

Opinion vs. Fact Student Worksheet

I'm not biased!

Actually, most people have certain biases; a bias is “an attitude that always favors one way of feeling or acting over any other.” In other words, if you have ever felt partial to something, had a preconceived notion, or played favorites- you have probably experienced what it is like to feel a bias towards something. It is normal that people will favor a certain way of acting or feeling; it may be what you have learned at home, at school, or through different experiences in your life. For example, if you have had a science class that you didn't like in the past, you may have come into this one expecting not to like it. That would be a preconceived notion, or a bias towards science! It is important to figure out what your own biases are so that you can be aware of them and realize when they are and aren't appropriate. In recognizing your own biases, you will become better at picking out other people's biases as well.

Fact or Opinion?

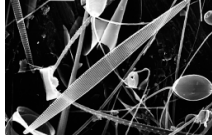
When you are reading a newspaper article, a magazine article, information on the internet, or even a book; how do you know what is fact and what is opinion? Can you tell from reading one of these if the author has any biases or if they are being completely objective? It is good for people to express their own opinions, but they need to make it clear what is opinion and what is actual fact. So how do you tell?

One way may be the language that they use. For example, if I were to say “everyone loves the ocean, the ocean is great” would that be a fact or an opinion? It would be an opinion; not everyone loves the ocean and not everyone thinks the ocean is great. I love the ocean and am therefore a little biased towards it and may not understand how anyone wouldn't like it. Alternatively, if I were to say “many people enjoy the ocean and think that it is great” that would be a fact. It would be even more accurate if I gave proof of my fact and said “I conducted a survey of all of the students in my class and found that 25 of 30 students enjoy the ocean and think its great”.

Another way would be to look at the author's credentials, what qualifies the author to make certain statements? This can be a little difficult sometimes, especially with all of the information that we can access so easily through the internet- how do you know what to trust? Usually the information that you get from big, well-known agencies is reliable (for example, information from a museum or a city office). If you are ever in doubt, try to double check the information by looking at another source or ask someone! When you are reading an article, it usually tells you who the author is, it may say that the author is a researcher at UCSB, or a government official, or it may not say much. You can also look at the company that the author, or the people who are quoted in the article, work for. If you read something in the LA Times it's a safe bet that it will be more reliable than something you read in the National Enquirer. You need to learn how to judge when you are reading information from a reliable source, and when you may not be. This takes practice.

Activity 1:

The 4 quotations below are taken from articles about marine mammals getting sick and, in some cases, dying. Scientists think that these illnesses and deaths may be due to a toxin that some types of algae produce called domoic acid.



This is a picture of the diatom (an algae) Psuedonitzschia, which can produce the toxin domoic acid.

For each quotation below you need to decide if it is fact or opinion. If you think that it is a fact highlight it yellow, if you think that it is an opinion, highlight it blue.

#1: “One possible reason for the large number of pregnant sea lions coming in is that during pregnancy the mothers have to eat more to sustain themselves along with their unborn pups- and by eating more, they also take more domoic acid into their systems.”

#2: “In 2002, 685 California Sea lion deaths were documented, as were the deaths of 75 dolphins”.

#3: “Common effects of domoic acid seen in animals washed ashore include head weaving and seizures, which may lead to permanent brain damage and eventual death if not treated”.

#4: “Why are domoic cases confined to coastal waters? Several researchers suspect connection with human activities.”

Activity 2:

As you read your article highlight fact in yellow and opinion in blue just like you did in activity 1. Also as you read, try and figure out (not all articles provide the following information, so just do your best!):

1. Who is the author? _____

2. What are the author’s qualifications? _____

3. What company or organization does the author work for? _____

4. What possible biases might the author have about the topic of the article? Why? _____

5. Does the author interview anyone? Yes/ No (circle)

If yes, what are the qualifications of the person who was interviewed? _____

Who do they work for? _____

What possible biases might they have? Why? _____