

News or Views: A Closer Look

SUGGESTED LEARNING STRATEGIES: Paraphrasing, Quickwrite, Marking the Text, Think-Pair-Share

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

Bias is an inclination or mental leaning for or against something, which prevents impartial judgment.

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 – since 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.

1. BIAS THROUGH SELECTION AND OMISSION

- An editor can express a bias by choosing to use or not to use a specific news item. An 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 they can be ignored 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.

2. 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.

- Some murders and robberies receive front-page attention while others receive only a mention on page twenty.
- Similarly, where information appears *within* an article may also reveal evidence of bias. Since 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/her personal bias) on the issue.

3. BIAS BY HEADLINE

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

4. 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.

5. 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" can be the same 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/she is critical of the crowd's purposes or beliefs. News magazines use specific numbers to enhance believability.



WORD CONNECTIONS

The perception of bias depends on evidence supporting or not supporting claims made. *Prima facie* is a Latin term meaning "on the face of it," or at first glance. An example of its use is, "*Prima facie* evidence does not support the conclusions drawn."

6. 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). 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.
- 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 choice 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.

Bias Type	Guiding Questions
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	

My Notes

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 carefully evaluate them for subtle evidence of bias using the guiding questions your class has generated.

Article

Facebook Photos Sting Minnesota High School Students

The Associated Press

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.

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.

"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.

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.

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.

"They don't have (the) support of the students to hand out arbitrary punishments and punishments that don't fit the crime," he said.

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.

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.

Principal Conn McCartan did not return a call seeking comment on the walkout, but students said they expected they'd be punished.

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.

"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.

McCartan said interviews with students suggested, however, that the pictures might have been posted on such sites, and warned of the dangers.

"These sites are not private places," he wrote. "Their content forms a permanent and public record of conversations and pictures."

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."

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.

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.

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.

"Facebook is largely a public space. Users don't always perceive it that way, but that's what it is," McGeeveran said.

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.

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.

My Notes

Lined area for taking notes.

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My Notes

“But some students are still foolish about what they put on their pages,” he said.

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.

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.

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.

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

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

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

“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.”

Federal Way schools restrict Gore film

by Robert McClure and Lisa Stiffler

This week in Federal Way schools, it got a lot more inconvenient to show one of the top-grossing documentaries in U.S. history, the global-warming alert “An Inconvenient Truth.”

After a parent who supports the teaching of creationism and opposes sex education complained about the film, the Federal Way School Board on Tuesday placed what it labeled a moratorium on showing the film. The movie consists largely of a computer presentation by former Vice President Al Gore recounting scientists’ findings.

“Condoms don’t belong in school, and neither does Al Gore. He’s not a schoolteacher,” said Frosty Hardison, a parent of seven who also said that he believes the Earth is 14,000 years old. “The information that’s being presented is a very cockeyed view of what the truth is. ... The Bible says that in the end times everything will burn up, but that perspective isn’t in the DVD.”

Hardison’s e-mail to the School Board prompted board member David Larson to propose the moratorium Tuesday night.

“Somebody could say you’re killing free speech, and my retort to them would be we’re encouraging free speech,” said Larson, a lawyer. “The beauty of our society is we allow debate.”

School Board members adopted a three-point policy that says teachers who want to show the movie must ensure that a “credible, legitimate opposing view will be presented,” that they must get the OK of the principal and the superintendent, and that any teachers who have shown the film must now present an “opposing view.”

The requirement to represent another side follows district policy to represent both sides of a controversial issue, board President Ed Barney said.

“What is purported in this movie is, ‘This is what is happening. Period. That is fact,’” Barney said.

Students should hear the perspective of global-warming skeptics and then make up their minds, he said. After they do, “if they think driving around in cars is going to kill us all, that’s fine, that’s their choice.”

Asked whether an alternative explanation for evolution should be presented by teachers, Barney said it would be appropriate to tell students that other beliefs exist. “It’s only a theory,” he said.

While the question of climate change has provoked intense argument in political circles in recent years, among scientists its basic tenets have become the subject of an increasingly stronger consensus.

My Notes

GRAMMAR & USAGE

News stories often carry many direct quotes. Notice, however, that this story contains a blend of complete quotations of one or more sentences, quotes of short phrases, and indirect quotes, which are paraphrases. The variety keeps the story from being boring or confusing. The same is true for research papers. Use longer quotes when the words are especially significant. Otherwise, rely on paraphrases and short quoted phrases.

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My Notes

“In the light of new evidence and taking into account the remaining uncertainties, most of the observed warming over the last 50 years is likely to have been due to the increase in greenhouse gas concentrations,” states a 2001 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which advises policymakers.

“Furthermore, it is very likely that the 20th-century warming has contributed significantly to the observed sea level rise, through thermal expansion of seawater and widespread loss of land ice.”

The basics of that position are backed by the American Meteorological Society, the American Geophysical Union, the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the National Academy of Sciences.

Laurie David, a co-producer of the movie, said that this is the first incident of its kind relating to the film.

“I am shocked that a school district would come to this decision,” David said in a prepared statement. “There is no opposing view to science, which is fact, and the facts are clear that global warming is here, now.”

The Federal Way incident started when Hardison learned that his daughter would see the movie in class. He objected.

Hardison and his wife, Gayla, said they would prefer that the movie not be shown at all in schools.

“From what I’ve seen (of the movie) and what my husband has expressed to me, if (the movie) is going to take the approach of ‘bad America, bad America,’ I don’t think it should be shown at all,” Gayle Hardison said. “If you’re going to come in and just say America is creating the rotten ruin of the world, I don’t think the video should be shown.”

Scientists say that Americans, with about 5 percent of the world’s population, emit about 25 percent of the globe-warming gases.

Larson, the School Board member, said a pre-existing policy should have alerted teachers and principals that the movie must be counterbalanced.

The policy, titled “Controversial Issues, Teaching of,” says in part, “It is the teacher’s responsibility to present controversial issues that are free from prejudice and encourage students to form, hold and express their own opinions without personal prejudice or discrimination.”

“The principal reason for that is to make sure that the public schools are not used for indoctrination,” Larson said.

Students contacted Wednesday said they favor allowing the movie to be shown.

“I think that a movie like that is a really great way to open people’s eyes up about what you can do and what you are doing to the planet and how that’s going to affect the human race,” said Kenna Patrick, a senior at Jefferson High School.

When it comes to the idea of presenting global warming skeptics, Patrick wasn’t sure how necessary that would be. She hadn’t seen the movie but had read about it and would like to see it.

“Watching a movie doesn’t mean that you have to believe everything you see in it,” she said.

Joan Patrick, Kenna’s mother, thought it would be a good idea for students to see the movie. They are the ones who will be dealing with the effects of a warmer planet.

“It’s their job,” she said. “They’re the next generation.”

My Notes
