

Critical Reading

Understanding Opinionated Writing

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A World of Opinion—What to Think?

When researching a paper, much of what you read will include facts and arguments that lead to a particular conclusion. Even newspapers and television news programs, which purport to be unbiased, often draw conclusions about the events they cover. It is especially perplexing when confronted with two very different opinions that appear to have equally impressive data to prove their points. People you know may hold very different opinions on many issues, citing statistics, personal anecdotes, and articles to back up what they think. It can be baffling to form your own opinions on an issue or decide what is right for you.

Fact-Based Arguments

To form your own opinions, you must be able to critically analyze what you view, read, or hear. Facts are often presented to support one point of view or another—and sometimes the same facts are even used to support opposing views. So how do you know what to believe?

- **Analyze Statistics**

Cell phone videos of police using what appears to be unnecessary force during traffic stops and other encounters are being posted on the Internet with distressing frequency. These videos have brought about riots, judicial review, and investigations into the way police officers do their jobs. They have also raised questions: Do more black people get killed by the police? And, more importantly, do more *innocent* black people get killed by the police? Analyzing the data and ferreting out informed answers to these questions is tricky.

A 2016 *Washington Post* article provides a good example of how to carefully analyze statistics in order to gain a better understanding of the facts. As the *Washington Post* explains,

According to the most recent census data, there are nearly 160 million more white people in America than there are black people. White people make up roughly 62 percent of the U.S. population but only about 49 percent of those who are killed by police officers. African Americans, however, account for 24 percent of those fatally shot and killed by the police despite being just 13 percent of the U.S. population. As The Post noted in a new analysis, that means black Americans are 2.5 times as likely as white Americans to be shot and killed by police officers.

U.S. police officers have shot and killed the exact same number of unarmed white people as they have unarmed black people: 50 each. But because the white population is approximately five times larger than the black population, that means unarmed black Americans were five times as likely as unarmed white Americans to be shot and killed by a police officer.



Police have shot and killed a young black man (ages 18 to 29)—such as Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri—175 times since January 2015; 24 of them were unarmed. Over that same period, police have shot and killed 172 young white men, 18 of whom were unarmed. Once again, while in raw numbers there were similar totals of white and black victims, blacks were killed at rates disproportionate to their percentage of the U.S. population. Of all of the unarmed people shot and killed by police in 2015, 40 percent of them were black men, even though black men make up just 6 percent of the nation’s population.

You can see how even a simple question about whether more black people are shot and killed by police requires a lot of analysis to find out what is accurate. To become an informed consumer of information takes time and trouble. But critical thinking is essential, especially when you are presented with many differing views from many different sources.

- **Get the Whole Story**

Consider the old saying “Don’t let the facts get in the way of a good story.” Good stories—especially stories about real people—are often more complicated than they first appear. But sometimes those who tell the stories leave out or choose certain facts to tell the story they want to tell. By questioning facts, or digging a little deeper, a researcher can critically analyze the meaning of or motivation behind events and ideas that may seem obvious at first glance.

The case of Stella Liebeck, the seventy-nine-year-old Albuquerque woman who was burned when a coffee she bought at McDonald’s spilled on her, is an example of a story whose point got lost in the telling. In 1992 Liebeck suffered third-degree burns from the spilled coffee; she had to be hospitalized and undergo skin grafts. Initially Liebeck asked only that McDonald’s pay the portion of her medical bills that was not covered by Medicare. McDonald’s refused. Liebeck sued—and won a judgment in her favor. McDonald’s was made to pay Liebeck two days’ worth of coffee sales in damages, which was the equivalent of \$3 million. The judge ordered her not to speak publicly about the case but did not issue a similar order against McDonald’s.

When the case ended, McDonald’s publicized it as an example of a frivolous lawsuit. The media picked up on the story, mostly characterizing it that way and citing it as an example of people refusing to take responsibility for their own actions. Because Liebeck was prohibited from speaking about the case, her side of the story was largely lost in the storm of media coverage.



Nineteen years later, documentary filmmaker Susan Saladoff meticulously investigated the facts of the Liebeck case and discovered many elements that were missing from the public portrayal of what took place. In her film, titled *Hot Coffee*, Saladoff reveals statements made during the court case showing that McDonald's actually knew the coffee would burn people within six to seven seconds of a spill, but it chose not to make any changes. But more than that, the filmmaker documented efforts by McDonald's and other large corporations to vilify average citizens who felt they had been wronged by those companies. The film shows the Liebeck story in a whole different light—and does the same with the stories of several other individuals who challenged large corporations in court. By questioning facts and digging deeper, critical readers can also gain a new understanding of events or ideas that seem obvious at the start.

- **Identify the Author's Background Beliefs to Detect Bias**

One of the most important ways to review information is to identify the author's bias. Although all writers exhibit bias—and a biased opinion does not make it wrong—it helps to know that information.

The goal of the *Washington Post* reporter who analyzed statistics on police shootings was to determine, based on statistics, whether police kill more blacks than whites. In this instance, the reporter presented the statistical data and explained its meaning but was not generally interested in drawing conclusions such as whether such information proves the need for disciplinary action against police. The reporter left that up to the reader to contemplate. Another writer might have used these statistics to draw conclusions about what society should do. That writer would have been more interested in making an argument than understanding the facts.

Saladoff also examined facts, but she used them to persuade viewers that private citizens and corporations are on unequal footing when it comes to legal disputes.

Value-Based Arguments

Other writers rely on value-based arguments to make their case. Instead of basing their arguments on facts, they assume the reader shares a similar set of values and so is willing to side with the writer. Unlike facts that can be refuted, values are based on personal opinion and cannot be verified or refuted. Value-based arguments work when the writer and reader (or speaker and listener) share the same values.

On the topic of animal rights, for example, one point of view is that animals have rights. Another is that they do not. Both views are based on values. For example, Peter Singer, author of a well-known treatise on animal rights, *Animal Liberation*, argues that the taking of an animal life, for whatever reason, should be considered the equivalent of taking a human life. He believes that animals have a right to life just as humans do and that humans have no superior claim to allow suffering in animals. Singer's views are based purely on his values—namely, that an animal life and a human life are the same. For Singer, there is no slicing of the pie. As he argues,

To protest about bullfighting in Spain, the eating of dogs in South Korea, or the slaughter of baby seals in Canada while continuing to eat eggs from hens who have spent their lives crammed into cages, or veal from calves who have been deprived of their mothers, their proper diet, and the freedom to lie down with their legs extended, is like denouncing apartheid in South Africa while asking your neighbors not to sell their houses to blacks.

Such arguments are persuasive if the reader agrees with Singer's value system. He is not trying to persuade the reader based on fact.

To analyze value-based arguments, it is sometimes useful to ask these questions: What might someone opposed to this author say? What would his or her belief system be? Here, a person who opposes Singer could make the biblical argument that humankind is superior to animals, and as long as people do not torture, abuse, or misuse animals, they should be able to kill, eat, and use animals for their own sustenance. Although value-based arguments are not better than fact-based arguments, there is nothing to refute—you either accept the premise and agree or reject the premise and disagree.

Assessing Core Beliefs

Core beliefs are the values that individuals hold dear. They are deeply held beliefs. Knowing your own core beliefs—and what influences them—is important to critical thinking. According to the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics, a nonprofit organization that promotes civics education, five ideas may interfere with our ability to make sound decisions about issues and opinions that we hold closely.

Core Beliefs

The Leonore Annenberg Institute’s “Annenberg Classroom” site defines these ideas as follows:

prejudice: A preconceived belief (usually negative) about all people belonging to one type or category.

partisanship: The tendency to favor those with whom you agree.

provincialism: The belief that the issues you feel most strongly about are the most important.

herd instinct: Adherence to cultural norms of belief and behavior.

availability bias: The assumption that memorable or hard-to-ignore events are more common than unmemorable ones.

For example, if voter A believes that illegal immigrants come to the United States simply to take advantage of American largesse, and a politician also makes this claim in an election speech, he may appeal to voter A’s prejudice, partisanship, and provincialism. Appealing to these types of emotional responses is called emotional appeal, and it is exactly what it sounds like. These arguments seem appealing because they cater to some of our deeply held beliefs.

A voter who wants to analyze the issues and go beyond an emotional response would need to gather more facts to know if this politician’s claims are valid. It would help to know, for instance, how many illegal immigrants use social services and how many do not. The voter also might want to examine the provincialism of the politician’s statements—just how important is the issue of illegal immigration when compared to other issues, such as ending the war in Iraq, providing health care to citizens, or decreasing unemployment?

For readers trying to analyze and navigate competing claims, the same problems arise. When an author makes a value-based argument and appeals to our emotions, it helps to examine some facts. It also can help tremendously to read positions of writers with whom we disagree. These opposing arguments may bring to mind some further investigation points that we haven’t thought of yet. An informed reader should understand many different sides of an issue regardless of his or her personal beliefs.

Analyzing Blogs, Internet Posts, Tweets, and Other Online Material

Although it is a common joke to back up one's opinion with the statement "It's true, I read it on the Internet," the joke is slowly becoming a reality. In the age of the Internet, anyone is free to offer an opinion on any subject, analyze it endlessly, and publish it for all to see and read. Many of the sites that purport to analyze the news merely regurgitate stories from other media outlets and further compare and analyze the differences.

Analyzing these sources can be challenging. It is usually difficult to find out enough information about the author and what his or her qualifications are. We must first examine the core beliefs mentioned above—understanding this person's beliefs and what type of material, facts, opinions, and values he or she is presenting to develop the argument. In some cases such material might be interesting to read, add to an understanding of an issue, or be a launching point for further investigation. Yet such informal sources usually require more research to verify the information.

A Few Common Argumentation Techniques

Writers use many techniques to further their arguments. Here are some common ones:

- **Categorical Statements**

Categorical statements imply that something always or never occurs or that people always or never do something. These statements may be true, but they are usually so broad that they cannot be proven. These statements should not be confused with statements of fact, such as "All people need to eat." These are examples of categorical statements: "Everyone needs to become aware of global warming" and "All men are created equal." Such statements make assumptions; they should be questioned when you are reading and should not be used in your writing.

- **Slippery Slope**

This is an argument that asserts that if one event or course of action is taken, others will inevitably follow. Here's an example of a slippery-slope argument: "If America cannot secure its borders, illegal immigrants will destroy the nation by burdening its social systems and increasing terror, crime, and joblessness." These statements exaggerate the consequences of actions and create fear. Slippery-slope statements also suggest that the first thing mentioned will inevitably lead to the next—they leave no room for the possibility that the first thing can occur without the others following. These statements are illogical because of this inevitability, which is impossible to prove.

- **Personal Attack**

Some writers or speakers attack their opponent personally rather than challenging that opponent's ideas or claims. This type of inflammatory technique is rampant during election years. During the 2016 presidential election campaign, Donald

Trump used this technique freely. For example, one of his comments about Hillary Clinton was that she “embarrassed herself and the country with her email lies.” Here, Trump referred to the fact that Clinton had used personal e-mail while she was secretary of state, but he also attacked her honesty and her dignity without really having to say anything about her depth of experience or her fitness to be president.

- **Cause and Effect**

A cause-and-effect argument becomes deceptive when the writer argues that one thing causes another just because they happened at or near the same time. For example, arguing that the ocean is warmer in Southern California because of global warming may or may not be true. A careful reader must examine when an argument relies on cause and effect and whether the two events are actually related to one another.