

## How to Find Evidence to Support Any Argument

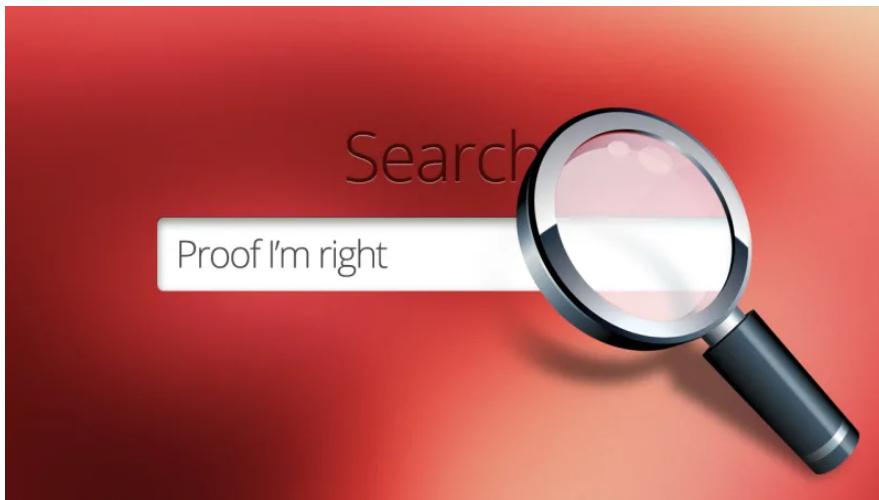


Alan Henry  
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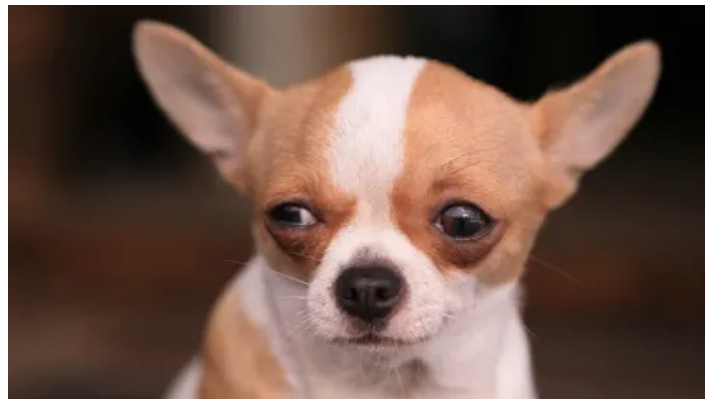
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Information is knowledge, and knowledge is power. If you want someone to rally to your cause, support your position, or put you in a position of authority, you need to be able to back up your positions and sway others from theirs. The trouble is, not every point has supporting data, and not every opinion is swayed by facts. That doesn't have to slow you down though. Here's how to find data to support any point, even the ones you disagree with, so you can better inform your own.

### Why Learning to "Prove" the False is a Valuable Skill



The trouble (or beauty) of the internet is that if you can think of something ridiculous, someone probably subscribes to it, and they likely have their own world of evidence to back it up. To them, that information is absolute fact and cannot be questioned. In some cases, they may even know it's not accurate, but because it supports their point—or rather, because it supports their confirmation bias—it gets rolled out whenever they need it.

Being able to support any point—even when it's absolutely wrong—has benefits beyond just winning arguments. The goal of this post isn't to show you how to flash evidence to back up things you know are false, it's to give you a way to challenge your own confirmation bias and to be rigorous about your beliefs and opinions. Since it's easy to, with the right spin and the right sources, find seemingly legitimate data for any point, you can—and should—use these techniques to understand how your own confirmation bias colors your decisions, and challenge it whenever possible. The best and strongest beliefs are the ones challenged, re-evaluated, and tempered with evaluation, information and research.



### Know How Confirmation Bias Colors Your Decisions

You know those moments when you get an idea, or make a decision, and everything you see seems to...

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### Find Good Evidence



The first step in finding evidence or data to support any point—even those that disagree with yours—is to wade into the world of people who support the point or position you're studying. It can be frustrating, but first, separate your personal perspective from what you're investigating. Then, dive into the world of opposing viewpoints.

#### Embrace Google

Google makes this really, really easy. You can pretty much type in any statement or position, hit search, and find a wealth of information both proving and disproving the idea. David McRaney quotes Justin Owings in his [piece on confirmation bias](#):

“Thanks to Google, we can instantly seek out support for the most bizarre idea imaginable. If our initial search fails to turn up the results we want, we don’t give it a second thought, rather we just try out a different query and search again.”

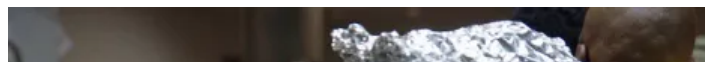
Take the time to find some semi-authoritative sources in a field that support the position you're researching. For politics, this is pretty easy—you can probably already name news sources or blogs off the top of your head that lean in one direction or another. The same applies for scientific topics as bombastic as climate change and as nuanced as human spaceflight. Simply searching "arguments for/against [X Topic]" will turn up a ton of information. Just be careful not to rely entirely on the news sources or blogs you find. Doing so will devalue your argument, since people will immediately reject evidence that comes from someone with a perceived bias. Instead, source the actual data they present.

#### Find Studies and Case Law with Google Scholar



If you're looking for scientific papers, head over to [Google Scholar](#). Even issues with general consensus have studies that contain multiple viewpoints. Almost every study lists areas for additional research that points out gaps in current understanding—holes that are often exploited by people who want to prove the research wrong. If you're interested in social issues and legal precedents, toggle "Case Law" at Google Scholar, or start searching for court cases and judgements related to issues you're researching. Many judgements—especially from the Supreme Court—have dissenting opinion that are great reading if you want to understand the perspective of someone who disagrees.

#### Talk to People Who Can Provide Supporting Information





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In addition to looking through contrary eyes, consider asking others—in legitimate places of discussion, that is—to help you with the exercise. Seek the opinions of people you don't know, experts in a field, and skeptics. Obviously, people who hold the opinion you're studying will be more than happy to explain their rationale for supporting it. They probably have their own evidence they'd be happy to show you. Take an interest, and study it critically. We're not saying agree with them, and we're not saying fight them, but we are saying that even when you know someone is full of it, taking a good and honest look at the data they provide to support their point will only give you a more rounded view of an entire issue. (Or a renewed passion for your own perspective.)

Of course, if someone is trying to explain that "the government is beaming mind control rays through our cell phones" and has a boatload of extremely questionable proof to support the theory, your mind is unlikely to be swayed. However, reviewing even that proof can give you insight into the mindset and the psychology that drives those theories and the people who support them—and can help you identify when those same tactics are used in more mainstream ways that may be directed at you, like political campaigns, special interest advocacy, and even commercial advertising.

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#### Talk to People Who Disagree, but Can See It from Your Perspective



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There's a lot to be learned from people who disagree with the point you're trying to prove, too—after all, the pieces of evidence they find most convincing are the ones that'll best convince your opposition. Even experts in a field are often willing to entertain opposing viewpoints to their own research. Some of the best conversations I've had with some of my old physics professors began with questions like "Why do you think people believe the contrary," or "What other theories explain the same phenomenon?" If you're interested in engaging others on a topic, consider the [StackExchange's Skeptics board](#) or the Skeptic Subreddit.

In general, both places offer rigorous discussion of topics with multiple viewpoints in mind. Keep in mind however that both places are best served if you're open about what you're researching and that you genuinely want to hear all viewpoints (as opposed to making a splash with a controversial statement). Encourage people to put themselves in someone else's shoes and you'll get more empathetic responses, and those responses will show you how to build your argument so it's convincing.

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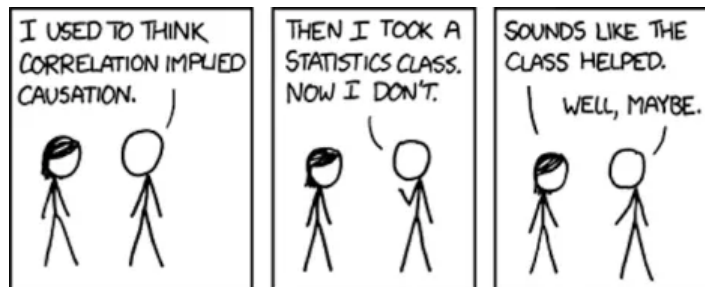
### Avoid Bad Evidence



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Of course, there isn't always hard data to support every perspective of point. Some things are just factually incorrect, but that usually doesn't stop arguments around them. In many cases, "controversy" over an issue is really a matter of information and data on one side, and misinterpretation (or multiple interpretations) or rationalization tricks on the other. If you can learn to see those tricks when they're used, or how someone can misinterpret information that seems so plain and clear, you'll never be duped by them again, and you'll catch yourself before you use them.

Watch Out for Logical Fallacies; They Make Your Argument Less Convincing



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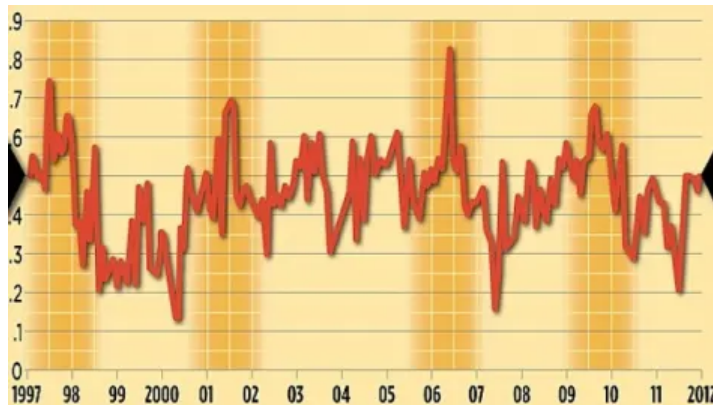
[Logical fallacies](#), or arguments that use errors in reasoning, are all too common in contentious debates. They're used by politicians, journalists, and people fighting in comment sections. The ability to see a fallacious argument for what it is and to think critically will help you avoid being swayed simply by people who are good at rhetoric, or arguments that appeal to your interests (and save you from making the same mistakes with your arguments). [Wikipedia's list of fallacies](#) is a good place to read more about logical fallacies, but [LogicalFallacies.info](#) is packed with examples and deeper descriptions. If you're really committed to the topic, [this site has a nice, large poster of fallacies](#) that you can refer to at any time.

Logical fallacies don't make the point you're making untrue, it just makes your argument much less convincing and built on a shaky foundation. Avoid them when

anyone who tries to disprove your point or prove their own only by deconstructing an argument through fallacy, as opposed to presenting their own information and interpretation.

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#### Avoid Carefully Curated Data, It's Almost Always Hiding Something



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When you see data being selectively used to support a particular stance, or a study being used to support a point but critical information about the study or the data is left out, be wary and seek out the additional information. Tune your BS sensor to its highest setting (even if you're studying something you agree with) and [challenge the data you see to be as complete and accurate as possible](#). If you can't find all of the information in one place, dig deeper—almost everyone with an interest at heart will hold back information that isn't relevant to their point (or that may contradict it), so for that very reason you should sniff it out.



#### How to Determine If A Controversial Statement Is Scientifically True

Every day, we're confronted with claims that others present as fact. Some are easily debunked, some

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Read the actual study being referenced, or search for more articles or published reports on the topic you're studying. If you're reviewing statistics, study their context. Are you studying a monthly jobs report? Expand your search to encompass a quarter, or several years so you get a better picture of the trend. Is a company

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numbers include shipped and sold, as opposed to just shipped to retailers. Reading an article that touts "30% of people believe Y" as a headline? Remember that also means that 60% of the same people surveyed believe something different, or disagree with Y entirely. In all of these cases, you're not trying to refute or support a specific perspective, you're just trying to get closer to the truth.

### Keep the Best Evidence and Leave the Rest Behind



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When you've finished your homework, the last and best thing to do is to present your research with the best possible factual information to support the point you're investigating. Even if you know the point is outright false, put the data you did find forward first, and save the logical fallacies and semantic arguments for another time. Sure, it may be more tempting to bring them out first in an attempt to be convincing, but if your goal is to actually understand how someone may come to the conclusion at hand, your best bet is to start with whatever evidence there is to support it, and draw your line from there.

After all, even the most mind-boggling beliefs and perspectives are usually based on half-truths or old information that people cling to, or that have been rebuffed by new information. If you can collect as much factual data to lead to the conclusion you want to understand, you can see how people may have thought, for example, at one time that the earth was flat and there must be some far-off end to it, where everything just falls off. Of course, new information has disproven that notion, but there are reasons to understand why someone may have thought that way at one time —and how those beliefs changed and evolved over time.

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Remember, understanding how someone might get to a conclusion and that conclusion being true are different—you're not betraying your own beliefs by studying others. Quite the contrary—McRaney [explains](#):

Over time, by never seeking the antithetical, through accumulating subscriptions to magazines, stacks of books and hours of television, you can become so confident in your world-view no one could dissuade you.

Remember, there's always someone out there willing to sell eyeballs to advertisers by offering a guaranteed audience of people looking for validation. Ask yourself if you are in that audience.

In science, you move closer to the truth by seeking evidence to the contrary. Perhaps the same method should inform your opinions as well.

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The next time you find yourself riled up against a specific political opinion, online argument, or you catch yourself banging your head against the wall because your relatives are driving you crazy, take some time to think about why they think the way they do, and where they're getting their information. Try to understand how convincing their information is, and whether it's based on something you don't know, rooted in rhetoric and fallacy, or a product of misinformation, outdated information, or purposefully twisted information.

The better your understanding of any viewpoint—especially the ones you disagree with—the better you'll understand your own, and the more convincing you'll be when it comes time to make your own case and present your own facts.

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This post is part of our [Evil Week](#) series at Lifehacker, where we look at the dark side of getting things done. Knowing evil means knowing how to beat it, so you can use your sinister powers for good. Want more? Check out our [evil week tag page](#).



#### Welcome to Lifehacker's Fourth Annual Evil Week

With Halloween growing closer, we're relaxing our ethical standards and looking to the dark side of

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