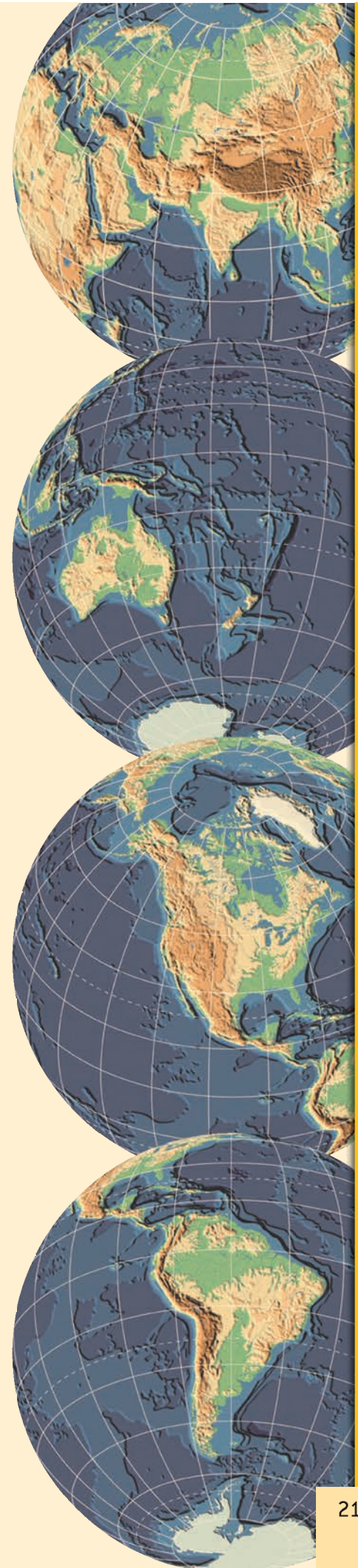


Should I believe it? A guide to evaluating knowledge claims

The three S's: source, statements, self		
Source	Statements	Self
As we gain knowledge from a range of different sources – people, books, Internet sites, media – what general critical questions should we ask about them?	What critical questions should we pose about the knowledge claims themselves – what they say, how they say it, and what justification they provide in support?	What critical questions should we ask ourselves about our own perspectives, blind spots, skills in evaluation, and responsibility for action?

1. Source

- To what extent does this source provide credible authority? What are the speaker's, writer's or organization's qualifications and experience? Are they relevant to the claims being made?
- If the source is claiming to be an expert, has he actually had work published in peer-reviewed journals respected in the relevant field? If you are reading on the web, what kind of website hosts the article (check "about" and "home")? Is it a credible source, such as a university website or a peer-reviewed journal?
- Are there any "red flags" that instantly suggest a dubious source? For example, is the source claiming to be a lone genius, unappreciated and suppressed by the establishment?
- Does the source acknowledge counter-claims or limitations of its own knowledge – as you are expected to do in your own TOK essays?
- Has your understanding of this source been influenced by other sources, such as friends, speakers, bloggers, or other media? If the source has been controversial, is the controversy relevant to the topic and the source's credibility? Is it well-founded criticism, or is it a fallacy of appeal to the speaker or source? (See fallacies p173)
- Does the source give information from an identifiable perspective (See perspectives chapter 1)? Could it have a motive for deception? Is your source consistent with other credible sources? Does it conflict or complement? (See coherence check for truth p57.)
- Does the source provide ways of checking accuracy – references to professional or social organizations, or footnotes to further sources that can be readily traced? Do you judge the sources of your source to be reliable?
- If the source is an eyewitness, how reliable? Are or were his senses working normally, free of drugs or other substances? Did he have good viewing conditions, over adequate time? Was he in a situation of stress at the time of observation? What factors of race, sex, ethnic group, etc. could generate confirmation bias



(p62, 93, 199)? What degree of memory decay is likely with the passage of time? (See eyewitness memory in chapter 6.)

- If the source is a collective one, such as Wikipedia, what degree of dependence will you place on it? Will you consult it at first but read further?
- If the sources are friends, familiar authority figures, or community reports, does personal trust in relationships increase your trust – or possibly undermine your willingness to evaluate the accuracy of the information?

2. Statements

- Why is the particular topic being discussed at this time, and why from this perspective? Is the article contributing to a larger discussion or debate within an area of knowledge, a professional body, or the media? Do the conclusions have implications for any current social issues?
- What knowledge claims are being made by this source? Are they implicit or explicit? What kinds of claims dominate – observational claims, value judgments, metaphysical claims, definitions, hypothetical statements, predictions? (See knowledge claims p45)
- Can you sum up the central arguments the source is making? (See argument p125)
- Can you identify any fallacies of argument? Do they seem to be momentary failures or part of a strategy of communication?
- What seems to be the main goal of this speech, article, blog, or video – to present facts, narrate background, explain ideas, make causal connections, recommend a cure, persuade to a point of view, encourage to take action? If the last, what action are you being encouraged to take, such as buying, giving political support, making changes in your personal life?
- When conclusions are presented, is any account given of the methodology used to gather information, test it, and reach results?
- Are the knowledge claims free of contradictions and supported by evidence? (See coherence and correspondence checks for truth chapter 3) What is the quality and quantity of evidence? Is the support given to knowledge claims based on general surveys or merely anecdotal stories? What other justifications are given?

- If the knowledge claims are accompanied by statistics, maps, graphs, or photographs, are they relevant? Are they factual or emotionally affecting, or both? (See Representation and perspectives interchapter p150.)
- Are there any “red flags” that signal possibly questionable claims: for example, extraordinary claims, conspiracy theories, “secret” information or ingredients, promises of “guaranteed” results, generic all-purpose cures, or claims that are too good to be true?
- Is a particular perspective identifiable through analysis of features of representation: selection of facts, emphasis, colouring of emotions and values, relation of parts, and framing in context? (See Representation and perspectives interchapter p150.)
- Can you further identify broad features of that perspective – the assumptions, values, selected facts, processes for validation, and implications? (See Exploring different perspectives p28)

3. Self

- What features of my own perspective might influence my understanding of the source or the statements – limiting it, biasing it, or deepening it? (See own perspective p26)
- Do I recognize in myself an inclination in advance to believe or reject particular knowledge claims? Is this inclination based on thoughtful evaluation in the past or is it a reaction of bias? (See cognitive biases p199)
- Can I push myself to keep an open mind and apply critical thinking to all sources and topics?
- If I use my own past experience and understanding as a basis on which to judge the plausibility of new statements, how extensive and relevant is that past experience?
- Am I affected by features of a particular source that are irrelevant to the arguments and justification – a speaker’s attractiveness, age, sex, racial or ethnic heritage, manner of dressing and speaking, accent, self-confidence?
- Do I have a responsibility to know about some topics? Do I have a responsibility for taking action on the basis of my knowledge?

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Eileen Dombrowski, Lena Rotenberg, Mimi Bick
Theory of Knowledge. Oxford University Press, 2013