Hello! Today, we’re going to talk a bit about confirmation bias, how it affects research, and how you can avoid it through critical thinking. Let’s start with a few definitions.

Confirmation bias is the tendency to interpret information in a way that matches your beliefs. When confronted with these two images:

A cat lover might think “this is proof that dogs are undignified and cats are smart,” but a dog lover might think “this is proof that dogs are funny and cats are boring.” Although the images are the same, the viewers’ interpretations are impacted by their personal biases.

Two other terms you may have heard that relate to confirmation bias are “echo chamber” and “filter bubble.” An echo chamber is a space (online or in person) in which you are only exposed to information that supports your existing beliefs. A filter bubble is the result of online algorithms that tailor information based on your past searches and demonstrated preferences. Let’s take a look at a social media example.

One day, you decided to open a Facebook account. You started out seeing lots of posts about both cats and dogs, but over time, you clicked “like” on more posts about cats than you did about dogs. Other people on your feed left comments and posted videos about cats, showing how great they are and affirming your belief that cats are awesome. Recently, you realized that all the posts on your Facebook feed feature cats, and there are no dogs anywhere to be found. Over time, Facebook’s algorithm took your preferences and created a one-sided version of your feed that only shows cats.

This example shows that echo chambers can be self-created, and that filter bubbles are created by computer programs, but both create opportunities for confirmation bias to impact your thinking.

In college, there will be many opportunities for confirmation bias to influence your academic work. Confirmation bias doesn’t only relate to the way you interpret information that passively crosses your path. The choices you make about which information sources to read or cite can be fueled by confirmation bias too! It takes active effort on your part to seek out information that contradicts your viewpoint.

This process can be challenging. Seeking out contradictory information is often uncomfortable and it can be more work. It might make you angry or upset, and you might not believe in the logic of the information. Sometimes you will find information that forces you to restructure your argument or even your worldview.

That being said, there are benefits associated with seeking out contradictory information. Arguments are stronger when you address the counterpoint and refute it if you can. Challenging your biases also promotes critical thinking, which is a transferrable life skill. Finally, seeking out information that you disagree with helps you keep an open mind and gain some perspective. To succeed in college and beyond, it’s important to be open to challenging your beliefs… even if those challenges come from you!