

# TWO SIMPLE TESTS CAN SEPARATE TRUTH FROM FICTION IN A WORLD AWASH IN MISINFORMATION



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We live in a world of readily accessible information, maybe a little too accessible.

We simply “Google” to find an answer and treat the top hit as the *obvious* solution. We check a few “other resources” if feeling diligent and, if the information is repetitive, we consider it a job well done. The information is true and the question solved.

Are there better ways to separate credible from junk?

There are!

Recommendations include limiting .com sources and focus on .edu or .gov. Google Scholar, or other advanced searches can collect research-based information.

The **CARS** checklist and the **CRAP** test are two tools used to help validate resources. Deciding what memory aid to use may simply come down to which is easiest to remember.

## **CARS checklist ([bit.ly/carstestwyo](http://bit.ly/carstestwyo))**

**Credibility:** Who is providing the information? Grammatical errors can also be a sign of credibility – or lack thereof. I often see the misuse of homophones (too, two, to) in lesser quality articles.

**Accuracy:** Oftentimes, we automatically consider accuracy by looking for the same information from multiple sites. How current the information is the other element of accuracy. What we know is always changing, especially in science. Recommendations can also change, so following the most up-to-date guidelines and recommendations is important.

**Reasonableness:** Is the information unbiased? This is where sourcing information from scholarly articles comes in handy, because the information should be reasonably unbiased, and recommendations are limited to use or to purchase specific products. A writer trying to sell something is a red flag.

**Support:** Does the author clearly indicate where he or she found the information? Does he or she make himself available for further questions on the subject? An author unwilling to go into further detail on a subject or clarify a point may not be credible.

The CRAP test is similar to the CARS checklist but phrased slightly different.

## **CRAP test ([bit.ly/craptestwyo](http://bit.ly/craptestwyo))**

**Currency:** Similar to accuracy in the CARS checklist, this element identifies how current the information is and how recently the website was updated.

**Reliability:** Does the author provide resources to support unbiased information? Articles riddled with opinion indicate a source lacking reliability.

**Authority:** Is the author qualified to write the article? The author doesn’t have to be a specialist in the subject, but what she or he lacks in credentials should be offset in

credible resources to support claims. Is the article published or sponsored by an organization? The publisher or sponsor can give hints as to whether the information is unbiased, science-based information or simply a means to sell something.

**Purpose/point of view:** What is the point of the article? Is the author trying to sell something? Does the author want to convince us of something using mainly opinion? Both of these scenarios would be indicators of information that is not credible.

**Geography can be important:** Sometimes an article can pass both tests but is still an inappropriate resource due to the geographical origin of the information. This is especially true for agriculture and natural resource subjects because of differences in growing seasons, precipitation, soil types, etc.

Finding specific information about Wyoming can sometimes be difficult; however, information specified for our neighboring states or states with similar climatic characteristics will provide more successful results than following recommendations for a state such as Georgia. This varies widely by subject matter.

I work for University of Wyoming Extension. One of our goals is to constantly work to be a source of unbiased, science-based information pertinent to the citizens of Wyoming. Producing user-friendly reliable information is always on our minds.

In a complex and ever-changing world, where misinformation is accidentally and deliberately generated, a little time spent considering the source of the information you are using and a healthy dose of skepticism can prevent wasting time or ending up with unintended consequences to your actions.

It's a challenging time for us all!

## 'I thought you said that was healthy, and now you say it isn't!?!'

Knowing a little bit about the incremental and sometimes bumpy course of the scientific process can help judge the content of your morning's newspaper (or blog). One study/experiment generally does not generate a definitive conclusion in science. Science is a process, and many studies must be conducted, sometimes over long periods of time, before a fairly definitive conclusion is reached, although nothing is ever beyond question in the realm of science.

This can be hard to remember when reading stories in the mass media. A newspaper will report excitedly on one study conducted with a few subjects (say 15 people) in an area such as nutrition or medicine. Although these can be exciting articles, it is wise to recall that much larger and repeated studies have to be conducted before a reasonably reliable result emerges. This is why you may feel like you are reading "Vitamin X is a wonder drug!" one year and then the next year "Vitamin X is bad!" and begin to believe you can't trust recommendations on anything.

Eventually the bulk of evidence will accumulate and generally give conclusions, which often, though not always, reside in the middle "Vitamin X has positive effects in certain situations and dosages but has negative effects in others."

Remember the old saying, "If it seems too good (or bad) to be true, it often is." You may want to have the same skepticism when reading material where an entire argument, which deviates widely from generally held opinion in an area of science, is based off of only one (or two) small scientific stud(ies) when a whole bunch of studies have been published on the subject - aka "cherry picking" studies. It may be "true" but not the whole "truth."

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