

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 Mikkelsen 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.

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 Mikkelsen, 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," Mikkelsen 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

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.)

Exercise 4-8

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

Exercise 4-9

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:

According to zFacts.com, \$412 billion dollars were spent on advertising in America during 2008. Somebody really wants to sell us something!

People watching a sexual program are thinking about sex, not soda pop. Violence and sex elicit very strong emotions and can interfere with memory for other things.

—BRAD BUSHMAN of Iowa State University, whose research indicated that people tend to forget the names of sponsors of violent or sexual TV shows (reported by Ellen Goodman)

*For an excellent treatment of this and related subjects, we recommend *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, rev. ed., by Anthony R. Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson (New York: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1998).



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

"Doctor recommended."

This ambiguous ad slogan creates an illusion that many doctors, or doctors in general, recommend the product. However, a recommendation from a single doctor is all it takes to make the statement true.

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,

We are professional grade.

Meaningless but catchy slogan for GMC trucks. (We are professional grade, too.)

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.



■ We suspect the Coke can is there because Pepsi wouldn't pay enough.

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 uninflated, 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 whatcha 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 maintains 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 reliable information and fair-mindedness, we recommend them. They're also on the web at <<http://www.consumersunion.org>>.

This list summarizes the topics covered in this chapter.

Recap

- 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 disinterested 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, reputation, 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, services, 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.

Additional Exercises

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

- Probably true
- Probably false
- 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

 - the father of one of the fighters
 - a sportswriter for *Sports Illustrated* magazine
 - the coach of the American Olympic boxing team
 - the referee of the fight
 - 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 friend who owns either a Macintosh or a Windows machine
 - a friend who now owns one of the machines but used to own the other
 - a dealer for either Macintosh or Windows computers
 - a computer column in a big-city newspaper
 - 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

 - Dr. Choker
 - the surgical proctor from the Surgical Practices Committee
 - an anesthesiologist
 - a nurse
 - a technician
4. The mechanical condition of the used car you are thinking of buying

 - the used-car salesperson
 - the former owner (who we assume is different from the salesperson)
 - the former owner's mechanic
 - you
 - a mechanic from an independent garage
5. A demonstration of psychokinesis (the ability to move objects at a distance by nonphysical means)

 - a newspaper reporter
 - a psychologist

- a police detective
- another psychic
- a physicist
- a customs agent
- 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?

 - Consumer Reports*
 - Stadtlander Drug Company (the company that makes Crixivan)
 - the owner of your local health food store
 - the U.S. Food and Drug Administration
 - your local pharmacist
2. Issue: Should possession of handguns be outlawed?

 - a police chief
 - a representative of the National Rifle Association
 - a U.S. senator
 - 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 representative of the National Rifle Association
 - a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court
 - a Constitutional historian
 - a U.S. senator
 - 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?

 - Time* magazine
 - Runner's World* magazine
 - your physician
 - the National Institutes of Health
 - the *New England Journal of Medicine*
5. Issue: When does a human life begin?

 - a lawyer
 - a physician
 - a philosopher
 - a minister
 - 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."

—"The Truth Was Secondary," Washington Post National Weekly Edition

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 counter-intelligence 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

20. Paris Hilton requested a trademark for the phrase "That's hot" from the U.S. Office of Trademarks and Patents.

—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.