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Finding What You Need

C9 Can you trust the writer?

In this masterclass you will learn:

- how far you can trust the writer
- to recognise the difference between fact, opinion, assertion and comment
- detect and deal with bias when you read

Can you trust the writer?

You can *never* trust the writer. Writers can lie. They can conceal facts and they can present them in a way that influences your response. They can hoodwink you by writing in a style you think of as factual, but use it to sell their own opinions. Watch out for:

- **facts** – information that can be checked and proved
- **opinions** – views and beliefs held by the writer
- **assertions** – statements that sound like facts but are open to debate
- **comments** – neither facts nor opinions, but reflections or discussion points

For example:

Research has shown that men are twice as likely as women to be serious gamblers. (*Fact*)

Gambling is a type of addictive behaviour. (*Assertion*)

Gambling is a vice. (*Opinion*)

Many gamblers say that their habit started out as a bit of fun, but over time it developed into a form of comfort or thrill that they couldn't live without, like an addiction. (*Comment*)





Activity

- 1 Spot the 4 categories in each of these sets:

Checklist

A Divorce

- Two out of five marriages in the UK ends in divorce.
- Three out of five married couples in the UK live happily ever after.
- Marriage, it seems, is a less-than-perfect fairy tale.
- Marriage is only for romantics.

B Sweat

- Everyone should use an anti-perspirant deodorant.
- Sweat is healthy.
- Sweating is a natural process that has become a social taboo in the west.
- A typical person has around 2.5 million sweat glands, and about 80% of them are in the armpits.

Facts from *XY: Toolkit for Life* by Matt Whyman

- 2 List some of the signs that a writer is being accurate and truthful.
- 3 List some of the warning signs of inaccuracy or bias.



Can you trust the writer?

This article presents the arguments for and against the right to lifeboat help for people in danger on the sea:

RESCUE RIGHTS ROW REOPENS

The death of two lifeboat crew during a rescue off the coast of Devon last month has reopened the row about 'rescue rights' at sea.

The two men died during a rescue at sea when inexperienced holidaymakers found themselves in difficulties during a storm. They had ignored warnings to stay ashore because of the approaching storm, and the rescue was complicated by mountainous seas. The holidaymakers were saved, but two lifeboatmen were swept into the sea. Their bodies were recovered the following day.

'People who set sail in stormy weather cannot expect other people to put their own lives at risk to save them,' says St Meg's mayor, Glyn Tredegar. He points to the 40% of rescues which are the result of human error and misadventure.

The Lifeboat Service is committed in its constitution to rescue any sailor in distress on the sea, no matter how he or she came to be in difficulties. But should they? Lifeboat officer John Crowne is clear that the service should stick to its principles: 'Once you start to pick and choose who to save and who to let die, you are in a moral

fix. All life is precious, even if the sailor has made a bad decision.'

But Jane Butler, wife of one of the drowned crew members, sees it differently: 'It is one thing to rescue innocent lives at peril, but quite another to offer your own life to save someone who chose to ignore all warnings. Lifeboat crews cannot be expected to pay for other people's selfish and suicidal choices. People must realise that putting to sea is always a risk, and there are no guarantees.'



Activity

- How does the writer avoid bias and personal opinion?



Opinion and bias

Opinion is not a bad thing. The expression of strong beliefs, ideas and arguments is very important in a democracy. At the same time, you don't want to be taken in by every opinion you ever hear. You also need to guard against bias, when strongly held opinions lead writers to ignore or misrepresent other views.

Bias is often expressed in:

- exaggeration
- claims made without supporting examples or statistics
- the use of loaded or emotional language
- statements that can't be proved
- only mentioning things that support your own opinion
- keeping quiet about alternative views
- misrepresenting alternative views
- failing to mention exceptions
- passing off personal opinions as 'common sense'
- overuse of supporting phrases, e.g. 'obviously', 'certainly'

Activity

- Spot the signs of bias in this text:

Women make poor drivers because they lack confidence and swift responses. When traffic tails back, it is almost always a woman at the front of the queue, dithering about turning right or nervous about passing parked cars. It takes women twice as long to turn right as men; they just don't have the nerve for it. And flashing amber means nothing to them; only green will get them off the line. Heaven save us from women drivers.

Can you trust the writer?

Being a critical reader

Be aware that writers can influence you. When you read, stay alert to their influence by:

- asking questions of the text, e.g. Is that really true?
- checking against your own common sense and experience, e.g. Have I found that the case?
- keeping an eye on words and phrases that lull you into agreement, e.g. 'obviously', 'always', 'never', 'as we all know', 'the fact is...'
- looking for the signs of honesty, e.g. evidence

Activity

As you read this text, check if you trust it:

Dress well

Dress well means exactly that – dress well. There is simply no excuse for dressing badly, dressing down, dressing dumb, dressing cheaply or dressing carelessly.

I'm afraid that this rule is very important and must be strictly adhered to. There are no days off, no excuses, no letters from your mother letting you off. Dressing well is the most noticeable thing about you. If you relax your guard for a moment it will be remembered.



From *The Rules of Work* by Richard Templar

- 1 What would you wish to question or check in the text?
- 2 How would you check?



Test it

Read the text and answer the question:

Don't take sides

If you take sides, then you are part of the argument, the fight, the dispute, the disagreement. You have to remain totally objective and firmly in the middle. Stay on the fence what ever you do, because if you don't, then one side will blame you as well as the person they were arguing with originally.

The more detached you appear to be, the more senior you will come across. If you jump in with your boots on and take sides, you run the risk of making an enemy as well as being seen as hot headed.

The difficulty is when a friend is embroiled in a row with another less close colleague. Your friend will invariably turn to you and try to drag you in. 'Oh for God's sake, tell her I'm right will you, Richard?'

You can't afford to be dragged in. You will have to hold up your hands defensively and say, 'Don't involve me. If you two can't sort this out sensibly and without arguing I will send you to your room.'

The text tells the reader not to take sides, but it is an example of a writer trying to force his opinions and his advice on the reader.

- 1 Find 5 ways he does this.
- 2 Give an example of each.
- 3 Explain why the reader should not trust the writer.

What you get marks for

1 mark for each way of forcing an opinion	5 marks
Half a mark for each of the 5 examples	2.5 marks
Half a mark for each explanation	2.5 marks
Total	10 marks