

Top Ten Hints for Fact-Checking

1. First, find a fact to check.

- This will not be as easy as you might think.
- Much political info – ads, brochures, speeches, Web sites – is largely fact-free.
- Instead, it can be a slogan or simply opinion or impressions implied but not stated.
- “Day One, Everything Changes” / “It’s Morning in America” / “Yes, We Can.”
- Yes, you can and should check the accuracy/honesty/completeness of the implied impressions – if there’s anything to check.
- That gives voters the full picture and CONTEXT.

2. Check your own biases/ preferences/ viewpoints.

- We more readily believe info that confirms our own points of view.
- That’s a dangerous trap.
- Be doubly skeptical of info that reinforces what you believe.
- Ask yourself: Why do I accept this? Why do I reject it? What’s the EVIDENCE for AND against it?

3. Figure out the SOURCES and METHODOLOGY behind the candidate’s or campaign’s assertions.

- Where did the candidate or campaign get its info?
- How does the ad or info define its terms?
- What is it counting or including?
- What is it leaving out?

4. Look for INDEPENDENT sources of the facts – the most authoritative/credible.

- What agency/group/person collects this kind of info?
- For example: Who collects unemployment statistics? Property tax info?
- What’s the original document, such as a budget or bill?
- Who’s the most respected expert or authority on this subject?

5. Beware the “wobble room” and “weasel words.”

- Be clear on EXACTLY what’s said.
- “Average” vs. “Median,” for example
- “Up to” xx amount
- Asking a question – “Is Dukakis soft on Crime?” or “Is Quayle Ready to be President?” – is a way to imply something without saying it.

6. Be aware of the visual images and the sounds.

- These convey powerful messages and implications without overt statements.
- A great example of how to use images and sound to change meaning:
http://www.pbs.org/30secondcandidate/tricks_of_the_trade/
- The images and sounds can also contradict the facts, suggesting something that’s not true or distorting the reality.

7. Be precise in your own judgments and wording.

- There are reasons to NOT say “That’s a LIE” or “He’s lying.”
- A lie is an INTENTIONAL telling of untruth.
- We seldom know whether the untruth is intentional – we can’t read minds.
- Plus, “lie” or “lying” – those are very emotional words.
- Politicians seldom literally lie. Instead, they use “wiggle room” and “weasel words.”
- Stick with precise, careful phrasing: A “distortion.” Or “misleading” or “inaccurate” or “incomplete” or “exaggeration.”

8. Explain – step by step – your reasoning for the conclusion/ judgment.

- This statement by Candidate X is inaccurate *because*....

9. Cite your sources.

- Tell where you got your facts or info.
- This establishes your credibility.
- It allows others to verify – fact-check – YOU too.

10. Correct your errors quickly and openly.

- Yes, you probably will make mistakes.
- Correcting them also supports your credibility.
- Plus, it’s just the RIGHT thing to do.