

College Writing R4B
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Don't Generate Waste, Ask "WAIST?"¹
Evaluating Your Everyday Sources

Due to bCourses on Thursday, January 26

Before you begin this assignment, I offer a few morsels for thought, one from a recent news commentary and another from a century-old short story (i.e. the latter is fiction):

As for readers, we're the ones consuming all this news. Our clicks feed ads and show media companies what sorts of stories go viral — which can lead to more of those types of stories. Social media has also effectively turned us all into publishers. Each time you like a Facebook post, your connections become a new audience. And it has your implicit signature of approval. We can think before we click: Who is providing this news? Do they have incentives to lie? And if we see our connections spreading lies, how might we confront them?

"We should have the sense of responsibility that anything you click on will affect other people," [University of Texas Professor Angela] Lee said. "I always tell my students: 'Click like you mean it.'"

—"Fact Checking Won't Save Us from Fake News," Brooke Borel (Jan. 4, 2017)

"Beware of first-hand ideas!".... "Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand, for then they will be far removed from that disturbing element—direct observation. Do not learn anything about this subject of mine—the French Revolution. Learn instead what I think that Enicharmon thought Urizen thought Gutch thought Ho-Yung thought Chi-Bo-Sing thought Lafcadio Hearn thought Carlyle thought Mirabeau said about the French Revolution. Through the medium of these ten great minds, the blood that was shed at Paris and the windows that were broken at Versailles will be clarified to an idea which you may employ most profitably in your daily lives.... You who listen to me are in a better position to judge about the French Revolution than I am. Your descendants will be even in a better position than you, for they will learn what you think I think, and yet another intermediate will be added to the chain. And in time...there will come a generation that has got beyond facts...a generation...which will see the French Revolution not as it happened, nor as they would like it to have happened, but as it would have happened, had it taken place in the days of the Machine."

—"The Machine Stops," E.M. Forster (1909)

¹ WAIST = *Why Am I Sharing This?*

The Elephant in Your Brain

Admit it: from time to time, you've probably shared something hastily on social media that appealed to you emotionally without thinking much about it—a funny meme or GIF that was maybe a little mean; a link to an article that you didn't read beyond the incendiary and possibly misleading headline; a link to a video you shared just because a friend (or “friend”) did, even though you didn't watch more than a few seconds of it.

It's hard *not* to do this because of something the psychologist Jonathan Haidt describes through the metaphor of an Elephant and a Rider: In each of our brains there is a Rider representing our reasoning that helps us rationally navigate our decisions and actions, and a powerful Elephant that represents our intuitive and emotional reactions to things. Picture a Rider sitting atop a six-ton Elephant. When the Elephant is angry, distracted, scared, or otherwise stirred up, guess which in this pair controls our decisions?

That's what often happens when we're online—quickly watching, reading, liking, commenting, and sharing: the Elephant is calling the shots, running wildly around while the Rider hangs on for dear life. Now, hard as it is to do, let's help your Rider to take control and *slow your Elephant down*.

The Assignment: Instead of Generating Waste, ask WAIST?

First, I'd like you to go to bCourses and read the article, “Fact Checking Won't Save Us from Fake News,” by Brooke Borel.

Next, go to your favorite social media feed(s) and find two things that you would typically share or like reflexively—articles, blog posts, videos, memes or the like—that come from sources you don't immediately recognize. These might be serious or intended as jokes, but whatever they are, they'd have to contain some element that would have to be verified: claims, facts, statistics, quotes from public figures, and so forth. Also, these should be things that stir you up emotionally in some way, things that you might share or repost without much thought.

Then ask yourself, “Why Am I Sharing This?”, and respond to the following prompts about each of the two items you've selected. Post your response to bCourses:

- a) First describe what the thing is in some detail.
- b) Next, describe why this appealed to you. Why was your first instinct to share it?
- c) Identify who posted it. What do you know about them? Is it original or a re-post? If you don't know the person/media outlet/group responsible for the original posting, do some digging and describe what you discover. Does the originator have particular biases? Is the information accurate/truthful? On what basis do you make this judgment?
- d) Consider: how would this post affect your audience? What benefits or problems might follow from posting it quickly without consideration?
- e) Knowing what you know now, would you still share this with your followers? Why or why not? What have you come to realize by doing this exercise?