Think Like A Journalist - A News Literacy Guide from NewsTrust.net - The Four Ds of Journalism

NewsTrust was created to promote quality journalism in the Internet age, a formidable task as millions of news-related posts, blogs and sites are created each day.

How do we make sense of all this digital noise?

**NewsTrust knows how.** We have assembled a network of the most talented journalists, educators, scholars and informed users who submit articles, opinion, news and more to our site, to enlighten you on current events that affect your personal and professional world.

You, too, can participate in our collective news evaluation. NewsTrust invites members like you to review submitted stories and rate them according to journalism standards and principles.

Together, we look for the best news coverage on the Web, often according to a theme that builds awareness on long-term topics (health, war, economy, education, government, etc.); this community project also immerses our members in the news process and helps each of us develop our news literacy skills.

By reviewing the news at NewsTrust, you'll begin to think like a journalist.

You'll distinguish news from opinion, become familiar with journalism principles and ethics, and sharpen your critical judgment.

This News Literacy Guide will introduce some important news literacy concepts — and help you get started as a NewsTrust reviewer.

**The Four Ds of Journalism**

The best way to learn news literacy is to think like a journalist.

Reporters have distinct traits that either led them to the profession or that they developed while doing journalism.

The four Ds of thinking like a journalist exemplify these qualities. They are:

1. **Doubt** — a healthy skepticism that questions everything.
2. **Detect** — a “nose for news” and relentless pursuit of the truth.
3. **Discern** — a priority for fairness, balance and objectivity in reporting.
4. Demand — a focus on free access to information and freedom of speech.

1. Doubt — Don't automatically believe everything you read.

If you have studied or practiced journalism, you’re probably reading this to see where, if at all, this guide goes astray. That’s part of a journalist’s profile—a healthy skepticism that questions everything, including issues in which they fervently believe.

Reporters who lack skepticism are easily hoaxed or manipulated. A hoax is a bogus story meant to embarrass the journalist and his or her media outlet.

Think about something in which you passionately believe—the truth about climate change, pro-life vs. pro-choice, liberals vs. conservatives—and then imagine a tipster confirming your worst suspicions.

A non-journalist might take the bait, asking that source easy questions; however, a seasoned reporter would interrogate the source knowing how dissemination of false information not only undermines his or her credibility, but that of the entire media outlet.

To think like a journalist, ask yourself:

- Do I seek information or affirmation?
- Are my beliefs and convictions coloring how I see a topic
- What is the difference between skepticism and pessimism?

2. Detect — Relentlessly pursue the truth to discover the “big picture.”

Journalists have a “nose for news.” They hunt down stories. They follow up on all tips and leads. They are relentless when pursuing the truth.

Reporters share a lot of character traits with detectives who assemble a puzzle piece by piece, or fact by fact, until they see the “big picture.”

Reporters also pursue sources as detectives pursue suspects, giving them their day in court—the court of public opinion, that is.

Of course, not all sources are suspects. Those who aren’t should be expert witnesses because they are either authorities on a topic or have experienced an event first-hand.

To think like a journalist, ask yourself:

- How can I use the Internet like a detective in verifying assertions?
- What is the difference between verification in news and assertion in a blog?
- Does the public have a right to know the news that affects or afflicts them?

3. Discern — Think critically to find a fair balance.

Journalists think critically. They often tell sources that they will contact them again with more questions about a topic or event.

Meanwhile, they are discerning how to balance a story so that it is fair to all parties. They want their stories to be balanced so that their reports are as objective as possible.
Let’s define these terms:

*Fairness* means making sure all viewpoints are included in a story. Reporters discern which viewpoints are more important than others in conveying the truth about a topic or event. If some facts detract from that truth, or are unfair, ethical journalists leave them out.

*Balance* doesn’t mean getting two equal sides of a story. It means discerning which side is more accurate and then gathering facts to make that case by detecting motives of sources and getting expert opinion to support or refute them.

*Objectivity* means seeing the world as it is, not as the reporter or reader would like it to be. Reporters discern whether they have any biases that might taint a story and, if so, how they might adjust for that when filing a report.

To think like a journalist, ask yourself:

- How do I feel when viewing news that omits a viewpoint or hypes another?
- Is the news or opinion politically or personally motivated, slanting truth to manipulate rather than inform?
- When I see a "hole" in a story missing viewpoints or sources how can I fill it with facts using online resources?

4. Demand — Uphold and protect the free flow of information.

The best reporters make demands—on themselves and others.

The most primary demand is for freedom of information. Reporters believe if taxpayers fund a project or function, citizens should have access to details and documents. They believe that when elected politicians meet, the public should be informed in advance, an agenda should be provided, minutes should be taken, and time for public testimony allotted.

Journalists demand that their and citizens’ Constitutional rights are protected, especially the five freedoms of the First Amendment: speech, press, religion, petition and assembly.

The best journalists demand high ethical standards in their own work and in that of others associated with such topics as:

- Plagiarism (passing off someone else’s work as their own)
- Invention (fabricating data and quotations in a story)
- Good taste (deleting offensive language, slurs and stereotypes from reports)
- Conflicts of interest (reporting on issues for personal gain)
- The common good (doing the least harm)

To think like a journalist, ask yourself:

- What are the rights in the Bill of Rights?
- How does freedom of information ensure transparency?
- What role do media ethics play in ensuring quality journalism?

News vs. Opinion
Now that you are thinking like a journalist, one more thing to keep in mind is the difference between news and opinion:

**News** informs. **Opinion** persuades.
**News** is based on multiple viewpoints. **Opinion** is based on singular viewpoints.
**News** believes the facts speak for themselves. **Opinion** believes informed arguments do.
**News** is objective and impersonal. **Opinion** is subjective and personal.

**News formats include:**

- *News Report* — disseminating facts the public needs to know
- *News Analysis* — interpreting issues and events objectively and impersonally
- *Special Report* — focusing in-depth on an issue, newsmaker or event
- *Breaking News* — covering news events as they happen
- *Investigative Reporting* — disclosing data, documents, and testimony
- *Poll* — surveying the public about issues, newsmakers and events

**Opinion formats include:**

- *Opinion* — a stance about an issue, newsmaker or event
- *Editorial* — the voice of an entire publication, such as a newspaper or television station
- *Interview* — questions and answers featuring a newsmaker or source
- *Speech* — spoken remarks by a newsmaker or source
- *Comment* — statement or blog post about issues, newsmakers and events

Remember these definitions when you post a story for review on NewsTrust.

To apply the concepts in this guide, we invite you to review a story on NewsTrust.

By reviewing regularly on NewsTrust, you’ll become a more discerning news consumer, not only because you have access to quality journalism, but also because you will be practicing it.

Remember to think like a journalist — so you can make more informed decisions as a citizen.

Good luck!

**About Michael Bugeja**

Michael Bugeja directs the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication at Iowa State University.

He is also an advisor and an editor at NewsTrust, our social news network devoted to quality journalism.

His Oxford University Press books include *Living Ethics Across Media Platforms* (2008) and *Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age* (2005), both of which have won the Clifford G. Christians Award for Research in Media Ethics.

His comments on ethics have appeared in *The Economist, Futurist, New York Times, Washington Post, Christian Science Monitor* and *USA Today*. 
Bugeja writes about technology and education for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and other publications and online news sites. His scholarship has appeared in *Journalism Quarterly, Journalism and Mass Communication Educator, Journal of Mass Media Ethics, New Media and Society*, and other peer-review publications.

He is a former state editor for United Press International.

If you are interested in learning more about news literacy, you might be interested in these books by Bugeja, an editor and advisor at NewsTrust:

— *How-To News Writer*
— *Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age*
— *Living Ethics across Media Platforms*