Technology enhances your ability to find successful solutions using search engines such as Google or Bing and sharing them with your fellow citizens on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. However, searching online isn't without its shortcomings. Information posing as fact has proliferated so widely that even the most discerning eye can be fooled. Poorly written articles by unqualified people posing as journalists and stories written to purposely misinform are rampant on the internet. Your credibility rests on the strengths of your research. If the research you present to a governing body, a journalist, or the public is full of misinformation, your credibility will be severely damaged. Fortunately, there are a number of ways to avoid getting tricked.

It's important to approach any information you uncover with a critical eye. But how do you do this when even the most reputable sources may contain information that was misreported? The following tips are some of the ways you can evaluate the information you plan to use in your research.

Foremost, ensure that the source/publication you're reading is credible. 1) Look for sites with a history of publishing credible information that are often cited by established organizations, such as major news outlets, think tanks, academic articles etc. 2) Look to see if the site you are researching issues corrections to stories. No publication, no matter how reputable, has a perfect record of accuracy. Retractions and corrections show their editors value facts. 3) Find out if the site is referenced favorably by established opinion leaders. Do a search on Twitter to see what kind of conversations are taking place about the site you're looking at and if they are trusted. 4) Snopes.com maintains a list of website known to promote misleading news.

Consider the expertise of the story's author. Authors have varied experience as journalists and experts on any given topic. Sometimes news organizations assign inexperienced journalists to beats that require specialized knowledge, like court reporters and science writers. Do some research into their background — most have a Linkedin or Twitter account — to evaluate their experience. See if they're reporting experience or academic history indicates a competency in their beat.

Consider the sources the story uses as supporting information. Online stories often contain links to primary documents, other news stories, personal testimonies, or statements on behalf of an institution. If a quoted source contains a link, check to see if the linked story actually corresponds to the content of the story you are reading. If the source is a quoted individual, do a web search to find other stories quoting this person, find a company bio on the individual, or look for their social media profiles. Anonymous sourcing is a standard practice in journalism to protect a source who may be risking retaliation for talking on the record. However, sometimes individuals remain anonymous to avoid accountability to provide cover when passing false information. When researching solutions, your evidence will have more impact if you're working from primary sources rather than from secondary or third-hand sources.

Be skeptical of sensational headlines. Headlines are often purposefully provocative or vague to compel the reader to click on the link. This is because the business model of most online news websites' is derived from pay-for-performance advertising – the more impressions an article gets when people click on it, the more money the organization raises from the ads displayed on the page. Chances are the story is more benign than the headline

implies. Remember, the headline is not the full story. Take the time to read the whole story and see if it is consistent with the headline before drawing a conclusion based on the headline alone. Make sure when you share a story on social media the headline accurately reflects what the story is reporting.

Note the date the story was published. When you find articles while researching your issue ensure that the date of the article reflects contemporary events. If the article is over a year old, there may be a chance that there is further reporting that strengthens or weakens the points highlighted in the article. Do further research to see if this is the case. When sharing on social media, the timeliness of a story is important to consider especially if it references a current event. Sometimes people share older articles that have the unintended consequence of distorting current events. People sharing old news may be mistaken to think it relates to a current situation (e.g., a story about a municipality bonding for a new capital project despite the fact the municipality is currently facing a budget crisis; the story is from several years prior and has nothing to do with the current budget situation). Before sharing on social media, make sure the story was published recently enough that it reflects current events accurately.

Find expert opinion. It is not unusual that the evidence you have found on your topic area is too complex to understand without having specialized knowledge. Documents like legal opinions, architectural plans, housing plans, environmental commission reports may require expert advice.

Perhaps the hardest aspect to overcome is one's own bias. This is more widely known as 'confirmation bias' – the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's

existing beliefs or theories. Personal bias is also the hardest to identify since people are reluctant to doubt their own beliefs. Counter this by remaining skeptical of stories that confirm your worldview. If you read a story about misconduct involving a public figure you already do not trust, do not automatically assume the story to be accurate. Remember, no-blame approach requires you to get past your personal biases when researching and sharing solutions. This immunizes your personal bias and focuses your attention on the evidence when you are not looking to place blame on a person or a party.