Fact Finding in the Information-Age

Like journalists, you depend on sources for information. You may read a story in the newspaper, see it on televisions, or hear it from a friend. To judge the reliability of the story, you should always consider the source. Use the following **SMART** test to check your sources:

Source. For you to evaluate a source, you have to know who or what the source is. Where does the story come from? Is the person reporting the story an eyewitness to the story? Did the person get the story from others? From eyewitnesses? From officials? Trace the source down. If the source is unclear, be skeptical about the story.

Motive. Why do they say so? Sources often have a special interest or particular point of view that may cause them to slant information to suit their beliefs or causes. Biased sources can be accurate, but you need to check them carefully. Get all sides to a story.

Authority. How good is the source? Eyewitnesses can be wrong. Was the witness in a good position? If the source isn't an eyewitness, make sure it is a source you can trust -- e.g. an expert on the subject, a newspaper with good fact checking. Be wary of any source that is repeating hearsay and rumors.

Review. Go over the story carefully. Does it make sense? Is it logically consistent? Are there any notable errors in facts or conclusions? Make a list of questionable facts. Develop questions about the story.

Two-source test. Double-check everything, if possible. Talk to a second party or tune-in to other newscasts to see if they are also reporting the same story. Research the subject in the library, by interviewing others, and search on the Internet. Does your two-source test confirm or contradict the story?

Resources for checking sources and fact finding:

Constitutional Rights Foundation's website provides links to many research sites, including broadcast media, government, and even sites that specialize in tracking down rumors, urban legends, and myths. Go to www.crf-usa.org and click on "Links," then "Research."