

When a claim is made, especially publicly, it is natural to think we are being told the truth. Most of the time we accept claims, especially claims to fact, at face value. For instance, if we read in the newspaper that there has been a plane crash, we are entitled to assume that such an event really has taken place. We don't jump to the conclusion that the statement is false just because we have not witnessed it ourselves. We hear the football results, or baseball scores, and assume they are correct, and not made up to please the fans of some clubs. We get a weather forecast telling us to expect heavy snow, and we plan accordingly: we don't ignore it just because it is a prediction, and predictions aren't facts. Assuming that most of what we are told is true is entirely reasonable. Indeed, it is necessary for a normal life, and the functioning of a modern democratic society. If we questioned, or refused to believe, everything we read or heard, life as we know it would come to a standstill. That is why we all have a responsibility to tell the truth; and why people are understandably annoyed if they are told something that is not true. Everyone knows the story of The Boy Who Cried 'Wolf!' or a story like it. The boy has a bad habit of raising false alarms, in particular frightening his community by shouting out that a pack of wolves is approaching the village. At first the villagers run to safety whenever he does this. But after a while they stop believing him, until the day comes when a real wolf appears. By then, of course, the boy has lost all credibility and his for-once genuine warning is ignored. (You can work out the ending yourself.) The moral of the story is that truth and trust are both important. People need to be able to rely on what they are told most of the time; and people who speak the truth need others to believe them most of the time. But that does not mean we should respond with blind acceptance to everything that we read and hear. Obviously we cannot assume that just because something has been asserted – in spoken, printed or any other form – it is true, or we have to agree with it. People do make false assertions not only with intent to deceive, but also out of carelessness or ignorance. Even when there is a core of truth in what someone says, it may be exaggerated or over-simplified, or a mere approximation or a rough guess. There are many ways, besides being plainly false, in which a claim may be less than the whole truth. None of this means that we should start routinely doubting everything. But it does mean we should keep an open and inquisitive mind.

Justification As you saw in the previous chapter, it is not always possible to know whether a claim is straightforwardly true or false. Knowledge requires certainty and certainties are rare. In the absence of certainty, the best evaluation we can give of a claim or belief is to say whether it is justified, or warranted. These two words mean much the same as each other. A warrant is a right or entitlement. We are entitled to hold a belief, or to make a claim, if there are strong grounds – for example evidence to support it. Without such grounds a claim is unwarranted (unjustified).