically about your sources. Are any stronger or weaker than the others? Explain why on a single sheet of paper. Come prepared to read your explanation, along with your list of facts and sources, to the class.

5. Jackson says you should be skeptical of the opinion of someone who stands to profit from your accepting that opinion. Smith disagrees, pointing out that salespeople are apt to know a lot more about products of the type they sell than do most people.

“Most salespeople are honest, and you can trust them,” Smith argues. “Those who aren’t don’t stay in business long.”

Take about fifteen minutes to defend either Smith or Jackson in a short essay. When everyone is finished, your instructor will collect the essays and read three or more to the class to stimulate a brief discussion. After discussion, can the class come to any agreement about who is correct, Jackson or Smith?

6. Your instructor will survey the class to see how many agree with this claim: The media are biased. Then he or she will ask you to list your reasons for thinking that this claim is true. (If you do not think it is true, list reasons people might have for believing it.) After ten minutes, your instructor will collect the lists of reasons and read from several of the lists. Then he or she will give you twenty minutes to defend one of these claims:

a. The media are biased.

b. Some of the reasons people have for believing that the media are biased are not very good reasons.

c. It is difficult to say whether the media are biased.

At the end of the period, your instructor may survey the class again to see if anyone’s mind has changed and why.