

Lesson 3

Thinking Critically: Fact, Opinion, and Bias

Materials Needed:
pen or pencil

Vocabulary: These words will help you understand this lesson.



Word/Term	Definition
fact	a true statement which can be proven by observation or research
opinion	a statement of personal judgment or belief
bias	to influence in a particular, typically unfair direction
connotative language	words used to get a specific emotion from the reader, such as beautiful or evil
denotative language	a literal meaning of the word, the dictionary definition
propaganda	information written in a way to persuade you without your realizing that is what is happening

Facts and Opinions

At the end of the last lesson, there was a project involving advertisements. Advertisements are a mixture of fact and opinion. If you turn on the television and watch a commercial for a new car or acne cream or diet foods, you will find that some of the statements are informational and can be proven. However, some statements are opinions. The opinions often start with statements that “people just like you” would say to endorse the product. They are real-life testimonies. By using statements of support from satisfied customers, the advertisers try to make you believe that their good feelings about the product will be your feelings as well.

Authors will use facts and opinions to try and persuade people. They can use this technique in advertisements, political speeches, essays, and research papers. The reader/consumer must use his critical thinking skills to examine the statements and sort facts from opinions. **Facts** are statements which can be proven by observation or research. **Opinions** are statements of personal judgment or personal belief. Read the examples

Fact: Richard Nixon was the first president to resign from office.

Opinion: All politicians are dishonest.

Statement one is a fact because you can research the information and discover that it is true. There are many sources that document that Richard Nixon was the first president to resign from office.

Statement number two is an opinion. Many, many people believe that politicians are dishonest. If you hear adults talk about politics, many times you will hear them say things like “I hope he’s different than the rest,” “Maybe this guy will follow through on his promises,” or “Ha, you can’t believe any of them.” It is important to understand that just because many people believe all politicians are dishonest does not mean that they are. You can not prove that every single politician in the world now or in the past was dishonest. Therefore, this is a statement of opinion.

Read the following statements and decide whether they are facts or opinions. Write a “F” on the line if you think the statement is a fact. Write an “O” on the line if you think the statement is an opinion.

- ____ a. Dogs make great pets.
- ____ b. They come in many sizes and colors.
- ____ c. It is possible to get a dog as small as 2 pounds.
- ____ d. Saint Bernard dogs can get as big as 27 inches high and weigh 200 pounds.
- ____ e. Dogs can come in a variety of colors, too.
- ____ f. Samoyeds are white.

- _____g. German Shepard dogs are a combination of brown, black and tan.
- _____h. Dog breeders are popular because everybody wants to own a dog.
- _____i. Some sell their dogs for hundreds of dollars.
- _____j. I think you should buy a dog today. You won't be sorry.

How sure are you that your answers to the exercise above are correct? If you are still uncertain, ask yourself these questions.

It's a **fact** if you can answer "yes" to these questions.

- Can the information be verified by direct observation?
- Can the facts be trusted? Can they be verified by research?
- Are the facts presented in an objective manner? (Is there any bias?)
- If the author refers to a source or an authority on the subject, is that source reliable?
- Do the facts support the topic?

It's an **opinion** if you can answer "yes" to these questions.

- Does the author use connotative words such as: pretty, ugly, safe, dangerous, evil, attractive, well-dressed, good, and so on?
- There are words and phrases that tell you it is someone's opinion. These words include: probably, perhaps, usually, often, sometimes, on occasion, I believe, I think, in my opinion, I feel, I suggest, and others.

***Check your answers with the answers at the bottom of the page.

Writers Often Mix Fact with Fiction

Writers often mix fact and opinion. So it is not always easy to tell whether something is based on verifiable information or someone's particular viewpoint. For this reason, it is important to read with a questioning mind. Just because someone says something is true - it doesn't mean it is true. What do you think?

a. O, b. F, c. F, d. F, e. F, f. F, g. F, h. O, i. F, j. O

Analysis:

Complete the following exercise. In the space provided write an **F** if you think the statement is a fact; write and **O** if you think the statement is an opinion.

- _____ 1. Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809.
- _____ 2. He died on April 15, 1865.
- _____ 3. He was the 16th, and the best, President of the United States.
- _____ 4. He successfully led the country through its greatest internal crisis, the American Civil War.
- _____ 5. He was a great man because he ended slavery.
- _____ 6. Lincoln became the first American president to be assassinated by a horrible man named Booth.
- _____ 7. Before his election in 1860 as the first Republican president, Lincoln had been a wonderful lawyer.
- _____ 8. On November 4, 1842 Lincoln married Mary Todd.
- _____ 9. She was the daughter of a wealthy, but bad family because they owned slaves.
- _____ 10. They lived in Springfield, Illinois when they were first married.

The Place for Opinion

The editorial page is one place in the newspaper where opinion is not only permissible, but expected. Comment and analysis are the norm rather than objective reporting. The opinions of the newspaper editorial board are offered as editorials. Readers offer their opinions in *Letters to the Editor*. Opinions of the board are reflected in the editorial cartoon. The paper may give diverse opinions through a variety of columnists.

The purpose of the editorial page is to provoke thought and discussion, to influence the actions of public officials, and to campaign for reform and specific proposals. It also provides background by analyzing events and serving as a community voice. The letters section gives readers a place to react to foreign and domestic news, agree or disagree with editorials and columns, and offer personal comments on many subjects.

Bias in the News

Another technique that writers use to persuade readers is the use of bias. Bias is an author's personal opinion which can give his/her writing a positive or negative slant. Biased writing uses certain facts that will support the argument and omits facts that can hurt the argument. Writings that are biased and used to influence people are called propaganda. Readers must use their critical thinking skills all the time. Not all bias is deliberate.

News stories are influenced by the attitudes and backgrounds of interviewers, writers, photographers, anchors, producers, and editors. Most bias is not intentional. Here is what to look for.

- Bias occurs through *selection* and *omission*. Editors select what they want to print, the details they want to include, and the words they choose. For example: If people boo during a presidential speech, they can be described as “remarks greeted by jeers” or “a handful of people who disagree.” Does this editor like the president?
- Bias can be shown by the placement of the article. Stories on the front page are thought to be more important than those on the back. Television and radio newscasts report stories that draw the biggest ratings first. *Time* magazine put Tiger Woods on the cover of its August 14, 2000 magazine and the coverage of the starting of the Republican National Convention on page 26.
- Bias is shown through names and titles. In many places a *terrorist* may be referred to as a *freedom fighter*.
- Bias can be shown by photos, captions, and camera angles. Is this a good picture of Al Gore? Who would print such a picture?



- Bias can be shown in headlines. Headlines are an important part of the newspaper and are often printed in large and bold fonts. They can be misleading and convey excitement when the story is not exciting, and they can express approval or disapproval. Here are two headlines for different incidents.

Example A: **“Israeli Troops Shoot Dead Palestinian in West Bank”**

Israel is named as the offender; Palestinian named as the victim.

versus

“New West Bank Shooting Mars Truce”

Palestinian not named as the victim; Israel not named as the offender.

Example B: **“Israel Kills Three Militant Palestinians”**

Israel is named as the offender; Palestinian named as the victim.

versus

“Bus Blows Up in Central Jerusalem”

Palestinian not named as the victim; Israel not named as the offender.

People can be influenced by the choice of words used in print and by the tone of the newscaster.

Analysis:

Headline: **Relief Comes in Bag of Skittles**

11. Questions to Consider:

- a. What do you expect this article to be about? (What is the issue being addressed? Identify the setting – who is involved? What is the story?)

- b. What words in the headline helped you most with your prediction?

- c. What words in the headline presented you with the most difficulty? (Which words were ambiguous or counter-intuitive?)

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- d. Based on the headline do you expect this article to be slanted in one way or another? (Politically? Sensationalist vs. Objective?)
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The Real Situation

U.S. humanitarian aid came to Iraq today at 3:43 p.m. when a Marine lieutenant colonel named Dave Long handed some food to a small, shy, not thirsty, not starving child by the side of a road, who tore open the bag with his teeth. If it wasn't the massive aid that President Bush had promised over the weekend would begin flowing in 36 hours, or even an official shipment at all, it was at least a bag of Skittles. Like everything here today, the child was a bit dusty.

12. Follow Up Questions:

- a. How did your prediction differ from the actual content of the article?

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- b. What were you right about?
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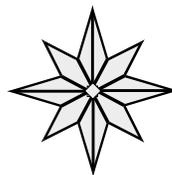
- c. What aspects of the headline may have been misleading? (Identify specific words, connotations, phrasing...)
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d. How much influence do headlines have upon a reader's perception of content?

13. Find a headline in any paper that is misleading and explain what you thought the article would be about.

14. Explain what the article was really about.

You have been using your critical thinking skills!



End of Lesson 3