



5 WAYS TO SPOT
'FAKE'
RESEARCH

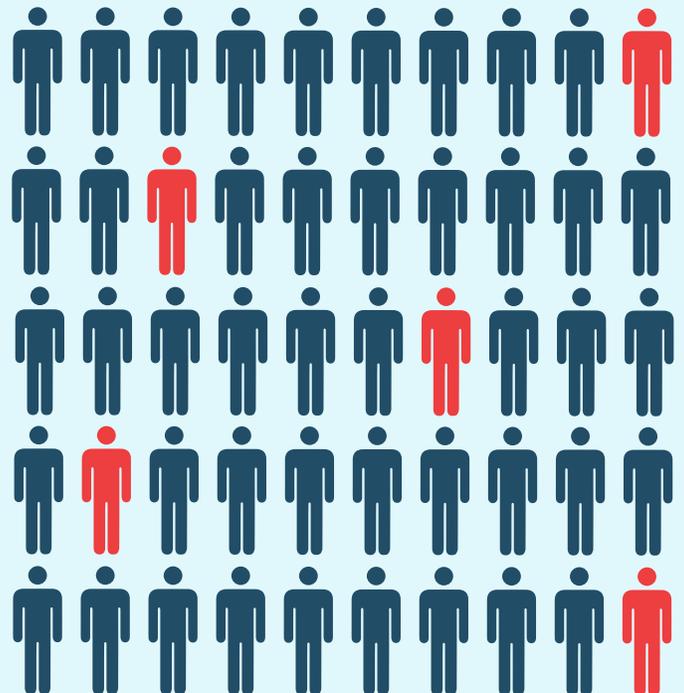
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With the introduction of new terms such as “**fake news**” and “**alternative facts**,” one area of interest that has not garnered as much attention is “fake research.” There is no denying the importance of research—research is conducted to make important decisions every day, both in our professional and personal lives. Sometimes, we may be too trusting of research results, especially if we see catchy headlines or results shared by a friend or family member on social media. Differentiating between “**good**” and “**bad**” research is critical. But how can we differentiate good from bad, or fake from real? Critical determinations of research quality are important to ensure the science behind it is rigorous and meaningful. This guide offers **five questions to ask of research to help spot “fake” research.**

HERE ARE FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK OF RESEARCH:

1. IS IT GENERALIZABLE?

Generalization involves drawing broad inferences from particular observations. For example, survey research using a random sample allows researchers to generalize the results to the population. Generalization depends on certain factors, such as sample size and response rate. Examining the methodology is a good first step in deciding if the results can be generalized.



2.

IS IT UNBIASED?

Good research is unbiased. When examining research, look at how data are collected to see if it is free from potential influence. For example, if a survey was conducted, ensure the wording of the questions did not encourage a desired response. Determine how the survey was distributed; a confidential or anonymous survey typically provides the most unbiased response. Also, review who conducted the research, and whether the conclusions are consistent with other data and research.

Below are two types and examples of biased survey questions to avoid:

LEADING QUESTIONS:

Leading questions prompt the respondent to provide the “correct” or desired answer, whether intended or not. Having someone review a survey before sending it out helps weed out poor questions.

EXAMPLE: “How does your lack of flexibility at work affect your level of job satisfaction?”
(Instead the question could be worded as: “To what degree flexibility at work important to you?)



LOADED QUESTIONS:

Loaded questions are worded in a way that may force the respondent to answer in a way that does not reflect how they feel.

EXAMPLE: “Why are you dissatisfied in your current role?” (What if the respondent isn’t dissatisfied with their job? This question may lead the respondent to make up something negative about their job, or it may lead them to simply not respond. Instead the question could be worded to say, “Describe your job satisfaction in your current role.”





IS IT TRANSPARENT?

Good research is transparent about its methodology, data collection, and sponsorship/funding source. The methodology section should always answer who, what, when, where, why, and how. Additionally, researchers should be open and honest about the limitations or flaws in the research. This transparency can aid in future research. If any of these transparency components are missing, it is a red flag.

Therefore, research descriptions should answer the following questions:

WHO WAS INVOLVED IN THE RESEARCH?

When addressing the “who” in the methodology, this should include a description of the respondents (including demographics), how they were recruited, and their compensation, if any. It also should include anyone else who was involved in research (i.e., if there was a focus group, who conducted the session, etc.).

WHAT WAS THE SAMPLE SIZE AND RESPONSE RATE?

Disclose how many people were sampled and how many participated. For example, the survey received 350 respondents, but a request to complete the survey was sent out to 1000 people.

WHAT TYPE OF RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED?

Disclose the research method used, such as surveys or focus groups. Was the survey both quantitative and qualitative?

WHEN WAS THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

Disclose the entire timeframe of when the research was conducted. When was participation requested? When were the surveys administered and completed? Sometimes, research may appear outdated or a societal event may occur that could affect responses.

WHERE AND HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

This should indicate where and how the research took place. Was the survey administered online or via email? Was it only conducted in the United States? Was it conducted in the workplace?

WHY WAS THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN THIS WAY?

This part of the methodology should explain why certain research methods were chosen. Why was the methodology best suited to answer the research question?

4.

IS IT AS OBJECTIVE AS POSSIBLE?

Research should be objective as much as possible from personal interest or emotional preferences. Understandably, researchers may become emotionally attached to research and desire a certain outcome, but it is important to remain objective or recognize subjectivity.

Steps to maximize research objectivity:



Question the sources you choose and consider all the facts.

Your sources should reflect different viewpoints. Sometimes playing “devil’s advocate” brings clarity and discovery.



Approach the topic from a different angle and pose different questions. This may strengthen, validate your argument, or you may even change your point of view once you consider each “side.”



Point out gaps or fallacies in your research. This objectivity will give you a more rounded, complete view of your research.



Be open and transparent about your results. Did your results differ from your expectations? Examine your findings from multiple viewpoints.



5.

IS IT ETHICAL?

Ethical research practice is vital to producing valid research. In 1978, the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research issued the Belmont Report outlining ethical principles and guidelines for research involving human subjects. Individuals must give consent before you involve them in research, and understand how the information they provide will be used. Remember, research should always be voluntary. In addition to protecting the research participant, there are many other ethical standards researchers should uphold including proper source citation, retaining data for future research as well as to verify research findings, and being transparent about any error or skewed result, to name a few.

Below is an example of what should be disclosed to the participants prior to their participation:



- What personal information will be collected and tracked
- Research risks
- How the responses will be shared and used
- Accurate range of participation time
- Contact information for the survey point of contact for questions
- Ability for participants to decline questions or withdraw from the survey at any time



All in all, conducting good or valid research can be difficult, and it is easy to allow **human error**. Additionally, it is important that as consumers of research, we **critically assess and analyze research** to determine the extent to which it is generalizable, unbiased, transparent, objective, and ethical.



The Institute for Public Relations offers the **IPR Research Bootcamp**, a one-day step-by-step training on how to conduct and assess research, from planning to conducting to evaluation.

If you are interested in hosting or attending the research bootcamp, please contact **Sarab Kochhar** at sarab@instituteforpr.org