



Is this source any good?

Top tips for beginners: source evaluation

TOP TIPS Finding information is the easy bit. Deciding whether to believe it is where beginners come unstuck. Use this sheet whenever a claim lands in front of you and someone will act on it.

01 Grade source and information separately.

A reliable source can be wrong on the day, and an unknown account can post something true. UK policing and NATO grade source and information on separate scales, and so should you. ^{1,8,9}

A national paper misreads a court listing: reliable source, wrong information.

06 Distrust the polish.

A professional logo and an official-sounding web address are simple to fake. A site's About us page tells you what the site says about itself. Lateral reading tells you what everyone else says. ^{3,4}

No named editor, no address, a contact form, domain three weeks old.

02 Stop before you share.

Mike Caulfield's SIFT method starts with Stop: Stop, Investigate the source, Find better coverage, Trace claims to the original context. If a post stirs you up, open a new tab rather than hit the share button. ^{2,3}

Viral post, 1,200 reposts, pulse up. New tab first.

07 Date the original, not the repost.

Recency is not reliability. The 1,200th repost adds nothing the first one lacked. Date the earliest version you can reach and compare it with the date on whatever landed in front of you. ²

Article dated today; the forum post it quotes is two days old.

03 Read laterally, not vertically.

In a Stanford study, professional fact checkers glanced at a page and then checked what the rest of the web said about its publisher. They beat historians and students, and faster. Search for the publisher, not the claim. ^{4,12}

"northern-haulage-news.example" - site:northern-haulage-news.example

08 Ask why it exists.

Every page exists for a reason: to inform, to sell, to settle a score or to chase clicks. A three-week-old domain with adverts on every page has told you its motive already.

Every page carries adverts; the domain is three weeks old. Clicks.

04 Find the original.

Primary is first-hand: the filing, the court record, the witness. Companies House registers company information; The Gazette carries formal insolvency notices. A screenshot or "reports say" is secondary, so trace back to whoever knew directly. ^{2,13,14}

Article quotes "a post on a drivers' forum". The forum post is the source, not the article.

09 Treat AI summaries as leads.

An October 2025 EBU and BBC study of more than 3,000 AI-assistant news answers found at least one significant issue in 45% and serious sourcing problems in a third. Use the summary to find sources, then read them. ^{5,6}

Assistant says "reports of insolvency". Find the report, then grade that.

05 Count origins, not copies.

Three blogs repeating one article are one source. Everything that traces back to a single origin is circular reporting, which is why the College of Policing's "B" grade demands separate corroboration. ¹

Three blogs, all linking to the same article: one claim, not four.

10 Word it with the yardstick.

PHIA sets standard UK government words for likelihood, from "remote chance" to "almost certain", alongside a confidence rating of low, moderate or high. Say how far you trust the claim, why, and what you checked, with a date. ⁷

"It is unlikely that Harrowgate Freight has entered administration. Low confidence."



■ Grading scales side by side (say which you use)

SCALE	SOURCE (OR LIKELIHOOD)	INFORMATION (OR CONFIDENCE)
3x5x2 (UK police)	1 reliable, 2 untested, 3 not reliable	A known directly, B indirectly but corroborated
3x5x2, continued	Sharing code: P or C	C indirectly, D not known, E suspected false
Admiralty (NATO)	A completely reliable to F cannot be judged	1 confirmed by other sources
Admiralty, continued	Wording differs slightly between publications	6 truth cannot be judged
PHIA yardstick: terms	Remote chance, highly unlikely, unlikely, realistic possibility	Likely or probable, highly likely, almost certain
PHIA yardstick: ranges	Remote chance ($\leq 5\%$), realistic possibility ($\approx 40\text{--}50\%$)	Almost certain ($\geq 95\%$); confidence low, moderate, high
Remember	3x5x2 numbers the source, Admiralty letters it	Fictional forum post: 2D, F6, unlikely, low confidence

■ Worked example (fictional)

- 1 A viral post says Harrowgate Freight Ltd (fictional) "has gone into administration, drivers unpaid", with a screenshot from northern-haulage-news.example. 1,200 reposts. We stop.
- 2 We trace the three blogs repeating it. All link to one article: one claim, not four. A lateral search finds nobody else mentioning the publisher.
- 3 We find the original: a forum account two days old, no other activity. Then the primary records, Companies House and The Gazette. Neither shows anything.
- 4 We log: "Source 2, information D. It is unlikely that Harrowgate Freight has entered administration. Low confidence. Checked Companies House and The Gazette 23 September 2026. Re-check 25 September."

■ Common mistakes

- ✗ Counting repeats as corroboration; ten copies of one post are one source.
- ✗ Trusting a polished site or its About us page instead of reading laterally.
- ✗ Confusing recency with reliability; the latest repost is not fresh evidence.
- ✗ Citing an AI summary as a source rather than a lead.

Keep it lawful

Stick to public information. If a source leads to personal data, UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018 apply: have a clear purpose and collect only what is proportionate.¹⁰ Never access an account or system without authorisation to "check" a claim; logging into the drivers' forum on someone else's account to see who posted would be Computer Misuse Act 1990 territory.¹¹

Grading and confidence wording are core to the course. Find out about our Level 3 Award in OSINT at obsidianarctraining.com.

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■ REFERENCES

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