FOREWORD

If your mother says she loves you, check it out.

When I was a young reporter in my first job, a veteran newspaperman pulled me aside and gave me this classic bit of journalism advice. When I told my mother about it, she was not amused. But I got the point: that it’s important to verify facts, even those that seem self-evident.

Although this expression takes professional skepticism to an extreme—of course your mother loves you—the essence of this advice is more important now than it’s ever been.

Today, it can be hard to know what, or whom, to believe. With so much information bombarding us 24/7, on platforms as varied as printed pages, Snapchat, and viral videos, how can we sort out real news from fake? What are the tell-tale signs that we’re reading a fact-based story instead of one that’s largely fiction? When we seek information that we can trust, how can we judge what’s objective and what’s biased?

At National Geographic, I like to say that our journalism is on the side of science, on the side of facts, and on the side of the planet. If these principles matter to you, this book can guide you in supporting them, especially the first two. It’s a brief course in how to become media literate, at a time when that matters more than ever.

YOU’LL LEARN HOW TO
- Tell if a website is fake;
- Detect phony photos;
- Become an expert fact-checker;
- Use our “Truth Tool Kit” to sniff out fabricated sources;
- Uncover your own biases (we all have them); and
- Become more open-minded about information you might not agree with.

While you’re building these media literacy skills, you’ll read some fascinating stories about the history of news, as well as how today’s journalists work to uncover the facts and share them with global audiences. We’ll also do our best to look ahead, to see how future modes of reporting and delivering news could affect us all.

Being media literate is the first step toward becoming an informed consumer; a critical thinker; and an educated guardian of our democracy. Thank you. And if that sounds like a lot to take on, just remember the basics: when your mother says she loves you, check it out!

Susan Goldberg
EDITOR IN CHIEF
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PARTNERS
TYPES OF NEWS

Whether you stream your news over the internet, watch it on TV, or read it on social media or in a newspaper, be on the lookout for these common types of news:

BREAKING NEWS

Usually reported the same day or the day after a newsworthy event occurs, these stories often answer basic questions—the who, what, where, when, and why of a story. Typically, they include a time reference, such as “yesterday,” “today,” or “on Tuesday.”

NEWS ANALYSIS

These stories provide additional background and more in-depth information. They sometimes use historical information and research to help readers and viewers assess what may come next.

FEATURES

Often more in-depth than breaking news, features tend to include interviews with famous people or report on trends—for example, if school cafeterias are serving healthier food, or bald eagles are making a comeback, timing can be less important for features.

OPINIONS AND EDITORIALS

Opinion editors, TV presenters, or experts share their perspectives in opinion or editorial pieces. They use research and reporting to build a case to support their opinions.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Through in-depth reporting and original research, journalists reveal information that was previously hidden from, or not commonly known by, the public. These investigative stories are often compiled by teams of reporters and can take days, months, or even years to develop.

DATA JOURNALISM

Data journalists use computer software to gather huge amounts of public information, or data, from governments, police, and other sources. They use the data to reveal important stories, such as increases in certain kinds of crime, and the data can be turned into interactive maps and visuals online or on TV.

VISUAL JOURNALISM

Similar to data journalism, visual journalism often uses interactive online maps and graphics to enhance stories. This style of reporting also features multimedia storytelling, using videos, photos, virtual reality, and other visuals.

PHOTOJOURNALISM

People post hundreds of photos of news events online almost the second they happen. But true photojournalism is different. Instead of showing pictures of everything that happens, a photojournalist captures one powerful moment that communicates the emotion and importance of a story. These photos often appear in newspapers, magazines, or online.
THE SINKING OF THE TITANIC

April 15, 1912

The R.M.S. Titanic, the “unsinkable” ocean liner, had struck an iceberg on its very first voyage. Reporters called emergency rescue operators to find out what was happening. But, in the confusion, only snippets of information came through. The facts were uncertain, and the fate of the passengers was unknown. In one embarrassing story, radio operators confused the Titanic with another ship, telling reporters that everyone on board was safe. The headline in London’s Daily Mail the next day read, “No lives lost.”

The New York Times, however, checked multiple sources, instead of relying on just one. And the paper was the first to get the story right. The morning after the accident, it reported that the Titanic had sunk, while other papers were still saying that the fate of the ship was unknown. The Times continued to beat other reporters to the story as it unfolded throughout the week.

From that day forward, the Times became New York’s leading newspaper and still is today. The way the story was covered also set a new standard for how the media would handle future disasters—committing full resources to a major story and racing to be the first to be published.

TV’S FIRST PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE
September 26, 1960

Presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon squared off in the first televised U.S. presidential debate in history. By 1960, most American homes had televisions, and some 70 million viewers tuned in to watch. At the time, that was the most people ever to have watched a single program.

Nixon entered the debate with a slight lead in the race, but all of that changed when the handsome and well-dressed Kennedy walked onto the stage. In contrast, Nixon was recovering from the flu and was running a fever. He appeared pale, sweaty, and like he had forgotten to shave. Kennedy looked directly into the camera as he gave answers, while Nixon tended to look off to the side.

After the debate, polls showed that people who had listened to the debate on the radio thought that Nixon had won, whereas people who watched the debate on TV thought Kennedy had. Many people believe that Kennedy beat Nixon in the election because he looked better on television. After this debate, no one could deny the power of television in shaping public opinion.

QUEEN ELIZABETH II’S CORONATION
June 2, 1953

When Britain’s Princess Elizabeth was crowned queen, it was huge news in the United Kingdom and around the world. The elaborate ceremony was the first coronation to be televised and the world’s first international television event. People stopped whatever they were doing to watch some streamlining parties. In the end, 22 million people in the U.K. tuned in, as well as millions more around the globe, a remarkable number given that many households didn’t even have TVs yet. The event helped establish television as a new form of mass media.
Most of us want to know what’s going on in our hometown or around the world. If you are reading a trustworthy newspaper or watching reliable TV news, you can usually be confident that the stories have been fact-checked and are true. But when we get news from social media or a video or website, it can be hard to tell where the information came from. How do you know if the story originated from a legitimate news source, or if someone just made it up?
HOW TO BE AN EXPERT FACT-CHEcker

If you use the truth tool kit on the previous pages and are still uncertain about whether a story is accurate, pretend you’re a detective and keep digging, where do you go next? Professional fact-checkers—who make sure stories are correct before they are published—say that looking outside the story is the real secret to success. Use these truth-telling tips to tell if a story is for real.

SEARCH THE EXACT HEADLINE.
Type the exact same title of the story into a search engine. If the story isn’t real, websites may pop up right away that call it out as fake.

LOOK FOR OTHER ARTICLES ON THE SAME TOPIC.
Big news stories will be covered by most major news organizations. If a story seems hard to believe, and it only pops up in one or two places, that’s a warning sign that something’s wrong.

CHECK THE DATE.
Is this a new story, or did it happen a long time ago? If it isn’t current, the information may be incorrect or just out of date.

SEE IF IT’S A KNOWN HOAX.
Many websites are dedicated to sniffing out incorrect stories and urban legends (myths that everyone thinks are true). If a story sounds suspicious, ask an adult to help you look it up on a site that specializes in finding hoaxes, such as Snopes.com, Politifact.com, FactCheck.org, or Hoax-Slayer.net.

DOUBLE-CHECK THE EXPERTS.
Search the experts quoted in the story to learn more about the organizations they represent. Are the experts qualified to speak about the topic? Do the organizations they work for represent a certain point of view? And if so, are experts with differing points of view included in the story? If the article is one-sided, that’s a sign of potentially biased reporting.

GO STRAIGHT TO THE SOURCE.
A reliable news story should say where all the facts came from. Search the Internet to look for the organizations behind the facts. Do they have a particular bias? For example, if an organization that represents peanut growers is behind a study about the health benefits of peanut butter, you know the goal is to sell more peanut butter.

VERIFY IT.
Many social media sites flag the real accounts of famous people or well-known organizations. Look for check marks, icons, or even special emojis next to the account names that show they have been verified. Some fake social media accounts will try to trick people with similar marks elsewhere on the page. If it’s not right next to the account name, it’s probably a phony.

GET UNSTUCK.
Social media is designed to keep you on the site. If you think something’s fishy about a story, leave the social media site and look up the story on a search engine to look for other sources. Also try searching in a new browser or clearing your history, so your search history can’t follow you.

ABOUT A THIRD OF KIDS WHO SHARED A NEWS STORY SAID THEY LATER FOUND OUT IT WAS FAKE OR INACCURATE.
QUIZ: Real or Fake?

1. Someone sends you a story with the headline, "Rats found in school cafeteria!" What should your first reaction be?
   a. Read the headline, share it with everyone you know, and vow to never eat at the school cafeteria again.
   b. Read the headline and immediately start organizing a protest of the school cafeteria.
   c. Read the headline and the full story, and then decide what to do.

2. You’re online, and suddenly a brightly colored, spinning wheel pops up with the message, "You’ve won a prize!" What should your first reaction be?
   a. Awesome! A prize! You click on the link and fill in your name and email address.
   b. You close the window immediately; it could be a scam or computer virus.
   c. There’s no back button, so you click to see what will happen.

3. You discover that you accidentally shared a false story on social media, what should you do?
   a. Nothing. It was just for fun, anyway.
   b. Tell only your family and best friends. They’ll understand, and anyway you’re too embarrassed to tell everyone you shared it with.
   c. Reshare the story to the same people you sent it to the first time, but this time, tell them you found out it’s a fake. Ask them to send out a similar correction if they shared the story with others.

4. An awesome photo circulated on social media. Could it possibly be real? What can you do to find out?
   a. Do a reverse image search on Google or another search engine and see where else the image appears.
   b. Don’t bother checking it. It’s obviously real; otherwise, how could there be even a picture?
   c. See if any of the fact-checking websites have called out the image as a hoax.

5. You see a post on your favorite celebrity’s social media account. She’s saying really weird stuff today—she doesn’t even sound like herself. What do you do?
   a. Share the post with all of your friends. This is pretty entertaining.
   b. Check to see if this is the celebrity’s real account. Look for a check mark or other symbol next to her account name to verify the account is real.

6. You are browsing a well-known news website, but something seems off. The stories look strange, and the website doesn’t look very professional. How can you check if it’s real?
   a. Look at the URL to see if it has a strange ending, like jo or co instead of .com.
   b. Notice if the site has a lot of misspellings or typos.
   c. Do a new Internet search on the company’s name to see what the news organization’s logo looks like on other sites. Check to see if it matches the logo on the site you were looking at.

7. How can you tell if a news story on social media is reliable?
   a. It contains a lot of detail and includes a photo.
   b. It comes from a trustworthy news organization.
   c. It was the first one to come up in a search, so that meant it’s likely the most accurate.

8. "Strange rain: why fish, frogs, and golf balls fall from the skies." This incredible headline actually appeared in Smithsonian Magazine in 2015. How would you check if this story is real or fake?
   a. Do an Internet search on the topic to see if there are other similar stories.
   b. Consider the source of the information. Go to Smithsonian.com and find out what the publication is all about.
   c. Do a search on the experts quoted in the story. Do they come from legitimate organizations?