

A Rough Guide to SPOTTING BAD SCIENCE

Being able to evaluate the evidence behind a scientific claim is important. Being able to recognise bad science reporting, or faults in scientific studies, is equally important. These 12 points will help you separate the science from the pseudoscience.

1. SENSATIONALISED HEADLINES

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Article headlines are commonly designed to entice viewers into clicking on and reading the article. At times, they can over-simplify the findings of scientific research. At worst, they sensationalise and misrepresent them.

7. UNREPRESENTATIVE SAMPLES USED



In human trials, subjects are selected that are representative of a larger population. If the sample is different from the population as a whole, then the conclusions from the trial may be biased towards a particular outcome.

2. MISINTERPRETED RESULTS



News articles can distort or misinterpret the findings of research for the sake of a good story, whether intentionally or otherwise. If possible, try to read the original research, rather than relying on the article based on it for information.

8. NO CONTROL GROUP USED



In clinical trials, results from test subjects should be compared to a 'control group' not given the substance being tested. Groups should also be allocated randomly. In general experiments, a control test should be used where all variables are controlled.

3. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST



Many companies will employ scientists to carry out and publish research - whilst this doesn't necessarily invalidate the research, it should be analysed with this in mind. Research can also be misrepresented for personal or financial gain.

9. NO BLIND TESTING USED



To try and prevent bias, subjects should not know if they are in the test or the control group. In 'double blind' testing, even researchers don't know which group subjects are in until after testing. Note, blind testing isn't always feasible, or ethical.

4. CORRELATION & CAUSATION



Be wary of any confusion of correlation and causation. A correlation between variables doesn't always mean one causes the other. Global warming increased since the 1800s, and pirate numbers decreased, but lack of pirates doesn't cause global warming.

10. SELECTIVE REPORTING OF DATA



Also known as 'cherry picking', this involves selecting data from results which supports the conclusion of the research, whilst ignoring those that do not. If a research paper draws conclusions from a selection of its results, not all, it may be guilty of this.

5. UNSUPPORTED CONCLUSIONS



Speculation can often help to drive science forward. However, studies should be clear on the facts their study proves, and which conclusions are as yet unsupported ones. A statement framed by speculative language may require further evidence to confirm.

11. UNREPLICABLE RESULTS



Results should be replicable by independent research, and tested over a wide range of conditions (where possible) to ensure they are consistent. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence - that is, much more than one independent study!

6. PROBLEMS WITH SAMPLE SIZE



In trials, the smaller a sample size, the lower the confidence in the results from that sample. Conclusions drawn can still be valid, and in some cases small samples are unavoidable, but larger samples often give more representative results.

12. NON-PEER REVIEWED MATERIAL



Peer review is an important part of the scientific process. Other scientists appraise and critique studies, before publication in a journal. Research that has not gone through this process is not as reputable, and may be flawed.

