Tools of the Trade

**A Process for Avoiding Deception**

**1. Keep an open mind.** Most of us have biases, and we can easily fool ourselves if we don’t make a conscious effort to keep our minds open to new information. Psychologists have shown over and over again that humans naturally tend to accept any information that supports what they already believe, even if the information isn’t very reliable. And humans also naturally tend to reject information that conflicts with those beliefs, even if the information is solid. These predilections are powerful. Unless we make an active effort to listen to all sides we can become trapped into believing something that isn’t so, and won’t even know it.

**2. Ask the right questions.** Don’t accept claims at face value; test them by asking a few questions. Who is speaking, and where are they getting their information? How can I validate what they’re saying? What facts would prove this claim wrong? Does the evidence presented really back up what’s being said? If an ad says a product is “better,” for instance, what does that mean? Better than what?

**3. Cross-check.** Don’t rely on one source or one study, but look to see what others say. When two or three reliable sources independently report the same facts or conclusions, you can be more confident of them. But when two independent sources contradict each other, you know you need to dig more deeply to discover who’s right.

**4. Consider the source.** Not all sources are equal. As any CSI viewer knows, sometimes physical evidence is a better source than an eyewitness, whose memory can play tricks. And an eyewitness is more credible than somebody telling a story they heard from somebody else. By the same token, an Internet website that offers primary source material is more trustworthy than one that publishes information gained second- or third-hand. For example, official vote totals posted by a county clerk or state election board are more authoritative than election returns reported by a political blog or even a newspaper, which can be out of date or mistaken.

**5. Weigh the evidence.** Know the difference between random anecdotes and real scientific data from controlled studies. Know how to avoid common errors of reasoning, such as assuming that one thing causes another simply because the two happen one after the other. Does a rooster’s crowing cause the sun to rise? Only a rooster would think so.

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