

CRITICAL READING

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"There's a sucker born every minute." P. T. Barnum, one of the organizers of the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus, said that about a hundred-years ago, but that statement is still true today. If you do not know how to accurately evaluate what you see, hear, and read, guess what, YOU ARE THAT SUCKER!

Everywhere you turn, you are bombarded with information, much of it conflicting. How do you decide when people are "pulling your chain" and when they are telling the truth? You think critically; you evaluate what they say based on several things:

1. What you know about the subject
2. The credentials of the speaker/writer
3. The facts that speaker/writer uses to support his/her argument

You use this same process when you read. Think about it. Which argument is more persuasive? One presented in supermarket tabloids like the National Enquirer or one presented in magazines like Time, Newsweek, or US News and World Report? Most people do not actually believe Elvis is pumping gas in a desert town in Arizona or that he was abducted by aliens. Why not? Most tabloids do not present facts to back up their statements; that's why not!

WORD CHOICE:

When you learn to read critically, you will become aware of how an author uses words to make positive or negative impressions on the reader. Notice the difference between these two sentences:

1. The unruly crowd forced its way through the restraint barriers and ruthlessly attacked the rock star.

2. The enthusiastic group of fans burst through the fence and rushed toward the rock star.

Both of these sentences say the same thing: a group of people broke down a fence and ran toward a rock star. However, in the first sentence, the word choice provides the reader with the negative image of an angry lynch mob, while the second sentence creates the image of a group of people joyful about seeing their favorite performer.

So, here's something to keep in mind when you read ANYTHING!!!

**WORDS CAN BE USED TO
MANIPULATE THE READER!**

INFERENCES:

Meanings can be unstated but implied, as in the following sentence.

1. You are driving on the freeway, and you notice a police car with flashing red lights behind you. You check the speedometer and notice that you are going ten miles over the speed limit.
2. A woman seated alone at a bar nervously glances at everyone who enters. Every few minutes she checks her watch.

What you may infer (understand) from sentence #1 is that you are about to get a speeding ticket. What you infer from sentence #2 is that the woman is waiting for somebody who is late. But are those the only explanations? of course not! There are alternative explanations. In sentence #1, the police car may be speeding on its way to a traffic accident or attempting to stop the car that just passed you going 20 miles over the speed limit. (And those are only a few of the possible explanations.) In sentence #2, a reader may also infer other meanings. Perhaps the woman sitting nervously in a bar is waiting until a certain time to whip out a gun and rob the bartender!

You can understand (infer) ONE of the meanings of a passage from the several ways in which the author writes it.

1. DESCRIPTION: You understand a situation or a character by the way in which the author describes it. .
2. ACTION: When the author uses active verbs, he/she provides clues about what is happening.
3. CONVERSATION: The way in which people speak, even when being quoted in a newspaper or magazine article, give the reader more clues about the character of that person.
4. WRITER'S COMMENTARY/DETAILS: The writer provides clues to these:
 - a. TIME-- "an oily midnight mist" tells you that the time is late at night
 - b. PLACE-- "reflection of smog-covered neon" suggests an area of bars or night clubs.
 - c. EMOTIONAL ATTITUDE-- "a woman with a face buried under a technicolor avalanche of makeup who performs for pay a forlorn, unromantic ritual" may suggest a prostitute who is hiding her true self under a mask and who feels ashamed or embarrassed about it.

(McWhorter 252-256)

We can often tell what an author believes by taking a look at his/her tone, purpose, or point of view.

TONE:

"Tone is the attitude a writer takes toward his subject and his readers. Tone may be casual or serious, enthusiastic or skeptical, friendly or hostile. . ." (Brusaw, et al, 599)

Tone is determined by many elements—formal or informal writing styles, word choice and sentence structure, and method of essay/article development. Look at these examples of article titles and ask yourself what kind of mood or tone they each suggest.

1. "Some Observations on the Diminishing Oil Reserves in Wyoming"
2. "What Happens When We've Pumped Wyoming Dry?"

Looking at title #1, readers would expect an objective and impersonal report on the oil industry in Wyoming. Title #2, on the other hand, is more down-to-earth, more personal in tone. Also, it implies that the author has a specific point of view about this issue. Both authors may be concerned with the economic impact in the state of the declining oil industry; but author #1 is mainly concerned with explaining that a problem does exist while author #2 may be concerned with the economic impact on the people and businesses who depend on the oil industry for a living. (Joffe, 292)

BIAS:

When you evaluate any piece of writing, always try to decide whether the author is objective or one-sided (biased). Does the author present an objective view of the subject or is a particular viewpoint favored? An objective article presents both sides of an issue, while a biased one presents only one side.

You can decide whether a writer is biased by asking yourself these questions: Is the writer acting as a reporter, presenting facts, or as a salesperson, providing only favorable information? Are there other views on the subject that the writer does NOT discuss?

SLANT:

Slanting means the selection of details that suit the author's purpose and the omission of details that do not. (McWhorter 287-288)

PURPOSE:

Often, readers can tell what an author thinks by the purpose of his/her writing. Is the purpose to inform the reader of the facts about a situation or problem? To amuse the reader? To make the reader want to DO something about a problem?

POINT OF VIEW:

Point of view is the way in which an author writes his/her essay or article.

1. Is it written in first or second person? The author uses "I," "we," or "you."

Writing from a personal point of view reminds your reader that two people (the writer and the reader) are involved in the communication.

2. Is it written in third person? The author uses "he," "she," "it," or "they." Most instructors prefer students to use this impersonal point of view because, in general, it sounds more objective and professional. Sometimes, however, this point of view can actually PREVENT clear and direct communication and may actually cause misunderstandings.

When considering point of view, whether in an article or essay you are reading or one you are writing, be aware of these errors:

1. When writers try to avoid "I" by using "one"--when they are really talking about their personal experiences--they do NOT increase objectivity. They merely make the statement impersonal!

EXAMPLE: "One can only conclude..." usually means that the author has made a personal conclusion about a topic. What he/she really means is "I can only conclude ... "

Never use "the writer" to replace "I" in an attempt to sound formal or dignified. The result is that you will only sound arrogant, self-important, and pretentious!

EXAMPLE: "This writer feels. . ." sounds bombastic Use "I feel ..." instead!

Writing in third person shifts the point of view from the author or reader of the article or essay to the person or thing being discussed. In college writing, the emphasis truly **SHOULD** be on your topic rather than on how you personally feel about the topic. That is why your instructors want you to use third person!

TO DETERMINE TONE, PURPOSE, OR POINT OF VIEW

1. Look at titles.
2. Read prefaces and introductory paragraphs carefully.
3. Notice the setting. (If the article begins "The sky was dark and cloudy and the atmosphere damp as they stepped into the graveyard,: you are NOT likely to be reading a scholarly treatise on old cemeteries!
4. Notice words that suggest an ironic or humorous intent
5. Try to be aware of the author's background. (A businessman speaking to a convention of businessmen on the subject of unions can be expected to have a particular point of view. On the other hand, if a speech on unions is made by a labor union leader at a union rally, a completely different point of view may be expressed.

(Joffe, 292)