

# Becoming an Informed Citizen

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*Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their government, for whenever things go so far wrong to attract their notice, they can be relied on to set things right – Thomas Jefferson*

Since the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Americans have celebrated democracy. The growth and development of our country is backed and guided by the process of citizen involvement and interest. As we look at the world stage and watch other countries employ news blackouts and restrictions to keep their people unaware and controlled, we celebrate the benefit of our first amendment rights to freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly. Rather than taking these rights for granted, our responsibility as informed citizens is to understand and become involved in the issues facing our leaders at local, state, and national levels. Outlined here are three steps to becoming and remaining an informed citizen: Be engaged, be curious, and be perceptive.

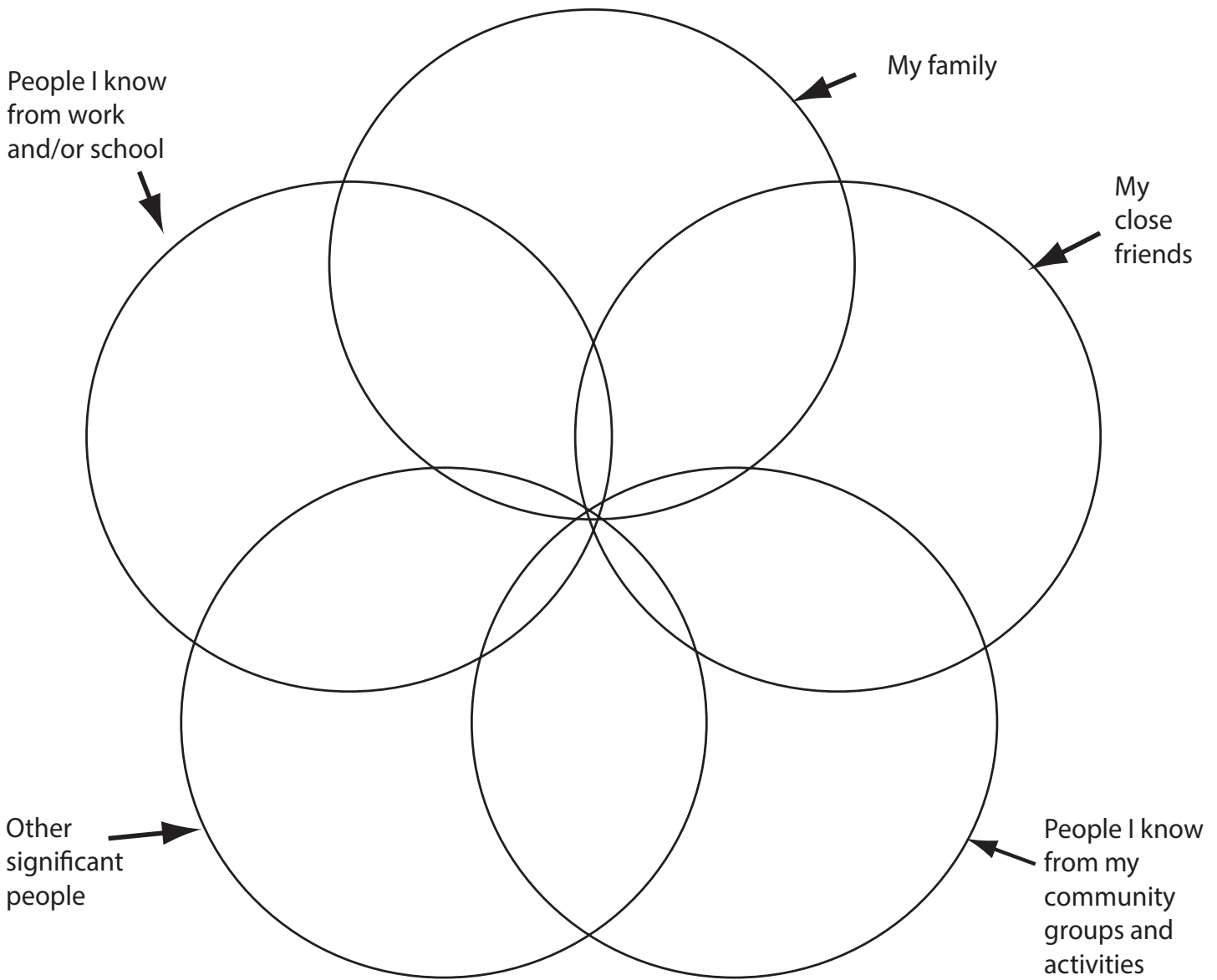
## Be Engaged

The community in which you live offers many chances for your involvement, whether through civic groups, faith-based organizations, charitable activities, organized sports, public meetings, special interest groups, or local school activities. The more active and engaged people are in their communities, the more interaction occurs and the more relationships develop. The value of this interaction has been called “social capital.” The term stresses the worth of strong social networks to the well-being of local citizens. Social capital is measured by the associations among people; these connections encourage trust and commitment.

Communities that have strong relationships and interaction among citizens show higher levels of social capital than those that have weak social networks. Relationships that bridge many groups are more beneficial to the community and civic involvement than relationships among a small group of people. In fact, a broader network among many people and groups is one predictor of lower crime rates, better health, and higher learning.

To be an informed and effective citizen, become engaged in local organizations and interest groups to build relationships and bonds within the community. Membership in several groups within the community can connect you with different points of view. Sharing ideas with each other will help to identify and build upon common interests.

*Identify the ways you hold “social capital” in the community through this simple exercise. In the circles on the next page write the names of people you know. Do you have more names listed in one area than another? This gives you an indication of where your social capital is concentrated. Is your network small or broad based? Ask a family member or friend to complete the same exercise and compare answers.*



Source: R. Edwards.

*Where were your relationships the same? Where were they different? How have these relationships helped you to be more informed about your community?*

*The exercise shows how relationships and networks open the door to many opportunities to become an informed citizen. In a strong community network, information, ideas, and potential answers to community concerns are shared. With social support, people feel more empowered to seek solutions and affect positive changes.*

### Be Curious

With access to internet and print resources, we can rapidly link to our neighbor down the street or an Australian family living in Sydney. Our local news media reaches us with rapid reporting. Local governments and organizations are now able to livestream community meetings and programs. We have the world available at a moment's notice. At no other time have we been able to immediately find so many answers, viewpoints, and ideas. It is important

to be curious about our community and our world. Because we are a rapidly changing planet, learning about each other and forming relationships and networks broader than just our neighborhood can help us to be better-informed local and national citizens.

*Each morning Joan starts her day with coffee and the news. In the past twenty-five years, this habit has not changed but how she accesses the news has. No longer does the paperboy deliver the paper daily to her house, nor does she solely rely on regularly scheduled radio or television news. Instead, each morning she turns to the Internet for the latest news and world events. She has an alert set on her phone to bring her up-to-the-minute links to local, national, and world news.*

The generation we are born in may affect our preferences for how we get information. For example, people born before the rise of the internet may prefer print sources, such as a newspaper or an educational publication. A reputable print source is one known for

publishing accurate and verified information and has some sort of editorial oversight. However, some of the print sources that have been seen as reliable or up to date in the past, may no longer be as reliable as staffing shortages limit their ability to research stories in depth and competing with the speed of social media limits their ability to edit and review.

There are many ways to find answers to our questions in our communities: reading local governmental reports, attending town meetings, listening to local radio, keeping up with organizations online, and watching area cable shows. Taking time to listen and read about current events is an important step in becoming an informed citizen. This step includes understanding issues that are of present concern to policymakers.

Within the Commonwealth there are organizations that provide information about state policy issues, committees, trends, and policy decisions. The Kentucky State Data Center (KSDC) provides state, county, and city information from data obtained through many resources including:

- U.S. Census
- Kentucky Vital Statistics
- Kentucky Department of Education

The State Data Center offers online access to reports, publications, and trend reports for the state. The Kentucky Legislative Research Commission (LRC) is another service agency of state government that keeps the public informed on state legislative decisions and discussions. Through this agency Kentuckians can learn about committee reports, pre-filed bills, legislative action, and legislator contact information. The LRC issues publications, reports, and news releases on legislative action of interest to the public and policymakers. University of Kentucky resources that show data trends useful to community leaders include County Data Profiles, assembled by Blueprint Kentucky, and Kentucky by the Numbers, a resource for those looking for reliable data about their Kentucky county.

An important key to being an informed citizen is to take time to read many different sources of information to build an understanding of the issues close to home as well as in our global community.

*Take a moment to make a list of the sources of information you access to keep yourself informed. Circle the ones you rely on daily. Check those you feel provide accurate information. Place a star beside those that may be less accurate. What clues did you use to decide whether the information was accurate?*

*You can also complete this activity by observing the apps on your phone. Are there any news sources? Are there social media platforms? Which provides more accurate information?*

## Be Perceptive

We can soon become weighed down with information about not only local events, activities, and issues but also national news, gossip, and opinions. How do we know what to believe in order to be an informed citizen? The key is to be perceptive in identifying reliable information. Perception is knowing and understanding.

Before you decide if a source is reliable find out:

- Who is the author?
- Where was the article published?
- Why was the article written?
- What data are they using?
- How much data did they gather?
- When was the article published?

Having the ability to judge the accuracy of information is an important skill to becoming an informed citizen.

National news online sources such as the New York Times and Washington Post are widely regarded as reputable sources due to their longstanding history of journalistic integrity, rigorous fact-checking processes, and editorial oversight. However, like all sources, their content should be evaluated for bias, especially in opinion pieces or editorials. Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary defines bias as a tendency to present information in a way that favors one viewpoint, group, or outcome while downplaying or ignoring others. Bias can stem from political, financial, cultural, or personal influences, and it can significantly affect the reliability of a source.

As people become informed citizens, readers are seeking balanced news sources. Some websites, such as Tangle News, summarize articles from different sides of an issue to provide readers with various viewpoints.

Social media can provide us with a great deal of fast and almost immediate news, but it can sometimes be difficult to determine if what is shared via social media is fact or opinion. This issue can be magnified by the effect of "going viral," where a topic is repeatedly shared, reposted, and rewritten rapidly by many people. "Going viral" can also put distance between the facts of the story and the information we're receiving. Perception plays a crucial role in how we interpret information from social media.

Social media posts, personal websites, talk radio, and television talk shows are designed to voice opinions rather than to report news and facts. You may be able to learn about a piece of news from them, but you should look for the motive in their report. Ask yourself what they hope to gain by sharing the information the way they did.

If you are researching information online, note the extension at the end of the domain name to assist you in deciding what might motivate each site. As noted on the next page, the extension at the end of the URL should indicate the type of organization hosting the website. Do they want to inform, to educate, to profit, to persuade, or something else?

Governmental organizations (.gov) and education institutions (.edu) are typically obligated to share impartial information. Commercial groups (.com) often have a business or profit incentive, while organizations (.org) may only share information that supports their goals.

## Extension Source

Extension	Source
.gov	Governmental
.edu	Educational
.com	Commercial
.org	Organizational



This checklist can help assess the reliability of information before using it for research or decision-making.

In all situations, check the author of the information, their credentials, and consider motive. For example, an author who is a registered dietician (R.D.) has knowledge to share about nutrition. However, there could be opinion or bias from information shared by the R.D. if it was sponsored by a food distribution company. You would want to look further to find other sources without direct interest in the issue. To determine the motive of a source and consider if the source is slanted by bias, think about what the author wants you to do with the information shared. What action does the author want you to take?

Be aware of sensationalism. Sensationalism is the practice of presenting information in an exaggerated, dramatic, or provocative way to attract attention or stir emotions. This often involves focusing on shocking or scandalous aspects of a story, sometimes at the expense of accuracy, balance, or context. Sensationalism is commonly used in media to boost readership, viewership, or engagement, but it can undermine the integrity of the information being presented.

Check the date of the information. Whether the information is research based or a popular interest source, the date is an important clue to reliability. Outdated or undated information is useless in trying to develop a current understanding of an issue. To avoid outdated information, look for when the article was last updated or revised.

Take time to verify the information you are reading by confirming the statements with the references provided. Sources such as the National Institutes of Health or the Food and Drug Administration lend confidence to the information source. One example of a source of information that may or may not be reliable is Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>). This site was designed as a collaborative encyclopedia— in other words, people from around the world are adding or deleting information at all times. There is no realistic way to know if the editors of the content are truly experts. Therefore, Wikipedia could be a place to start for general information about a subject, but you should seek further proof before trusting what you read there.

## Summary

Being an informed citizen takes time and effort. Linking with others in the community through local groups and organizations is an important step to becoming informed. Information can be found through television, radio, newspapers, and web postings. Engagement with current affairs, curiosity about the world and your community, and the ability to differentiate between facts and opinions are important skills to develop to become and remain an educated citizen ready to provide politicians with informed advice about community issues.

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## Information Reliability Checklist

Consider the credibility of the source	Yes	No
1. Is the publishing organization known for accuracy and reliability?		
2. Is the author clearly identified and does the author have relevant expertise or credentials?		
3. Are facts, statements, and claims supported by evidence?		
4. Has the source been updated as new information becomes available?		
5. Has the source been reviewed or verified for accuracy by experts?		
Consider the motive of the article		
6. Would the goal of the article be considered biased?		
7. Does the article show bias or use sensationalism to persuade the reader?		

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