



# Authentication and Citizenship

## – tip sheet

Being well-informed – and being careful to only share good information – are essential parts of being an active citizen in a democracy. It's important to think before you share political information with family and friends – especially during an election.

Here are three tips to help make sure you have good information about important issues.

### 1. Check against other sources

Don't rely on a single source of information on an important issue: every source reflects creators' decisions and assumptions about what is and isn't newsworthy. Keep an eye out for different kinds of bias that can occur in even the most responsible news sources.

- Bias through selection or omission: Different sources may include different details when covering the same story – such as who is quoted or interviewed – or cover different stories entirely. While there are sometimes good reasons for this to happen, it means that you often have to read more than one source to get the whole story. As well, whether we're given particular information about people in the story – like their race or faith – can influence how we read it and how we view those groups.
- Bias by placement: Where details are mentioned in a story can be as important as whether they're included at all. We're more likely to read and remember the earliest parts of an article, so info that's further down has less of an impact.



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- Bias by word choice: Words can have similar meanings but provoke different reactions. For example, an election could be described as a “win”, a “victory”, or a “landslide” for the winner, or a “defeat” or “rout” for the loser: each one fits the facts, but communicates something different about how we’re supposed to feel about it. This effect can be especially powerful in headlines, which are designed to grab your attention and make you read the story.
- Bias by image: A picture is worth a thousand words. When people are arrested, whether media use their mugshots or their social media profile pictures makes a big difference in how we see them. Even subtle things like lighting and camera angles can make a difference in what we think about someone.

Remember that there’s an important difference between a source being *biased* (which all sources are to some degree) and being *unreliable*. For tips on how to find out if a particular source is reliable, see our tip sheet [News You Can Use](#).

## 2. Get outside your bubble

Probably the most important thing you can do is make sure that you’re not only getting news that confirms what you already believe. At the same time, it’s important not to “overcorrect” and seek out sources that have a totally opposite bias from yours, which will almost certainly just make you angry and reinforce your current opinions. Instead, find sources from a moderately different point of view.

It’s important to remember that news that comes to you through search engines and social networks has already been filtered. To get outside of your bubble, try doing a search with a search engine that you don’t usually use. If a small number of websites provide most of the hits when you search, you can eliminate those by adding a minus sign and the Web address, as in “-www.mediasmarts.ca”.

One way to avoid getting pre-filtered options is to use a news aggregator such as AllSides ([www.allsides.com](http://www.allsides.com)) that provides summaries and links to stories from across the spectrum, to help you see how people with different points of view see issues differently. You can also use a tool such as the Wall Street Journal’s Blue Feed, Red Feed (<http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/>) to see what people with other political views are discussing on social networks.



### 3. Go to the source

For information about the positions of political candidates and political parties, it is always best to cross-reference and double-check stories about party positions or candidate views.

Go to their official websites and social media accounts (but be wary of fake or parody pages). Of course you can always take it offline: during an election attend all-candidates' debates and talk to the candidate or their door-to-door canvassers directly as well.

You can see if someone else has already fact-checked a story. To find out if a fact-checking site is reliable, see if they've pledged to follow the International Fact-Checking Network's code of principles. You can see a list of signatories here: <https://www.poynter.org/international-fact-checking-network-fact-checkers-code-principles>

Understanding the issues – and the terms that are used to talk about them – is a big part of getting good information about politics, too. Encyclopedias (online or offline) are great places to start to get general information on a topic, but remember to view them skeptically too. You can also ask a librarian to recommend a good introduction to the subject.

