"SIFT": A Method for Evaluating Information Sources
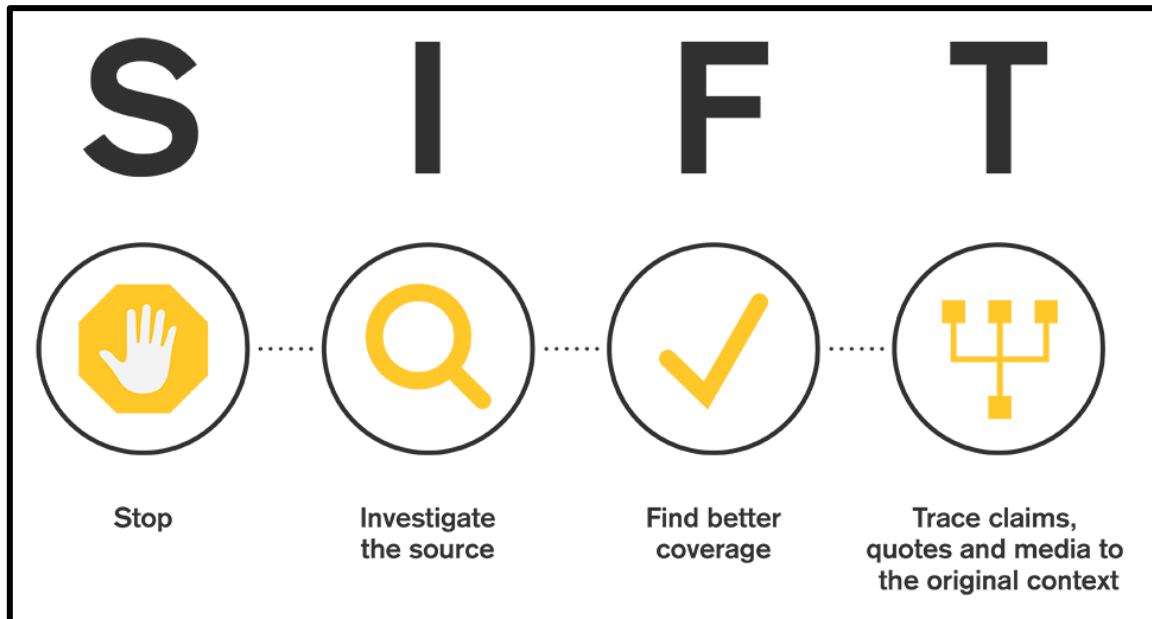
Did you know there is a useful method to help you separate fact from fiction when investigating information on the web? The "SIFT" method can be used to help you determine the credibility of a web source.

What does "SIFT" Stand For?

S: Stop
Before starting to read information sources on the web, stop for a moment. Ask yourself, have you heard of this source before? Is it reputable? Reliable? Truthful? Think about the purpose motivating your research. Do you need a quick resource to re-post on social media, or are you looking for scholarly sources for a research paper? Always come back to your research question and search strategy to stay focused.

I: Investigate the Source
When you land on an unfamiliar web source, find out where the information is coming from before you invest a lot of time reading it. But don't rely solely on what the website says about itself. Go beyond the "About Us" section and resist the temptation to do a top down (vertical) read of the entire page. Read **laterally** instead. This means leaving the source to investigate what others are saying about the source, its author(s), or the publication or organization that produced the information. Search for and examine other web sources. For example, if you find a
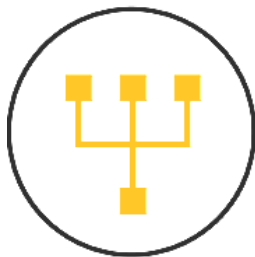
website with information that seems credible, but you're not sure, you could try Googling the author of the source, or use fact-checking websites such as [Snopes](#) or [Media Bias/Fact Check](#) to help you determine the reputation and reliability of the source.

F: Find Better Coverage

To assess the claim(s) made by an information source, to determine whether it is true or false, controversial, or represents consensus on an issue, you will need to search for additional sources. Your original source may be insufficient for your needs, in which case you will want to find better, higher quality sources. Resist clicking on only the first webpage or two in your results lists. Instead look for multiple, varied, and reputable sources for a more in-depth understanding about the claim.

T: Trace Claims, Quotes, and Media to the Original Context

A lot of information on the web is recirculated or reposted from other sources. As information is shared, it may get distorted and important information may be lost, taken out of context, or misinterpreted. For example, a video can be edited to show selected content only, or a news article may inaccurately report the findings of a research study. If your source is not the original, a better strategy to help you understand the material is to find and view the original source of the information to get the full context and to determine if the source you have found accurately represents the original source of information.

What does "Lateral Reading" Mean?

"Lateral reading" is a strategy used by fact-checkers to quickly assess the validity and truthfulness of an information source. As mentioned above, it involves going outside the source or website to find out what other trusted sites have to say about the source. By searching for the name of the website, its authors, or the publisher or sponsor of the source, and scanning and comparing the information you find across multiple sites, you will be better equipped to judge the reputation, quality, and reliability of your source. If you establish that your source is indeed reputable and trustworthy, you can return to it feeling confident that it is worth reading and engaging with more fully. Alternatively, if you discover your source is not a trustworthy site, leave it, and find a better, more reliable source. For more information, watch [this YouTube video](#) by Mike Caulfied, the creator of SIFT, for an example of lateral reading in action.

How can the "SIFT" Method Help me in my Studies?

It can sometimes be difficult to determine whether the information presented to you is credible or not. Taking the time to stop, investigate the information source, find better coverage, and trace claims, quotes, and media back to their original sources can help you understand the context of information sources and better judge their reliability and trustworthiness. This is especially important if you are planning to use a source for your own assignment. The quality (or lack thereof) of the information sources you select affects the quality of your own work.

Need Help?

If you need assistance with using the SIFT method, please visit us at the Research Help Desk on the first floor of the Patrick Power Library. You can also schedule an appointment with a librarian, call, text, or email for assistance. See our Research Help page for more information on how to contact us.

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