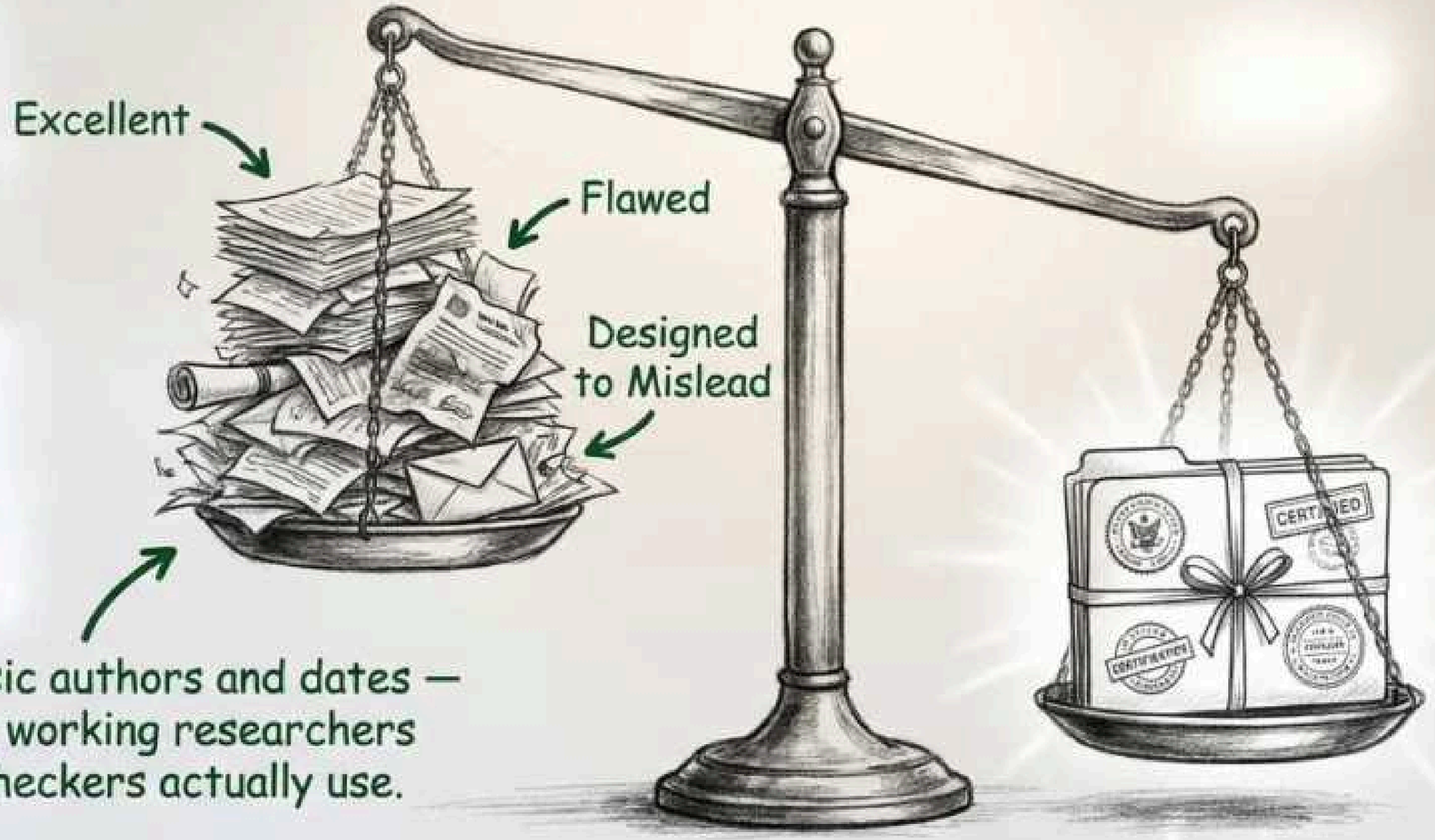


Lecture 3: Evaluating Sources

Lateral reading, author and funding checks, peer review, statistics, and matching source to claim.

Discovery ≠ Verification

¶ 3.2

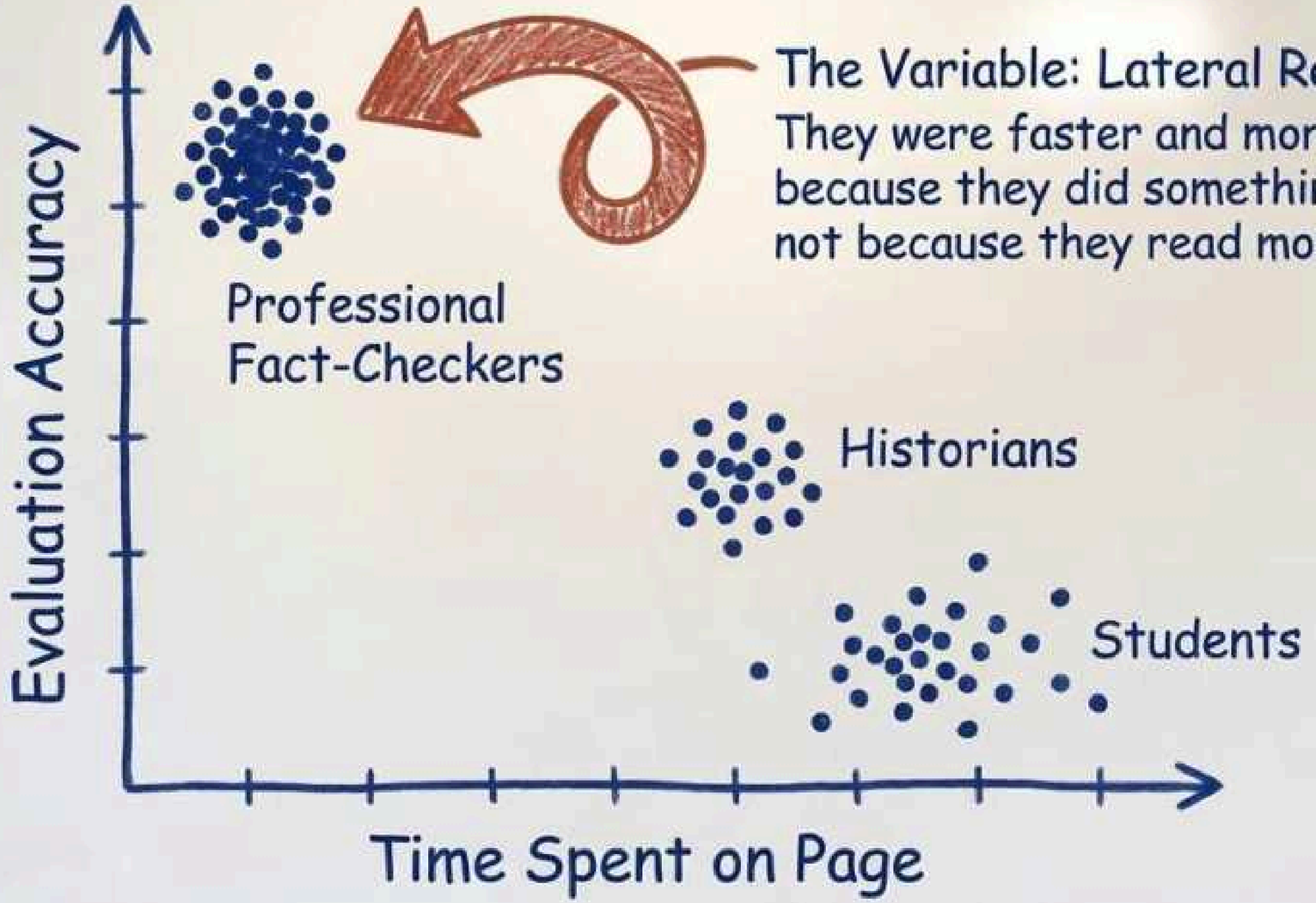


Beyond basic authors and dates — techniques working researchers and fact-checkers actually use.

Finding a source is <u>not</u> the same as trusting it.

The Fact-Checker's Secret

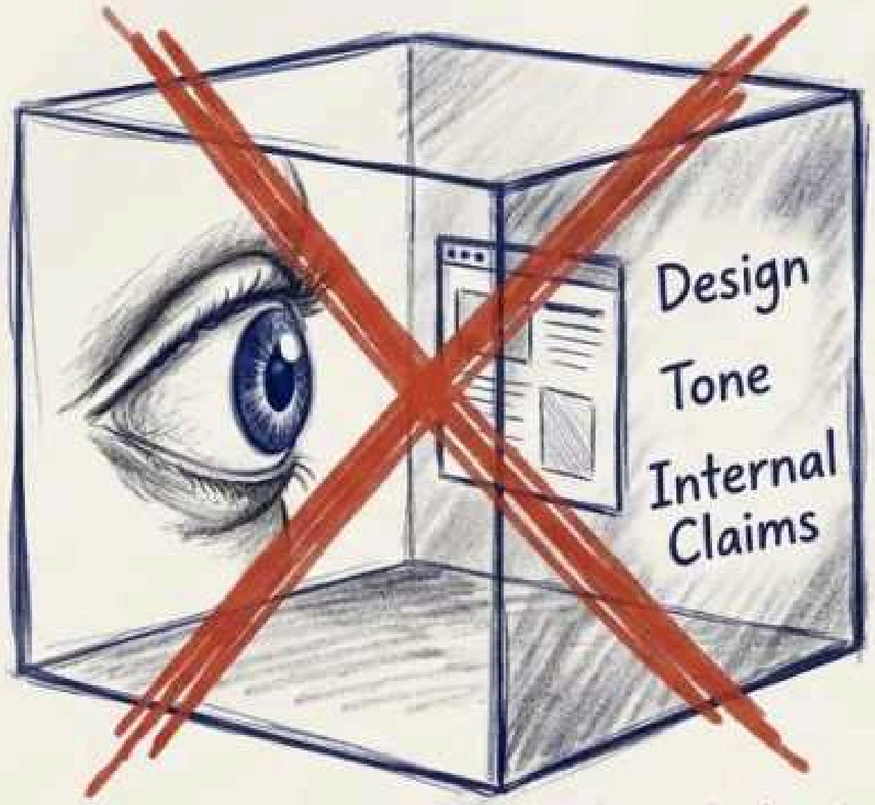
¶ 3.3



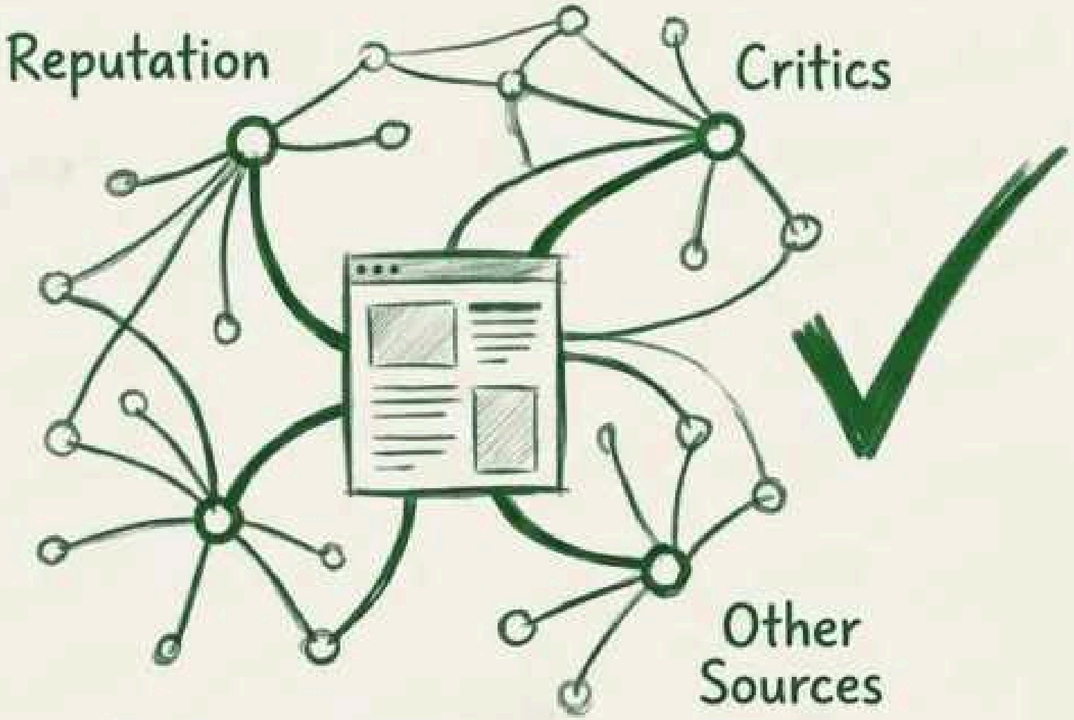
The Variable: Lateral Reading.
They were faster and more accurate because they did something different, not because they read more carefully.

¶ 3.4

Vertical Reading



Lateral Reading



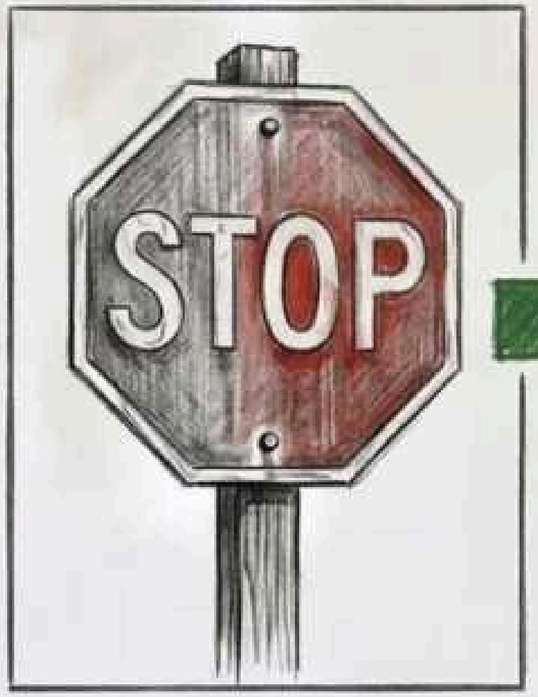
A polished page is an excellent disguise.
It cannot vouch for itself.

> Think of it as checking a stranger's reputation. You would not ask the stranger. You would ask people who know them.

¶3.5

Mike Caulfield's 4 Moves

1. Stop



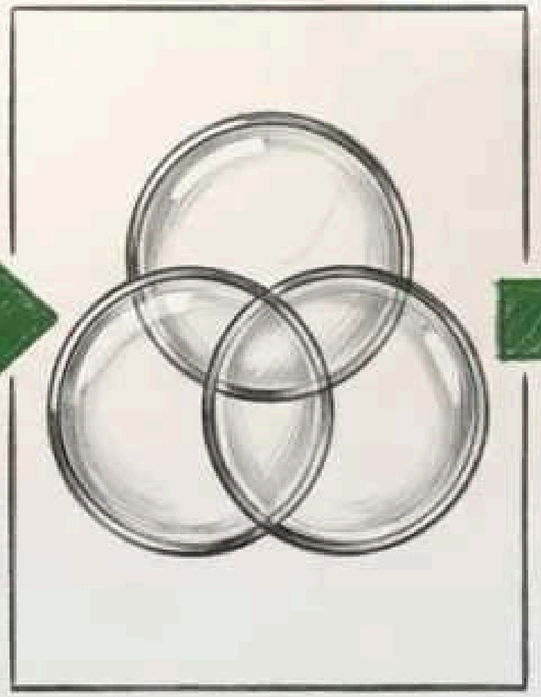
Notice your reaction before sharing or using.

2. Investigate



Who is the source? What is their record?

3. Coverage

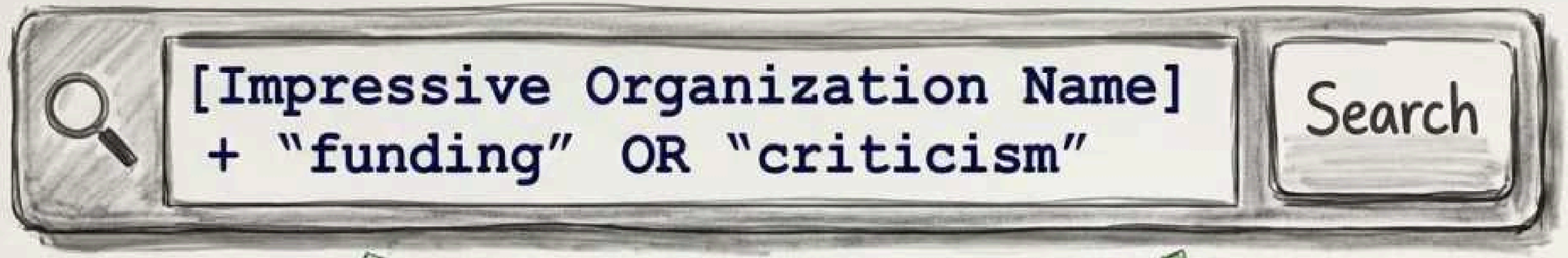


What do other trusted sources say?

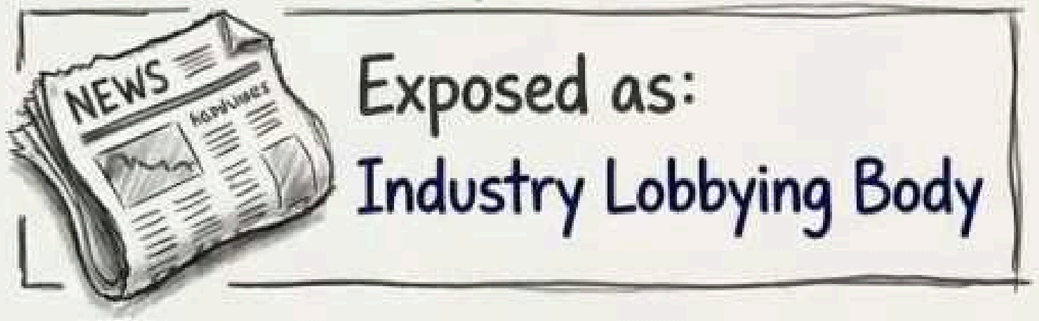
4. Trace



Trace claims back to original context to ensure they weren't twisted.







Leave the group's own website.

Independent sources on the first page of results will often tell you who runs it and who funds it.

Two minutes of lateral reading can save an entire paper.

Expertise(Field A) ≠ Expertise(Field B)



Famous Physician



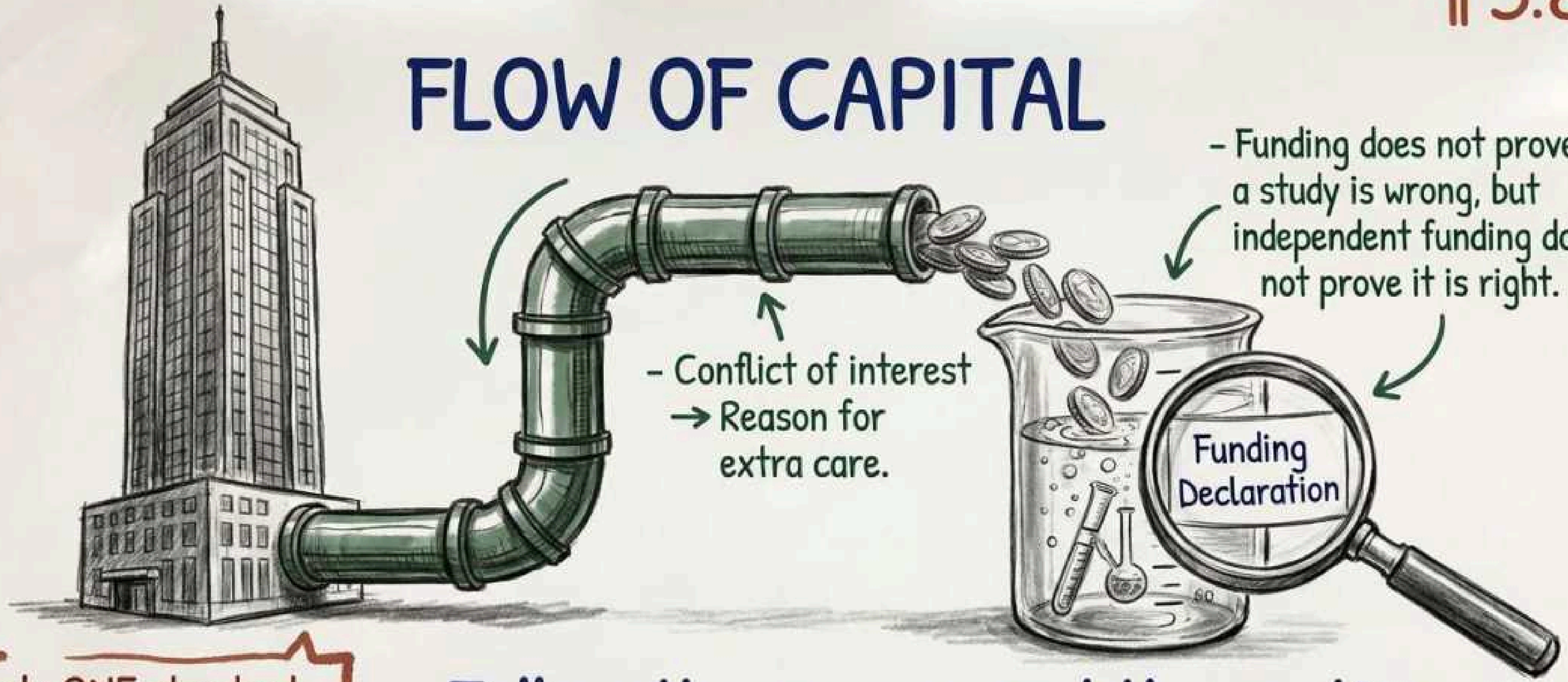
Economics

Credentials do not automatically carry over.

Author Checklist

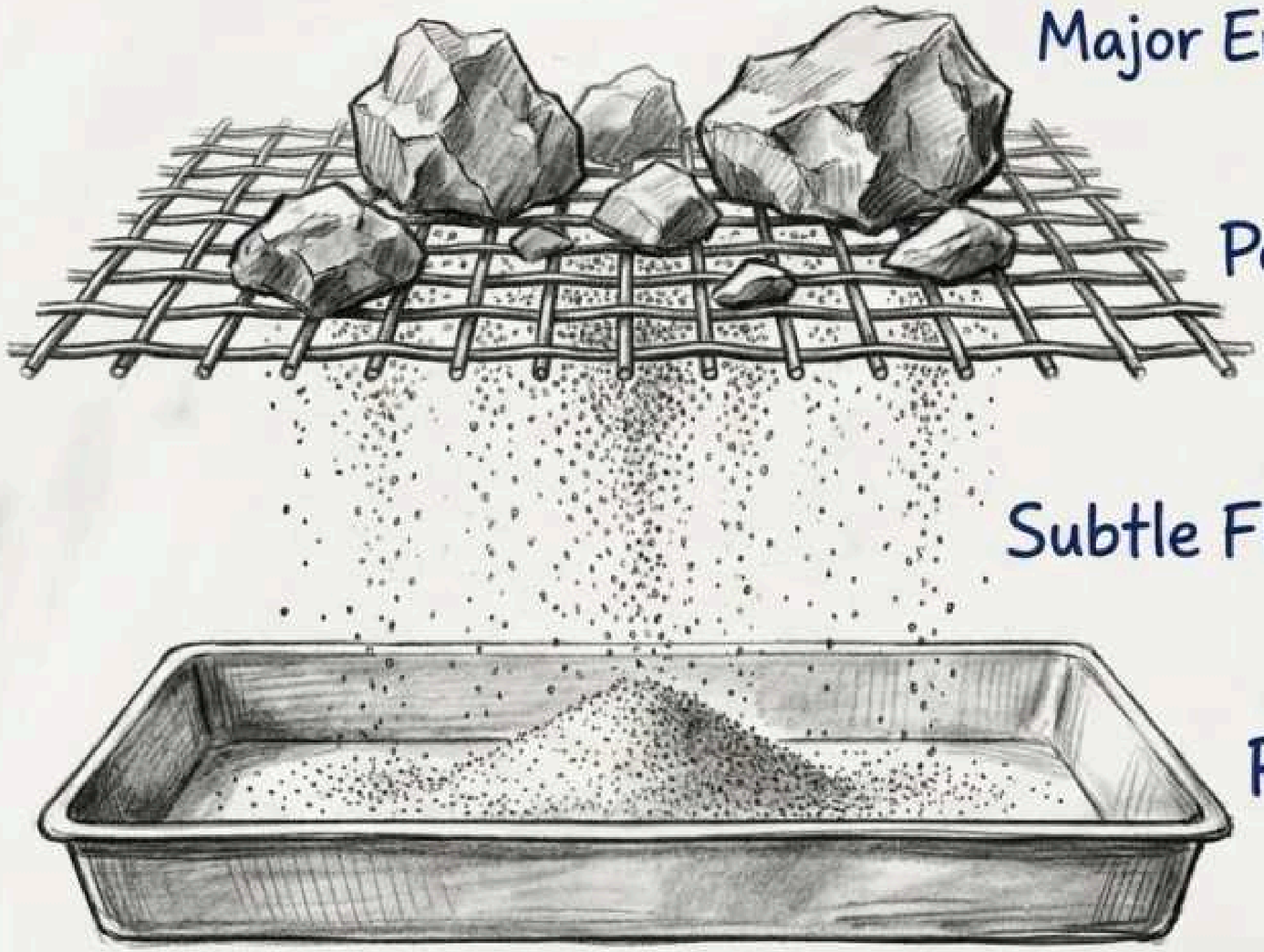
- Qualifications in THIS specific field?
- Other published work on THIS specific subject?
- Do other experts cite them?
- Has anyone criticized the work?

FLOW OF CAPITAL



Apply ONE standard.
Be just as sharp with sources you agree with as those you dislike.

Follow the money and the motive. Who gains if the claim is believed?



Peer review is valuable, but it is not magic.

Experts judge articles before publication, catching many errors, but **not all**. Check Retraction Watch to see if an article you rely on has been withdrawn.

1. Sample (n=50 in one town) ≠ Population (Whole Country)
2. Survey (What people say) ≠ Action (What people do)
3. Correlation ($A \leftrightarrow B$) ≠ Causation ($A \rightarrow B$)

Notice when conclusions go further than the evidence.

- Look at who was left out (e.g., volunteers vs. non-volunteers).
- Look at the date the data was collected—it is often older than the article itself.



$$\text{Meaning} = \text{Number} \times \left(\frac{\text{Context}}{\text{Original Data}}\right)$$



1 → 2

1,000,000 → 2,000,000

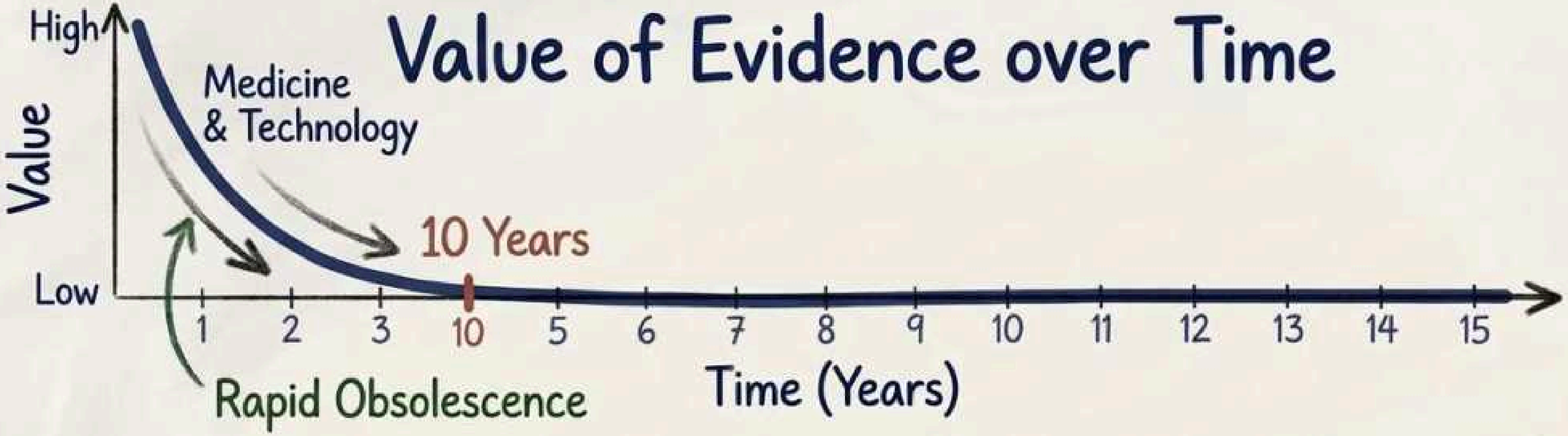


A number without a source is only a decoration.

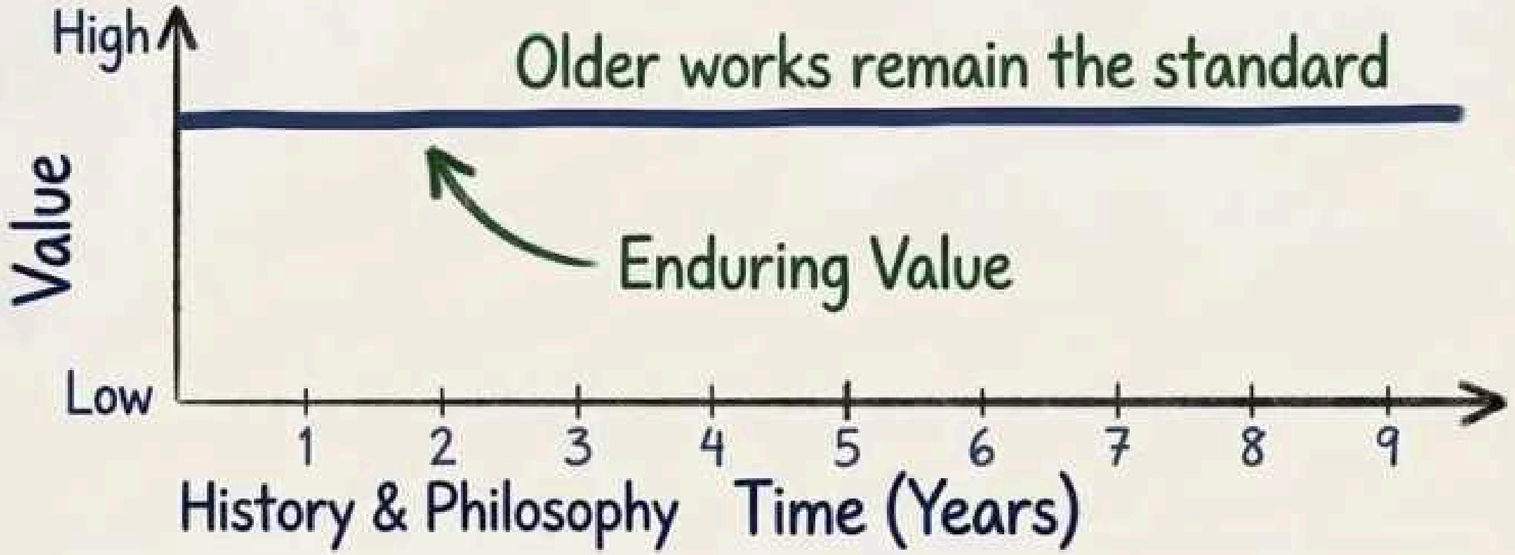
Ask: Where did it come from? How was it measured? What is the baseline comparison?

Find **original data**; reports often repeat numbers that were wrong in the first place.

Value of Evidence over Time

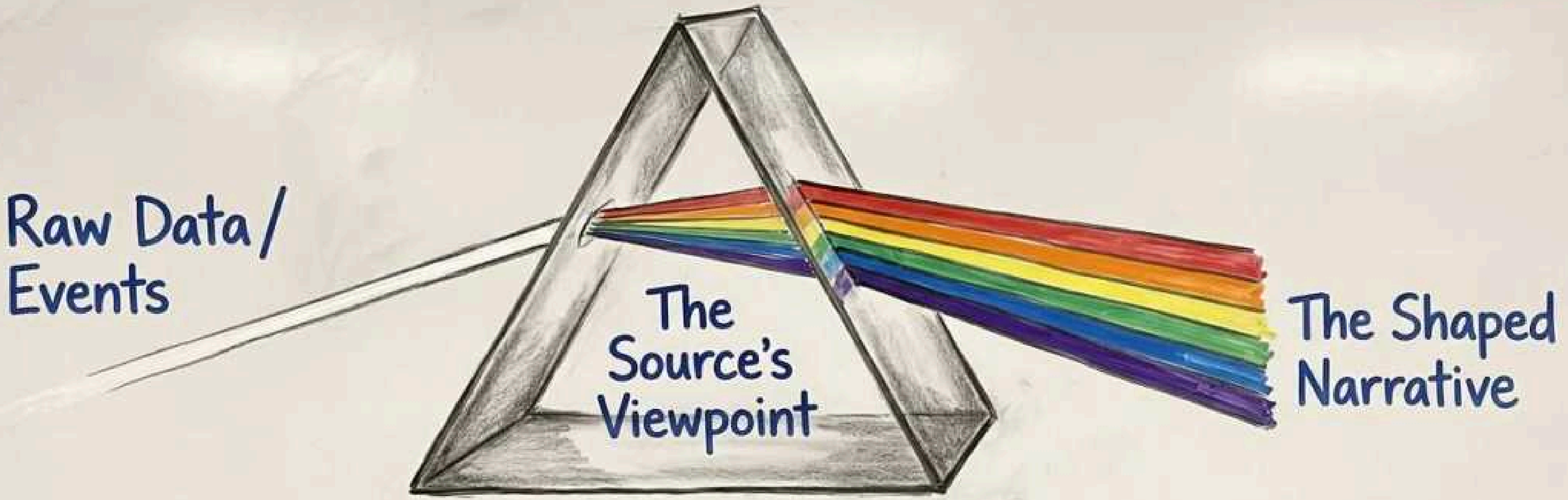


Currency means something different in different fields.





Review Article: For fast-changing subjects, check the most recent review article. It summarizes the whole field and tells you which older claims still stand.



The question is not whether a source is neutral.
The question is how its position shapes what it says.

[Everyone has bias. A source with a clear viewpoint is useful if balanced with others. Be alert to loaded language, selective facts, and missing voices.]

Use Wikipedia as a map, not the destination.



Wikipedia, Summaries, and AI Answers

Read the article for the shape of the subject.

Go to the sources at the bottom. Cite originals, not the encyclopaedia.

A summary is a second-hand report—the evidence lies underneath.



Primary Sources

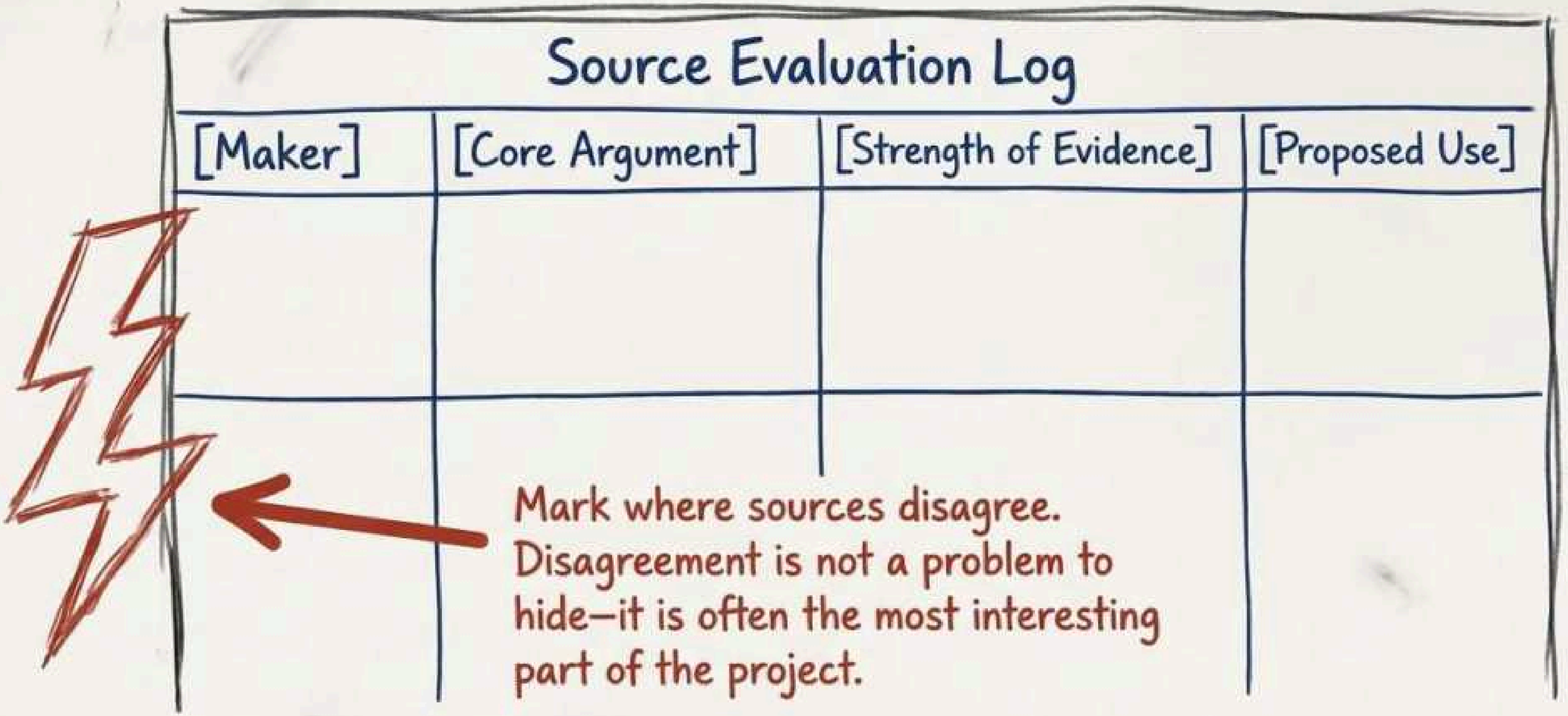
Blog Post	Excellent for: Showing what one person thinks. ✗ (Bad for proving a medical fact)
News Article	Excellent for: Reporting an event well. ✗ (Bad for explaining the root cause)
Scholarly Study	Excellent for: Explaining causes and structural facts.

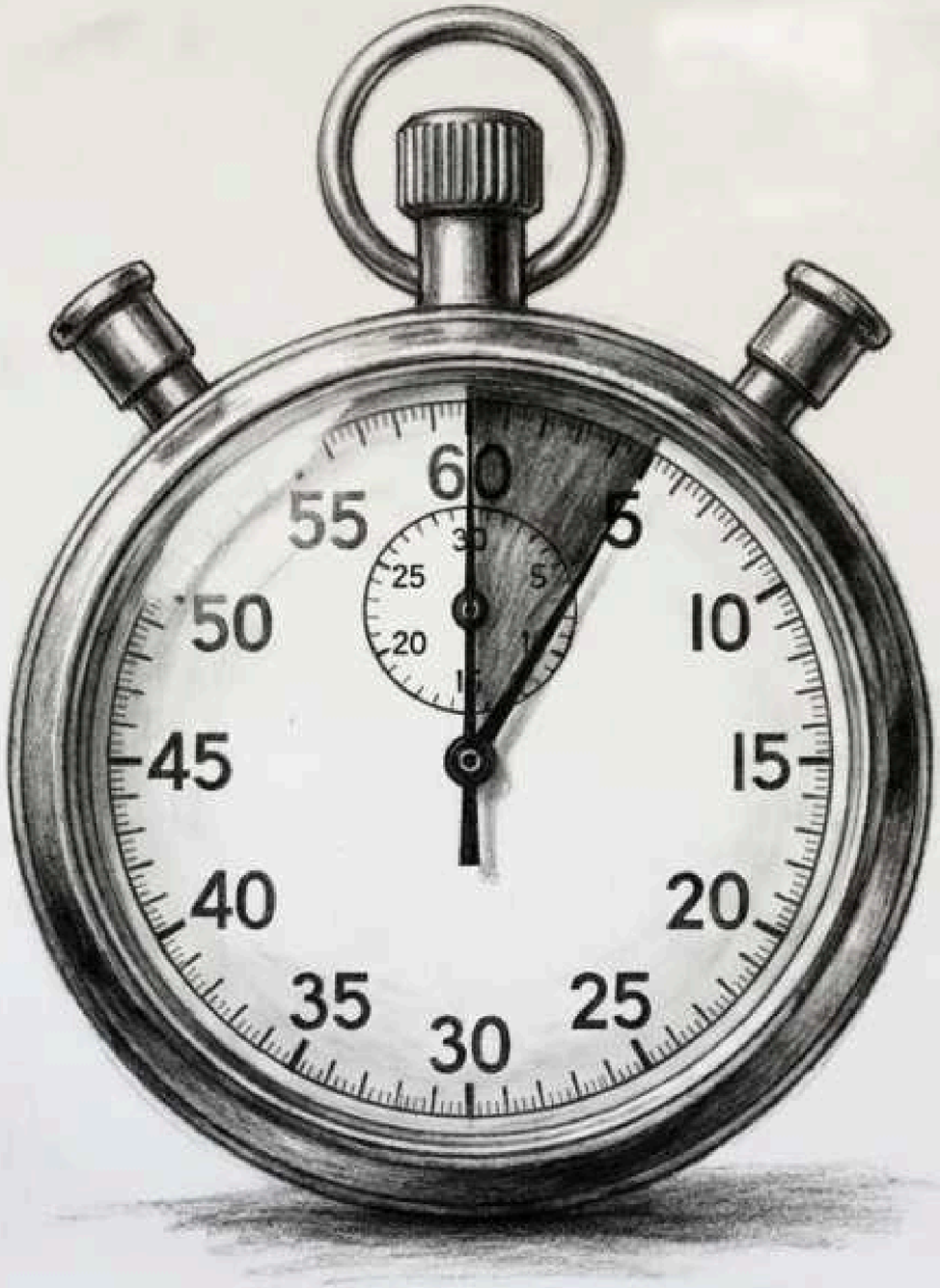
Write down the exact claim your source supports.

If you cannot name one, the source does not belong. Cut it without regret.

Match the source to the claim.
Every source has a specific job.

Keep an evaluation note for each source in your log.

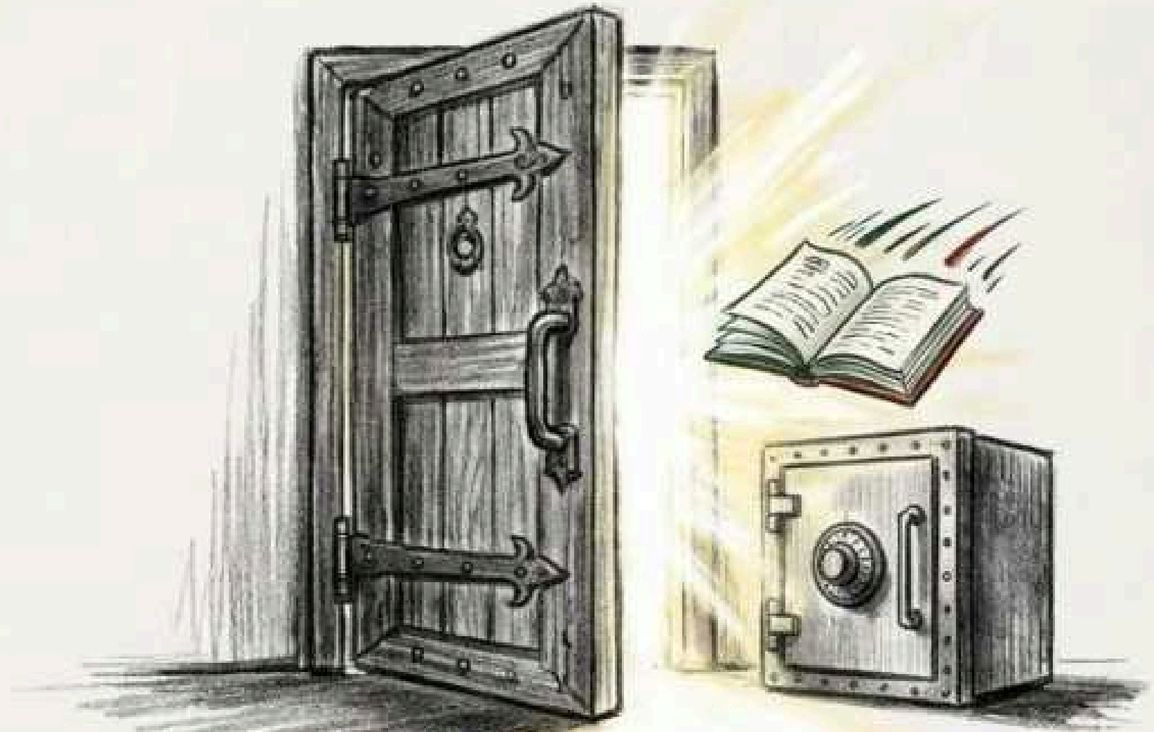




The 5-Minute Lateral Reading Challenge.

- Pick one source you have found.
- Spend exactly five minutes reading laterally.
- Who is behind it? What do others say?
- What did you learn that the page itself itself hid?
- Did this change how you will use the source?

Next... Lecture 4: Reading and Retaining.



We turn to reading: how to read quickly,
and how to keep notes you can trust.