

# 2.2

## HOW DO WE DECIDE WHAT TO BELIEVE?

**0:15–1:03**

**BIG HISTORY  
ENCOURAGES  
QUESTIONS**

Hi, I'm Bob Bain. I'm here in beautiful Seattle. It's a lovely day and I'm excited to be talking with you about Big History. I'm a friend of David Christian's, a long-time colleague. We've worked together on many projects and we're going to work together here on the Big History Project.

Like you, I'm going to be listening to David's talks and David's lectures. Like you, I'm going to be learning many new things. Big History is exciting for me because Big History makes me think. It encourages me to ask new questions. It helps me rethink the Universe and the world and my place in it. And from time to time, David has invited me to talk with you, to think with you about some of the important ideas that David has done in the Big History lectures.

For example, I loved the last lecture where David talked about origin stories. Actually, origin stories have been important in my life. My grandmother used to read me these origin stories and they were beautiful, they were wonderful. And in fact, I'm going to read them to my grandchildren as they get a little bit older. But David told us that origin stories do more than tell a good tale. They make claims about the way the world began and the way it works.

**1:03–1:41**

**ABOUT CLAIMS**

"Claims"-- do you ever use that word? We historians and scientists use the word "claims" to answer questions, to make assertions, suggestions about the way the world works, in answer to our own puzzles.

Now, "claims" may not be a word that you use every day, but you make claims every day. You're surrounded by claims every day, you encounter them every day.

**1:41–2:43**

**TRUSTING CLAIMS**

For example, a friend tells you over the weekend that they got the flu and that's why they didn't call you. They're making a claim. If you read a blog that tells you that your favorite band is going to break up, they're making a claim. If you tell your parents that the reason why you came in late was because your cell phone died and you couldn't tell the time, you're making a claim.

But here's the question: How would you know which claims to trust, which ones to ignore and which ones to investigate further?

For example, would you automatically trust, trust your friend when they said, "I had the flu over the week-

end”? Would you trust that blog enough to repost your favorite band disbanding, and what about your parents? Would they trust that your cell phone battery died and that was why you came in late?

## 2:43–3:14

### EVALUATING CLAIMS

In this course, in the Big History course, we’re going to ask you to raise questions about claims, to understand how it is that people make claims and by what means we can trust them. The degree of trust in claims is a very important question that we’re going to take up in this course.

So let’s take up this question of how you learn to trust or how you evaluate claims. And let’s use an everyday experience, something I’ll bet that you’ve had.

## 3:14–5:48

### A CLAIM TESTING SCENARIO

Let’s imagine that we, you and me, are going to go look for a new restaurant, the Big History Café, that we’ve heard great things about. The food is exotic, it’s coming from all over the world, heck, all over the Universe. And we hear the portions are enormous. Unfortunately, we’ve gotten lost on our way there. But good news. There’s a person who seems to know their way around approaching us. And so you stop them and say, “Hey, can you tell me how to get to the Big History Café?” And she says, “Of course. “You head down to the corner, make a right, “pass the big department store “and a little ways down on the left you’re going to see the Big History Café.” And so we start down our way following those directions but suddenly we stop. Do we trust her? Does she really know? I mean, our intuition, our gut said, “She seemed confident. Let’s follow it.” But then we stop and we decide, “You know, we should probably

check this out.” So we turn back and we say, “Excuse me. “Have you ever been to the Big History Café? Do you know where it is?” And she tells us, “Of course. “It’s my favorite restaurant. I’ve been going there for years and years.” So we feel good about this. She is... seems to be in authority, she’s been there before for the last five years and so we head on our way to the Big History Café. But then we stop and all of a sudden you realize, “Wait a second, “the Big History Café is a new café. “It’s only a year old. “She couldn’t have been going for five years. “There’s something wrong here. “It doesn’t make sense. “It’s illogical for her to have been saying that she’s been going for five years.” Good news, though. You remember that we both have cell phones and our cell phones have mapping programs on it. So you decide, “Let’s map the Big History Café.” And because we both know that sometimes mapping programs make mistakes, you decide, “You map one, I’ll map one and we’ll check.” Good news. We map the Big History Café and our cell phones agree, our mapping programs agree. By the way, we also discover that she had been telling us the wrong directions to the... a different café. In fact, we find on our cell phones that the Little History Café is exactly where she said it was going to be. The Big History Café is five blocks to the other direction. Confident now that we have the evidence that our directions are now accurate, we checked it out in two sources, we head towards the Big History Café.

Okay, that was a pretty simple story and suspenseful because we did get eventually to the restaurant, but I hope what it did was illuminate four different ways that human beings assess claims, we test claims.

## 5:48–6:56

### CLAIM TESTERS

So what were they?

- We look for intuition to test some claims. Intuition, a gut feeling like when we just felt that she was telling us the right story.
- We also use authority. Now, authority is when we accept information or data from a credible source, a believable source.
- We also use logic. We test claims sometimes by using our minds to think about something to see if these things make sense.
- And then of course we also test claims by using evidence. That's when we're gathering up available information about the world. By the way, "evidence" is an interesting word because "evidence" comes from "evident," to be able to see something. It's something that we can see, and in this story both of us could see it on different sources and hence, we were trusting our evidence.

## 6:56–7:38

### DEVELOPING THE SKILLS

Of course, we want you to learn, and more important, we want you to understand the claims that people have been making about Big History questions. The most important claims, the best claims that we as human beings can make and answer to those questions. But actually we want you to do something more. We want you to develop the skills to recognize when people are asking good questions. We want you to develop the skills to begin to assess other people's claims, to use intuition, to use authority and, most importantly, logic and evidence to assess claims, to determine whether or not they're trustworthy, to what

degree you trust them, whether or not you should ignore a claim or whether or not claims need further investigation, new questions.

Why do we want you to do that? Because actually that's how Big History works. That's the engine that drives Big History. It's people just like you that have begun to test and ask questions about people's claims, raising new questions, finding ways to develop new evidence and furthering our collective learning.

Incidentally, I'm wondering, did you believe all those claims that I made about myself? I didn't tell you very much actually. I told you that I'm Bob Bain, I'm a friend and colleague of David Christian's, but I didn't tell you much more about me. Did your intuition tell you? "You know, my gut tells me I can trust that guy." Or because I'm on this video, did that give me the authority to make these claims that I've been making? Did your logic tell you, "You know, the story he told me "seemed to make sense and therefore it was credible because it was so logical"? Or did you go online to discover that actually I'm a Professor of History and Education at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and that for 26 years before that I was a high school history teacher? I'd like you to believe those claims that I made but I want you to be the judge.

## 7:38–8:47

### YOU BE THE JUDGE