



COLLEGE OF IDAHO

Fact or Opinion

Interpreting What You Read

Fact or Opinion

Because writers don't always say things directly, sometimes it is difficult to figure out what a writer really means or what he or she is really trying to say. You need to learn to "read between the lines" – to take the information the writer gives you and figure things out for yourself.

You will also need to learn to distinguish between *fact* and *opinion*. Writers often tell us what they think or how they feel, but they don't always give us the facts. It's important to be able to interpret what the writer is saying so you can form opinions of your own. As you read an author's views, you should ask yourself if the author is presenting you with an established *fact* or with a personal *opinion*. Since the two may appear close together, even in the same sentence, you have to be able to distinguish between them.

The key difference between facts and opinions is that *facts* can be verified, or checked for accuracy, by anyone. In contrast, *opinions* cannot be checked for accuracy by some outside source. Opinions are what someone personally thinks or how he/she feel about an issue. Opinions by definition are subjective and relative.

Defining a Fact

Facts are objective, concrete bits of information. They can be found in official government and legal records, and in the physical sciences. Facts can be found in reference books, such as encyclopedias and atlases, textbooks, and relevant publications. Objective facts are what researchers seek in laboratories or through controlled studies. Facts are usually expressed by precise numbers or quantities, in weights and measures, and in concrete language. The decisions of Congress, specific technological data, birth records, historical documents, all provide researchers with reliable facts. Since anyone can look up facts, facts are generally not the subject of disputes. However, not all facts are absolutes. Often the problem is that facts are simply not readily available – such as battles like the Little Big Horn where all the witnesses who could give information on what happened died in the disaster.

In 1876, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and his 7th Cavalry engaged in a fight with Sioux Indians along the Little Big Horn Rivers in Montana. Custer and his entire company were wiped out; no one survived to tell what really happened.

In this instance, we can only read opinions on how this disaster befell Custer.

To sum up, facts:

- can be verified in reference books, official records, and so forth
- are expressed in concrete language or specific numbers
- once verified, are generally agreed upon by people



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Determining an Opinion

Opinions are based on subjective judgment and personal values rather than on information that can be verified. An opinion is a belief that someone holds without complete proof or positive knowledge that it is correct. Even experts who have studied the same issue carefully often have very different opinions about that issue.

Opinions are often disputed, and many times involve abstract concepts and complex moral issues such as right or wrong, fairness and loyalty. Abstract concepts, because they are not easily understood, can never be defined to everyone's satisfaction. For example, each of us holds a personal opinion about what fairness or loyalty is, about gun control and abortion, and these issues always remain a matter of opinion, not fact.

Although opinions cannot be verified for accuracy, writers should, nevertheless, back their opinions with evidence, facts, and reason – by whatever information supports the opinion and convinces the reader that it is a valid opinion. A *valid* opinion is one in which the writer's support for his or her opinion is solid and persuasive, and one in which the writer cites other respected authorities who are in agreement. If a writer presents an extreme or unconvincing opinion, the reader should remain wary or unconvinced.

Writers often slip their personal opinions into a piece of writing, even when it is suppose to be a "factual" account; alert readers can identify subjective opinions by studying the writer's language.

- Opinions are often expressed as comparisons (more, strongest, less, most, least efficient, but):
 - The painter Pablo Picasso was far *more* innovative than any of his contemporaries.
- Opinions are often expressed by adjectives (brilliant, vindictive, fair, trustworthy):
 - Ronald Reagan was a *convincing* speaker when he read a prepared address but was not *effective* at press conferences.
- Opinions often involve evaluations:
 - The *excellence* of her science project was a *model* for other students.
- Opinions are often introduced by verbs and adverbs that suggest some doubt in the writer's mind:
 - It *appears* she was confused.
 - She *seems* to have the qualifications for the position.
 - They *probably* used dirty tricks to win.

Some opinions obviously deserve more attention than others do. When expert economists, such as John Kenneth Galbraith or Paul Volcher, discuss the U.S. economy, their opinions are more informed and therefore more reliable than the opinions of people who know very little about economic policy. Similarly, when someone is a specialist on the poet John Keats, that person's opinion of Keat's poems should be given considerable weight.

Become an alert and critical reader. Understand the differences between facts and opinions and interpret and apply both into your critical thinking.