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Reading and Analyzing Non-Fiction: Spin, Slant, and Bias is a book that will help your students understand that virtually every writer—even the reporter who claims only to be providing information—has a purpose, an angle. Further, this book will help your students become familiar with the conventions and devices writers use to achieve their purposes. It describes how all writers, from the diarist to the propagandist, apply a degree of slant, spin, and sometimes outright bias to advance their points. Articles, letters, and speeches—both contemporary and classic—each annotated and accompanied by a thought-provoking exercise, will ensure your students’ understanding and test their ability to recognize and distinguish among the various devices non-fiction writers employ.

Frequent writing prompts provide your students with the opportunity to hone their skills and apply the conventions they’ve been studying in their own writing.

This book is somewhat unique among textbooks in that, although the chapters are numbered, they are not necessarily written to be used sequentially. As the genre of non-fiction is so broad, and the characteristics of the various sub-genres overlap to such a great extent, there is no need to study the news article before the memoir or vice versa.

Thus, if your need is simply to locate some excellent examples of non-fiction literature, this book can certainly be a worthwhile resource for you—even if you choose not to avail yourself of the exercise questions and writing opportunities.

If, however, your objectives include analyzing the interplay of rhetoric, logic, and emotion in the creation of non-fiction, then you will find the second chapter, which defines the key terms “slant,” “spin,” and “bias,” and the final chapter that defines and illustrates the most common logical fallacies and techniques of propaganda to be particularly helpful.
In every chapter—in our discussion of each sub-genre—we have followed a simple model-guided-practice-independent work process. The footnotes and margin annotations are intended to help guide your students to an independent analysis, and eventual evaluation, of what they have read.

We are confident, therefore, that you will find this book helpful in an Advanced Placement Language and Composition course, a general literature course that must include non-fiction, even a writing course in which you wish to give your students models to analyze and follow.

*Analyzing Non-Fiction: Slant, Spin, and Bias* is intended to be a versatile book, adaptable to your specific needs and objectives. Begin at page one and lead your students through, or begin with the last chapter and skip around at will; allow the following selections to amuse your students, anger your students, or make them nod their heads in agreement. Our goal simply has been to provide you with excellent selections, both classic and contemporary, and enough guidance to help your students become careful, thoughtful readers.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

“A New Ice Age Is Coming - Movie Title Or Reality?” by Joseph LaStella, San Diego, California, 1 July, 2004 —/E-Wire/. Permission pending.


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The entire realm of literature—in all media: print, film, digital, electronic, or even media that haven’t been discovered yet—can be divided into two broad categories or genres: fiction and non-fiction. Non-fiction is probably best defined, as it is named, in terms of what it is not. Non-fiction is not fiction.

Fiction is created. It is made up. It might incorporate historical, scientific, or some other type of fact, but if one single character is created by the author, if a single event is not documented as having happened, if a single line of dialogue is made up and is not an attempt to approximate what is known to have been said, then the literature in question is fiction.

Non-fiction is not fiction. It is not intentionally created by the author.

Does that mean non-fiction is factual? Not necessarily. The writer of a memoir or autobiography is writing from memory. What he or she remembers only vaguely cannot be called “factual.” Compare multiple eye-witness accounts of the same incident. Each account is likely to be different from all the others in some way. The witnesses will probably even disagree on basic facts—physical descriptions, time of day, etc. Yet, unless one or more of the witnesses is intentionally creating his or her account, the accounts are non-fiction—even if they are not precisely factual.

But isn’t non-fiction supposed to be “true”? Not necessarily. The author of an editorial is stating his or her opinion, and it is pointless to talk about the “truth” or “untruth” of an opinion. The same is true of a review of a movie, book or play. Reviews are largely informed by the personal taste of the reviewer. Can one person’s personal taste be “true” while another’s is “false”?

Non-fiction is simply not fiction. Whatever its topic, its author is not intentionally creating the events, characters, settings. Whether the piece you’re reading is a fact-filled article in a scientific journal, an emotional first-person account of a harrowing
Chapter Two:
The Elements of Non-Fiction

It still might be useful to define non-fiction in terms of what it is, in terms of its elements; for, like prose fiction, drama, and poetry, non-fiction is essentially the working together of certain elements.

**Fact:** A fact is any statement that can be verified as true. One's knowledge or ignorance of a fact does not alter that fact. What one does with his or her knowledge of a fact does not alter the fact. A fact, by definition, is indisputable.

Facts can be as finite as a person's age, height, or weight; the date, time of day, or weather during a given event; or the measurable results of a test, survey, poll, etc.

Remember, however, that the presence of facts—or their accuracy—is not necessarily the first element of non-fiction; as we discussed above, it is the absence of creation that defines non-fiction.

**Analysis of Fact:** There are entire college and graduate-school courses devoted to methods of gathering facts. Even your high school research projects have probably included instruction in gathering facts. Rarely, however, is it appropriate simply to report facts (“raw data”). Most of the time, the people who have gathered the facts will examine their data and then translate it into terms more understandable—and probably more interesting—to a broader audience. Note that analysis is not interpretation; the gatherers and reporters will not tell their audience what the data means, they will simply find more convenient ways to look at and talk about the data.
For example, the Constitution requires that the federal government conduct a census of the entire United States every ten years. Imagine that the census takers find the following (the following numbers are not really facts, they have been chosen to make the comparison between raw data and analysis easier to see):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RAW DATA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1,000,000 (1 million) people live in the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700,000 (700 thousand) are gray.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200,000 (200 thousand) are green.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000 (50 thousand) are yellow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40,000 (40 thousand) are blue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000 (10 thousand) are transparent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500,000 (500 thousand) people live in cities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400,000 (400 thousand) live in suburban developments and/or small towns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000 (100 thousand) live on farms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>350,000 (350 thousand) city dwellers are gray.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80,000 (80 thousand) city-dwellers are green.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40,000 (40 thousand) city-dwellers are yellow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,000 (20 thousand) city-dwellers are blue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000 (10 thousand) city-dwellers are transparent.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The census-gatherers could keep presenting these numbers, and eventually, your eyes would glaze over and you’d stop breathing (if you haven’t already). If you wanted to write an article on the results of the most recent census, you’d want this information in a more useable form.
For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analyzed Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1,000,000 (1 million) people live in the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70% are gray.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% are green.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5% are yellow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4% are blue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1% are transparent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50% of United States residents live in cities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70% of city-dwellers are gray.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2% of city-dwellers are transparent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50% of gray people live in cities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100% of transparent people live in cities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice that changing the numbers into percentages does not change the facts at all. Gray people are still 700,000 people out of a total of 1 million. They are still 10,000 out of 500,000 city dwellers. 10,000 transparent people out of a total of 10,000 transparent people live in cities. Presenting these numbers in percentages instead of raw numbers simply states the same information in terms that are easier to understand.

This is what analysis does: the information is translated into a variety of different formats, but the information is not changed. In fact, as long as the analysis is based on sound data (the census-takers collected all of the forms and counted them accurately), the analysis can be treated as fact itself (but there are times when you’ll want the data to support the analysis).

The analyst, however, does not tell you what to think of the fact that all of the transparent people in the United States live in cities.
That is *interpretation*.

**Interpretation**: While facts are indisputable, they are subject to interpretation. Interpretation does not alter what a fact means (it is either raining outside, or it is not), but interpretation places the fact in a context and attempts to explain its significance. Interpretation helps provide a conclusion based on the fact or sometimes a reason for the fact. Two thinking human beings can take the same fact (the Incredible Hulk is green), and develop two very different interpretations (green represents the creature’s rage; green is a color suggesting alien life—little green men—and illness).

For example:

If it is raining outside [fact], then farmers are pleased [interpretation] that their newly-planted crops will sprout soon [interpretation].

The sun rises in the east and sets in the west [fact], and the shadow on a sundial moves “sunwise” (from the top of the circle toward the right) [fact]; this is probably why the hands of a clock move in the same direction, commonly called “clockwise” [interpretation].

Interpretation is the basis of much non-fiction as the author of the editorial, review, biography, or memoir will most likely take the facts of his or her subject and lead the reader to a desired interpretation.
Chapter Two: The Elements of Non-Fiction

**EXERCISE ONE:**

Below are several statements. Identify each as either a verifiable fact or interpretation. For each interpretation, speculate what fact is likely being interpreted.

1. Typically, only ___% of Americans eligible to vote actually do.

2. Americans have grown largely cynical and apathetic.

3. Several organizations exist to encourage non-registered voters to register and vote.

4. They have not been overly successful.

5. The moon cycles from new to full to new through a twenty-eight-day cycle.

6. The melody to which *The Star Spangled Banner* is sung was originally an English drinking song.
7. *The Star Spangled Banner* was adopted as the United States’ national anthem by a congressional resolution in 1931.

--

8. *America the Beautiful* was another song under consideration.

--

9. *The Star Spangled Banner* was more beloved.

--

10. The song is a celebration of war and conquest.

---

**Opinion:** Fact is verifiable. Interpretation is a conclusion based on fact or an assertion that can be supported by facts. Opinion is purely personal and can be completely subjective. One might have facts underlying his or her opinion, or there might be no factual or logical basis for the opinion at all.

That the sky is blue is a fact. That the sky is *pretty* is an opinion.

That ____% of all eligible voters actually vote is a verifiable fact. That this is due to American cynicism and apathy is an interpretation. That it is *deplorable that so few Americans vote* is an opinion.

Editorials, letters to the editor, and many blogs are based on the opinion of the writer. The writer of a memoir is likely to share his or her opinion of other people or events.