

How to Analyze Facts, Opinions, Beliefs that you hear or read.

First, determine WHAT the statement is. This guide, provided by Colorado State, gives you a way to decide whether you are reviewing or analyzing a fact, opinion, belief, or prejudice. This determination will help you discover for YOURSELF the validity or purpose of those statements, it is NOT INTENDED to provide a guide for discussion with others.

Distinguishing Fact, Opinion, Belief, and Prejudice

Source: [Distinguishing Fact, Opinion, Belief, and Prejudice \(colostate.edu\)](https://colostate.edu)

Highlighting and emphasis added.

When forming personal convictions, we often interpret factual evidence through the filter of our **values, feelings, tastes, and past experiences**. Hence, most statements we make in speaking and writing are assertions [*a confident and forceful statement*] of fact, opinion, belief, or prejudice. The usefulness and acceptability of an assertion can be improved or diminished by the nature of the assertion, depending on which of the following categories it falls into:

A fact is verifiable. We can determine whether it is true by researching the evidence. This may involve numbers, dates, testimony, etc. (Ex.: "World War II ended in 1945.") The truth of the fact is beyond argument if one can assume that measuring devices or records or memories are correct. Facts provide crucial support for the assertion of an argument. However, **facts by themselves are worthless unless we put them in context, draw conclusions, and, thus, give them meaning.**

An opinion is a judgment based on facts, an honest attempt to draw a *reasonable conclusion from factual evidence*. (For example, we know that millions of people go without proper medical care, and so you form the opinion that the country should institute national health insurance even though it would cost billions of dollars.) An opinion is **potentially changeable--depending on how the evidence is interpreted**. By themselves, opinions have little power to convince. You must always let your reader know what your evidence is and how it led you to arrive at your opinion.

Unlike an opinion, a **belief is a conviction based on cultural or personal faith, morality, or values**. Statements such as "Capital punishment is legalized murder" are often called "opinions" because they express viewpoints, but they are not based on facts or other evidence. They cannot be disproved or even contested in a rational or logical manner. Since beliefs are inarguable, they cannot serve as the thesis of a formal argument. (Emotional appeals can, of course, be useful if you happen to know that your audience shares those beliefs.)

Another kind of assertion that has no place in serious argumentation is **prejudice, a half-baked opinion based on insufficient or unexamined evidence**. (Ex.: "Women are bad drivers.") Unlike a belief, a prejudice is testable: it can be contested and disproved on the basis of facts. We often form prejudices or accept them from others--family, friends, the media, etc.--without questioning their meaning or testing their truth. At best, prejudices are careless oversimplifications. At worst, they reflect a narrow-minded view of the world. Most of all, they are not likely to win the confidence or agreement of your readers.

(Adapted from: Fowler, H. Ramsey. *The Little, Brown Handbook*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1986.)

Second: Verify the facts OR the facts that back up an opinion

This is sometimes the most challenging part of your work. While looking for verifiable facts, you must consider the SOURCE. Review the source for any inherent biases, since while a fact may be absolutely verifiable, sometimes the opinion drawn from it does not make logical sense OR other facts that might change a conclusion are left out.

To determine the biases of a source:

- If there are “opinion articles” in that source (newspaper, magazine, web site) or places where a group or organization indicated support for certain issues, read some of these and review carefully HOW they support their opinions. Look for BALANCE in viewpoints.
- Review WHO owns or runs the publication, who is on their board of directors. Googling these people can provide ready information on that any possible bias might be.
- DO NOT rely on sites such as WIKIPEDIA. This is a PUBLIC SOURCE with articles written WITHOUT internal oversight.
- Recognize that even ACADEMIC web sites can intentionally or unintentionally provide biased opinions and incomplete facts.
- Don’t hesitate to verify a fact OR THE SUPPORT BEHIND an opinion with two or three sources.

While fact checking websites can be a useful place to start, avoid those that simply state: This is false, or this is a lie without providing CITED back up to their assertion.

Watch also to see if they tend to “analyze” opinions or assertions only from a certain political sphere.

If they seem to be on the impartial side, READ an analysis of assertions on both sides of the spectrum and carefully watch the use of language that validates or invalidates the assertions.

DON’T rely on just one source.

Factcheck.org, by the Annenberg Public Policy Center seems to do a thorough job of supporting its assertions about the validity of statements. It has faced complaints about prejudices in the political spectrum, but this is hard to avoid.

Reuters Fact Check is interesting because it seems to emphasize social media memes and posts.

Snopes – always a popular one... recently they explained that bears really can run downhill! While many items are good for an LOL, they also analyze other claims from the news and social media. Did you Snope that?

One source (I will decline to name it) claims to fact check the fact checkers, but almost all of the articles **LEAN** to the far right of the political spectrum. In other words, sometimes you need to fact check those who fact check the fact checkers!

THIRD: Consider these common “logical” fallacies that make conclusions drawn from facts ILLOGICAL opinions:

1. Appeal to authority.

Politicians love to have endorsements from powerful people ... to convince voters to support them. They might have a former president say that so-and-so is the best candidate since Abraham Lincoln, for example. But, because humans are fallible, just because someone important believes something doesn't automatically mean you should support it too.

2. Appeal to the crowd.

This is a popular one (no pun intended). Politicians like to drum up support for a candidate or policy by showing how many people are in favor of it. They might say "90% of Americans support stronger gun control measures" (don't get me started on the validity and reliability of statistics, by the way) or show clips of a dozen celebrities all endorsing so-and-so. Just remember that everyone's favorite teenage argument--"But Mom, EVERYONE'S doing it!"--doesn't hold water.

3. Straw man.

One of the most common errors is to misrepresent an opponent's views--in other words, create a "straw man"--and then tear down the misrepresentation (straw man) instead of tearing down the real argument. For example, if a Democratic leader wanted to provide medical care for desperately impoverished single moms, one misrepresentation would be, "So-and-so wants to give handouts to every single mom in the country! We can't afford that!"

4. Opposition.

In today's polarized political climate, all a would-be candidate has ... say "The Democrats supported this" or "Those Republicans think marriage should be between a man and a woman." This usage of the opposition as "the enemy" creates the impression that whatever "the enemy" believes MUST be wrong or bad--simply because they're the enemy. The emphasis is usually not on the idea, but on where (or who) the idea is coming from. (Note that this also plays on stereotypes. Not all Republicans or Democrats believe the same things, but this fallacy assumes they do.)

5. Ad hominem (personal attack).

Boy, politicians LOVE this one. Ad hominem literally means "to the man," and is the term used for an argument that attacks the person instead of that person's arguments (kind of like the opposition fallacy). Well-known examples include demanding that so-and-so release his tax returns (and, for bonus points, then criticizing him whether he releases them or not) or criticizing Joe Bob for being divorced.

6. Black-and-white thinking (AKA all-or-nothing).

This fallacy is exactly what it sounds like: "You're either with us or you're against us"; "The death penalty is always unjust"; "If you're not pro-choice, you're anti-women's rights"; etc. It creates the illusion that there are only two (usually opposite) stances by ignoring the different variables and contexts that create a third (or more!) option.

7. Non sequitur (AKA beside the point).

Ever heard the argument that so-and-so takes vacations with his family twice a year, so therefore he must be a bad leader mooching off the taxpayers? Yeah, that's an example of a non sequitur (Latin for "it does not follow"), a conclusion that doesn't follow from the premise (or previous statement). A non sequitur is something that isn't relevant to the real issue being discussed, and can be similar to an ad hominem.

8. Appeal to emotion.

Playing on peoples' feelings can persuade them without them actually having to think rationally--and there are so many useful emotions to choose from. Fear ("immigrants are taking away all the jobs in this country") is a powerful one, but there's also outrage, pride (e.g. patriotism), and pity.

Source: [The Most Common Logical Fallacies In Politics \(theodysseyonline.com\)](http://theodysseyonline.com)

These are just a few of the fallacies people fall into:

Here's another web site with more examples and even a couple of fun exercises that let you put your brain to work..

[15 Logical Fallacies You Should Know Before Getting Into a Debate | The Quad Magazine \(thebestschools.org\)](http://thebestschools.org)

Finally, try not to let your own prejudices influence your own opinions.

When talking with other about these points, be sure to investigate the many good sources on Civil Discourse and how to disagree with others.