Spotting Websites You Just Can't Trust

To function effectively in our world, it is important that you understand that you can't automatically trust everything you find online. People use the Internet to share their opinions and to try to persuade readers to think a certain way.

As a researcher, it is your job to find facts and avoid being fooled by people who are not telling you the whole truth. This activity will help you judge the trustworthiness of a site that you are exploring by working through three key practices.

Lesson 1: Common Sense Matters

One of the best defenses against falling for half-truths told online is your own common sense. If something just doesn't sound right, you should automatically be suspicious!

Spend a few minutes working with a partner to gather statements from a website that you are skeptical about. Record your discoveries here.

Lesson 2: Look for Links

Knowing they must build readers' confidence, legitimate online content creators supply you with sources for the information they are sharing, and online readers should explore multiple sources before deciding what is worth believing.

Working with a partner, look for links on the website you chose in the previous lesson. Has the author included any? Are there any claims made in the text that you wish included links to sources or evidence? Does the author link to websites that you think are credible, or does the author link to websites that you have never heard of before?

Lesson 3: Look Out for Loaded Words

Whenever you are exploring websites about controversial topics, you are bound to come across words and phrases packed with emotion. These kinds of emotionally loaded words and phrases are a sign of bias. Authors who use loaded words and phrases have a strong opinion that they just can't hide—and that means they may intentionally present one side of an issue.

Working with a partner, read through the site that you are exploring. Do you see any loaded words or phrases? Are there places where the author lets his or her emotions about this issue show?