

## How Do You Know What to Believe on the Internet?

Anyone can build a website and put any information on it they want. The information does not have to be accurate, authenticated, or true. Some websites are designed to deliberately spread unscientific information about topics, while many others were not deliberately designed to mislead people, but may contain inaccurate information. Some websites are designed to support the views of a particular political, business, or religious group. Many of these websites only present information that agrees with their views, even if that viewpoint is not supported by scientific research. Of course it is important to learn the viewpoints of different groups to know what different people think about how to solve problems. But it is also important to be very aware of who is providing the information so that you can judge whether or not the information is accurate or biased.

Even a Wikipedia article can be written and/or edited by anyone. The author may be a world-renowned expert or it may be someone who is really interested in the topic, but accidentally includes inaccurate information because they just do not know that much about the topic. Sometimes people have even been known to post incorrect information on Wikipedia as a joke.

Often people reporting news do not have a good understanding of the science behind the story they are covering. So even websites of some national news organizations can contain inaccurate or incomplete information.

So how do you know what information is accurate and to be trusted as fact? First of all, be aware of who is in charge of developing the website and what message they are trying to get across.

There are some organizations whose purpose is to provide accurate information. For example, If a person needs accurate scientific information related to geology, one of the best sources is the United State Geological Survey ([www.usgs.gov](http://www.usgs.gov)) or the geological survey in your state (<http://www.stategeologists.org/>). For national parks check the national parks website ([www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)). For information about soils check the Natural Resources Conservation Service (<http://soils.usda.gov/>).

For some of the geoscenarios, you will find two lists of websites: those that you can depend on for the most accurate scientific information that is available and those that include the opinions and viewpoints of different groups about a problem or issue related to the geoscenario. The second group may include opinions or viewpoints that are not necessarily supported by scientific data.