

By [Reid MacCluggage](#)

Train yourself to be skeptical all of the time, but not cynical. There are some journalists and academics who think we are too skeptical. Don't believe them. We don't raise nearly enough questions.

Ask your sources where they got their information. A good question to ask is: How do you know that?

Take special care to understand and check percentages, rates and ratios.

Compile a checklist of questions to ask when confronted with statistics and polling results.

Distrust unanimity. When everyone else is nodding and applauding, step back and think: What have we left out? What have we misunderstood? Why is everyone else so certain?

Look for assumptions and pre-conceived notions in yourself and set them aside.

Zero in on specifics. Beware of generalizations.

Increase the number of "eyes" on major investigative stories and projects.

Beware of stories that are too good to be true. They often are.

Watch out for certain words. When stories report "surges" or "trends" or "waves" or "epidemics," be especially careful.

Watch out for crowd estimates. Don't take the word of sponsors. Check with other sources, too, and, if possible, count the crowd yourself.

Be careful of claims from organizations and individuals who stand to receive foundation grants or government support.

Be skeptical of urgent public concerns that arise suddenly without any notice in which lobbyists, interest groups, and politicians urge legislation or other drastic measures.

Watch out for stories that have "good guys" and "bad guys" until you are satisfied they really are good guys or bad guys.

If a story bothers you, stop and think about why it bothers you. Don't let it be published until you feel right about it. Your gut instinct often gives you the best advice. Take it.

Underscore the importance of attribution. The source of a fact or a quotation gives you and the reader a wealth of information.

Be wary of what The New York Times calls "The Influence Industry." Lobbyists often appear as grass-roots movements, pretending to be just plain folks. But, as The Times points out, "Some of these efforts are ... deceptions in which a special interest pays to create the appearance of a popular ground swell."

Appoint a designated devil's advocate on every major story. This will build in a contrary opinion, which will act as a check on the story's key points.

Look for what's not in a story. Think outside of your own experience. If you were a conservative, what questions would you ask? If you were a liberal, what questions would you ask? If you were a different race, culture, religion, what questions would you ask? Put yourself in the shoes of others and ask their questions. It will make you a better journalist.

Be skeptical. Be skeptical of your own knowledge and understanding of complex subjects. Reporters: Be skeptical of information you get from sources. Editors: Be skeptical of information you get from reporters. But always keep an open mind.