

Learning Targets

- Access prior knowledge about objectivity and subjectivity.
- Analyze a news story for evidence of bias.

Examining Bias

1. With a partner, create a graphic that compares and contrasts news articles and editorials. If you have access to a newspaper or online news source, review examples of news articles and editorials for specific evidence to inform your findings.
2. We tend to think that news articles are **objective**, which means they are based on factual information. However, all news reports are to some extent **subjective**—or based on feelings or opinions—because they represent the reporter’s analysis of the information surrounding the story’s topic. Close analysis of the details of the text’s content, structure, and publication context can often reveal subtle indications of **bias** in terms of how the writer frames the issue. Considering the following aspects of a text gives a basis for understanding that many news stories may be far from objective in their coverage of the stories they construct.

You will be assigned one of the following six types of bias. In your small group, paraphrase the explanation for your assigned type of bias. Next, generate several guiding questions you can use to discern whether your assigned type of bias is present in a given text.

Types of Bias

A. BIAS THROUGH SELECTION AND OMISSION

- An editor can express a bias by choosing to use or not to use a specific news item. For example, the editor might believe that advertisers want younger readers—they spend more money. Therefore, news of specific interest to old people will be ignored.
- Within a given story, details can be ignored or included to give readers or viewers a different opinion about the events reported. If, during a speech, a few people boo, the reaction can be described as “remarks greeted by jeers.” Or the people jeering can be dismissed as “a handful of dissidents . . .” or perhaps not even be mentioned.
- Bias through the omission of stories or details is very difficult to detect. Only by comparing news reports from a wide variety of outlets can this form of bias be observed.
- Bias in local news coverage can be found by comparing reports of the same event as treated in different papers.

B. BIAS THROUGH PLACEMENT

- Readers of papers judge first page stories to be more significant than those buried in the back. Television and radio newscasts run the most important stories first and leave the less significant to later. Where a story is placed, therefore, influences what a reader or viewer thinks about its importance and suggests the editor’s evaluation of its importance.

For example, a local editor might campaign against the owning of hand guns by giving prominent space to every shooting with a hand gun and gun-related accident in his paper.

LEARNING STRATEGIES:

Paraphrasing, Quickwrite, Marking the Text, Think Aloud, Think-Pair-Share

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

Bias is a slanted attitude of either preferring or disliking something.

My Notes

News or Views: A Closer Look

My Notes

- Some murders and robberies receive front-page attention while others receive only a mention on page 20.
- Similarly, where information appears *within* an article may also reveal evidence of bias. Because most readers only read the first few paragraphs of any given article, burying information at the end may work to suppress a particular point of view or piece of information, while placing it at the beginning emphasizes it. The opposite might be true, though; the end could reveal the writer’s closing thought (and thus his or her personal bias) on the issue.

C. BIAS BY HEADLINE

- Many people read only the headline of a news item. In addition, most people scan nearly all the headlines in a newspaper. As a result, headlines are the most-read part of a paper. They can summarize as well as present carefully hidden biases and prejudices. They can convey excitement where little exists; they can express approval or condemnation; and they can steer public opinion.

D. BIAS BY PHOTOS, CAPTIONS, AND CAMERA ANGLES

- Some pictures flatter a person; others make the person look unpleasant. A paper can choose photos to influence opinion about, for example, a candidate for election. Television can show film or videotape that praises or condemns. The choice of which visual images to display is extremely important. Newspapers run captions that are also potential sources of bias and opinion.

E. BIAS THROUGH STATISTICS AND CROWD COUNTS

- To make a disaster seem more spectacular (and therefore worthy of reading), numbers can be inflated. “One hundred injured in train wreck” is not as powerful as “Passengers injured in train wreck.”
- Crowd counts are notoriously inaccurate and often reflect the opinion of the person doing the counting. A reporter, event sponsor, or police officer might estimate a crowd at several thousand if he or she agrees with the purpose of the assembly—or a much smaller number if he or she is critical of the crowd’s purposes or beliefs. News magazines use specific numbers to enhance believability.

F. BIAS BY SOURCE CONTROL

- To detect bias, always consider where a news item “comes from.” Is the information supplied by a reporter, by an eyewitness, by police or fire officials, by executives, by elected or appointed government officials? Each might have a particular bias that is presented in the story.
- Puff pieces are supplied to newspapers (and TV stations) by companies or public relations directors—and even sometimes by the government (directly or through press conferences). The name “puff piece” comes from the word *puffery*, which means overly flattering words about a topic. For example, the “Avocado Growers Association” might send a press release in the form of a news story telling of a doctor who claims that avocados are healthy and should be eaten by all. A food company might supply recipes for a newspaper’s food section that recommends use of its products in the recipes. A country’s tourist bureau will supply a glowing story, complete with pictures of a pleasant vacation. Recently, even government agencies have sometimes issued such releases.

INDEPENDENT READING LINK

Review your outside reading and find examples of at least two types of bias. For each example, provide an explanation of how it exemplifies the bias.

- A pseudo-event is some event (demonstration, sit-in, ribbon cutting, speech, ceremony, ground breaking, etc.) that takes place primarily to gain news coverage.
- Similarly, the question of who is quoted in an article can point to bias. Be sure to consider who is quoted, what the quote seems to reveal or imply (negatively or positively) about the position, who is merely paraphrased, and what perspectives are unrepresented or remain silent in the article.

3. Use the following graphic organizer to keep track of examples of the guiding questions each group developed for identifying bias. Then apply those questions to a sample newspaper article or online news source.

Identifying Examples of Bias

Bias Type	Guiding Questions	Examples
Bias Through Selection and Omission		
Bias Through Placement		
Bias by Headline		
Bias by Photos, Captions, and Camera Angles		
Bias Through Statistics and Crowd Counts		
Bias by Source Control		

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My Notes

Before Reading

4. Have you encountered bias when using a social networking site? If so, give an example.

During Reading

5. While editorials openly present opinions, newspaper articles may appear objective until carefully examined for evidence that reveals a more subjective agenda. Read the following news stories and mark the text by labeling any evidence of bias you encounter. Be sure to use the guiding questions your class has generated.

Article

Facebook Photos **Sting** Minnesota High School Students

The Associated Press

1 EDEN PRAIRIE, Minn. — For 16-year-old Nick Laurent, walking out of Eden Prairie High School yesterday to protest the school’s punishment of students seen partying on Facebook pages was about asking administrators to be fair.

2 More than a dozen students joined Laurent after learning of the walkout from fliers the junior handed out the day before. The students said school administrators overreacted to the perception that students in the photos were drinking.

3 “It’s the loudest thing we could do,” said Laurent, who organized the walkout but said he wasn’t one of the students in the photos.

4 Laurent tried to make his point by passing out red plastic cups that were similar to those seen in some of the photos. He noted that it was impossible to see what was inside the cups, so administrators couldn’t prove that students were drinking.

5 Laurent agreed that athletes and other students who sign a code of conduct to be involved in activities should face consequences if they break the rule against drinking alcohol. But he said the punishments were too harsh.

6 “They don’t have (the) support of the students to hand out arbitrary punishments and punishments that don’t fit the crime,” he said.

7 Once the photos on the social-networking Web site came to the attention of administrators, 42 students were interviewed and 13 face some discipline over the pictures, school officials said.

8 School officials haven’t said how the students were disciplined, but Minnesota State High School League penalties start with a two-game suspension for the first violation. Laurent and other students said they knew of classmates who were banned from their sports teams for five weeks.

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What is the effect of focusing on Laurent rather than focusing on the punished students, their parents, or the administration?

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

When making an argument, credible evidence is crucial. How credible is the evidence presented by the reporter through Laurent in this piece? Explain.

- 9 Principal Conn McCartan did not return a call seeking comment on the walkout, but students said they expected they'd be punished.
- 10 In earlier statements, the school's principal said school officials did not seek out the pictures. But he didn't say who gave the school the photos.
- 11 "We do not go out looking at student social networking sites. We do however take action when we are given legitimate information about school or Minnesota State High School League violations," McCartan said in an e-mail to families of his students.
- 12 McCartan said interviews with students suggested, however, that the pictures might have been posted on such sites, and warned of the dangers.
- 13 "These sites are not private places," he wrote. "Their content forms a permanent and public record of conversations and pictures."
- 14 In an e-mail to parents and guardians, Superintendent Melissa Krull said, "We are not legally at liberty to discuss further details of this investigation."
- 15 Fourteen-year-old Ali Saley said cutting class for the cause was worth it. She held signs such as, "They walk or we do," in solidarity with the students who were punished. A few cars honked in support of the students as they gathered on a footbridge over the road in front of the school.
- 16 The Eden Prairie High School students who got into trouble ran afoul of a new reality: digital cameras and social networking sites make the entire world a public space.
- 17 It's becoming increasingly common for schools and potential employers to check social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, and to penalize kids or other people for what they find, said William McGeeveran, a professor at the University of Minnesota Law School and an expert on data privacy.
- 18 "Facebook is largely a public space. Users don't always perceive it that way, but that's what it is," McGeeveran said.
- 19 Even when young people are cautious about what they put on the pages, he said, friends or acquaintances can post pictures of them in questionable situations without their knowing about it.
- 20 McGeeveran cited research by the Pew Internet & American Life Project that suggested most teens were aware of the risks of posting personal information on the Internet. A report issued last month found that most teens restrict access to their posted photos and videos at least some of the time, and that few consistently share them without any restrictions.
- 21 "But some students are still foolish about what they put on their pages," he said.
- 22 Eden Prairie High School has about 3,300 students, and Facebook lists about 2,800 members in its network for the school, including more than 500 from the current senior class. A spot check on Jan. 9 showed that some had posted dozens and even hundreds of pictures of themselves and their friends. However, most members used a privacy setting to limit access to their profiles to friends and other authorized people.
- 23 Schools in Minnesota have limited ability to regulate the conduct of students after hours. When students participate in sports or certain fine-arts activities, however, they must agree in writing to abide by the long-standing rules of the Minnesota State High School League, which prohibit the use of alcohol, tobacco and controlled substances, even over the summer.

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Quoting experts can be a useful tactic when trying to build credibility. What is the effect of quoting this expert in this article?

News or Views: A Closer Look

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Conclusions are often restatements of the argument, a sort of “now we have come full circle” or “now think about this” final statement. How effective is this quote as a concluding statement?

24 League spokesman Howard Voigt noted that parents must sign the forms, too, certifying that they understand the rules and penalties. Still, he said, complaints are common.

25 “We run into that all the time here—parents call and accuse us of being too hard on their kid,” he said.

26 Voigt said there had been several cases of students’ running afoul of league rules because of potential violations posted on social-networking sites.

27 It’s not safe for kids to assume what they do in small groups won’t be broadcast to the entire world, McGeeveran said.

28 “I don’t think most of us would have liked to have lived our teen years in an era of ubiquitous camera phones and social networking,” he said. “It really changes the perception of what places are private and which ones aren’t.”

After Reading

6. Evaluate this article as a source of credible information. Did you find bias in this article, or is it objective? Explain.

Check Your Understanding

Expository Writing Prompt: With a partner, plan, develop, write, revise, and present an informational article on a timely and debatable issue of significance to your school community, local community, or national audience. Be sure to:

- Integrate information into the text to maintain the flow of ideas.
- Include both a paraphrase and a direct quote in your text.
- Maintain an objective tone.