Facts vs. Opinions vs. Informed Opinions and Their Role in Journalism

Overview
Students learn why many people like opinions more than facts and reflect on the negative and positive consequences of this tendency. Then they practice three strategies for determining the difference between the opinions and facts to discover the power of critical thinking.

Warmup Activity
Fact vs. Opinion vs. Informed Opinion
Ask:
What’s the difference between “fact” and “opinion”?

Then pass out Worksheet A to students. Together read through the definitions and then as a class create the best definitions and give a few examples for each one.

Pass out Worksheet B and let students work first on their own to complete their paper and then in pairs check their answers with each other and explain to each other why they think their answer is correct.

Main Activity
The Role of Informed Opinion in Journalism
Ask:
When and where do we see opinion pieces in the news? How do we know it is an opinion piece?

Go to the BBC One Minute News and select one short news story to play for the students. Then play three minutes of the PBS NewsHour analysis piece with Mark Shields and Ramesh Ponnuru included in online materials or see it here.
Ask:

Ask students which was the opinion piece and how do they know?

Pass out Worksheet C and read through the definition at the top with them and then have them fill in the blanks. Have students share their answers with the class and write discussion-worthy answers on the board.

Ask:

What is a blog? Do they have any favorites that they follow? Why do they like to follow blogs?

As a class create a working definition of a “blog” and write it on the board. Then have student read the second part of Worksheet C and ask - building upon the definition they just came up with - what would a news blog look like?

Write adjectives and nouns on the board that students imagine would describe a news blog.

Then pull up the PBS NewsHour Rundown blog for the class on the board and see if their preconceptions about a news blog were right or wrong.

There are also news blogs that can be written by one person — here is an example of a student who blogs for the Huffington Post. Hand out Worksheet D for students and have them read through his short biography and blog.

Have students work in small groups to complete Worksheet D.

Have a short discussion about the different forms of news they have just learned about.

- What formats did they like or not like?
- What are some benefits of having a news blog like the Rundown vs. a regular news article?

Explore and Analyze the News: Nifty Articles and Bodacious Blogs

Explain to students that they have an important task ahead of them: They must find the best news articles, opinion pieces and news blogs and evaluate them. Some places to check out are the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Richmond Times Dispatch, Huffington Post, BBC News, Slate, Al Jazeera, etc.

Here is a list of topics that might interest them or — even better — come up with a class list of interesting topics.

- Cuts to your school system’s budget for the current (or next) academic year.
- Rising costs of college tuition in your state.
- Recent decisions about players on one of your region's sports teams.
- The economy.
- A current political debate.
Pass out copies of **Worksheets E** and **F** to students, read through it with them, and then give them their tasks:

Find one example of a news article and one example of an opinion article on the same issue.

Examine popular online news blogs (ex: Fox News Blog, The Huffington Post, The Daily Nightly, etc.) or another online opinion resource. Select one **opinion** piece from one of these sources, and then conduct online research to locate another news article in another **news** source about that particular topic. Print all articles so that you can read and mark them as you work in pairs on Worksheets **E** and **F**.

**Discuss Study Findings**

Encourage students to discuss their findings of how fact coverage in news articles differs from the presentation of an informed opinion, and how presentation of a point of view in a news blog differs from a straight news article. Where do they see emotion shining through? What kind of language or vocabulary differences do they see? How much coverage of sides is there in each type? List students’ observations on the board.

You can review some of the ways to distinguish fact from opinion in written, video, or interactive sources:

News items that present the facts will carefully avoid appealing to emotion. Opinion pieces are trying to appeal to the emotion of the reader or viewer. Opinion pieces will try to evoke some kind of reaction (agreement, disagreement, move to action, etc.).

An opinion piece often uses language that is much more demonstrative, flamboyant, and sometimes inflammatory; that is how it often hooks the emotion of the reader. News items that cover only the facts do not use this kind of language.

Opinion pieces will often present only one side of an issue, with a small acknowledgement somewhere in the piece of the presence of another side of the issue. A news item that covers the facts will strive to present all of the facts as they are known.

**Closing Activity**

As a class have students share a summary of their news piece or news blog and why it is the best piece of journalism in **UNDER 1 MINUTE** in their pairs. Then have the class nominate and vote for the best piece of journalism. Have the rest of the class volunteer answers as to why they think the winner’s piece was so good.
Fact vs. Opinion vs. Informed Opinion: Worksheet A

Warmup Activity
We asked real journalists what their definition of the words “fact,” “opinion,” and “informed opinion” were. As a class, pick and choose from the responses below to come up with your own class definition, which you will use during this lesson and in your journalism career.

Definition 1
Source: April Brown, PBS NewsHour Coordinating Producer
Fact: Something that can be proven true.
Opinion: Thoughts on a subject, not necessarily informed by fact, often informed by emotion.
Informed Opinion: Thoughts on a subject by someone who is familiar with facts, studies, trends, or firsthand experience.

Definition 2
Source: Allison McCartney, PBS Newshour Extra Editor
Fact: A statement, whether it is quantitative or qualitative, that can be proven with evidence.
Opinion: A person’s worldview, applied to a specific situation.
Informed Opinion: A person’s worldview when applied to, or incorporating, facts.

Definition 3
Source: Merriam-Webster Dictionary
Fact: A piece of information presented as having objective reality.
Opinion: A belief, judgment, or way of thinking about something.
Informed Opinion: Based on possession of information and a belief, judgment, or way of thinking about something.
Fact vs. Opinion vs. Informed Opinion: Worksheet B

Directions: In the scenarios below decide which are “facts,” “opinions,” or “informed opinions” and then write down your answer in the space next to the sentence giving it an “F,” “O,” or “IO.”

1. Swimming
   ___ Boo Radley is the greatest swimmer of all time.
   ___ Michael Phelps is the greatest swimmer of all time because he has won more Olympic medals for swimming than anyone else in history.
   ___ There is no way to really tell if Michael Phelps is the greatest swimmer in the history of the world, but he is definitely very good at swimming and the argument could be made that he was the greatest competitive swimmer in the world at one time.

2. Food in the United States
   ___ I say that Thanksgiving dinner is the best food we have in the United States and a CNN poll also ranked it as the #1 food favorite in the states.
   ___ Pizza is the best food, ever.
   ___ There isn’t a way to really find out for certain what the most popular food in the United States is.

3. Animals
   ___ Mudpuppies spend their entire lives underwater and are distinguished as the only salamanders that make sound—a doglike barking.
   ___ The hammerhead shark is the most dangerous shark ... just look at it.
   ___ The bird of paradise is one of the best-known dancers in the animal kingdom. See the article here.

4. Movies
   ___ Twilight is the best movie of all time.
   ___ Gravity is the highest-grossing film of all time.
**Fact vs. Opinion vs. Informed Opinion: Worksheet C**

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**Opinion Pieces**
True news segments, whether written, televised, or interactive, will rely on facts and sourcing in order to provide information to the reader or viewer. An opinion piece, particularly about a newsworthy issue, will be informed by facts, but will allow one particular stance or viewpoint to shine through in order to persuade the reader to agree with the opinion.

**Directions:** Fill in the blanks

I see informed-opinion pieces in the news when I ...

I know it is an informed-opinion piece because ...

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**News Blogs**
A news blog is a type of website that features individual commentary about newsworthy issues and that sometimes allows readers to participate in the commentary. Bloggers can be professional writers affiliated with the blog’s parent organization or individuals across the country who create a website to espouse their opinions. The important thing to realize is that blogs often contain compelling opinions about newsworthy items, but they are often user-generated opinions.

**Directions:** Fill in the blanks

I know it’s a blog because ...

Some good blogs are ...

I know it’s a news blog because ...
**Fact vs. Opinion vs. Informed Opinion:**
Worksheet D

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**News Blogger: Noah Fitzgerel**

Noah Fitzgerel is a member of Brown University’s Class of 2017 in Providence, Rhode Island, where he intends on concentrating in political theory. At Brown, Noah serves as an editor-at-large for the *Brown Political Review*. Before attending Brown, Noah graduated from Annandale High School in Annandale, Virginia, with the International Baccalaureate Diploma. While a student at Annandale, Noah served as class president for three terms and was an active member of the Key Club. Additionally, Noah served in various editorial roles on The A-Blast, Annandale’s school newspaper. Noah is a nationally recognized writer, having received the Quill and Scroll Gold Key in Editorial Writing. He follows politics closely and is particularly passionate about religious freedom and the separation of church and state—causes for which he has worked and written in Washington, D.C.

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**The Dangers of Sen. Rand Paul’s Argument Against Terrorism**

Terrorism affects people of all ethnicities, nationalities and religious creeds. It is the ubiquity of terrorism that makes it especially difficult to combat—the debilitating effects of terrorism do not heed differences. Once a car bomb detonates, its destruction is indiscriminate—its only limitation is the radius of its impact.

Part of why it is in a nation’s public interest to deter terrorism is because it impacts so many aspects of society; businesses, religious communities and our common sense of security are some of these.

This is largely why I take issue with a speech that Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) made on Friday at the annual Values Voters Summit. Most concerning among his talking points was the argument that the United States, by means of its allocation of international aid in conflict-ridden areas such as Syria and Egypt, is “giving comfort and aid” to crimes against Christians.

This sort of conspiratorial language is problematic in and of itself. The fact that Sen. Paul began with speaking about the American diplomatic role in Syria and then used examples of domestic attacks on American society (a mere 6,000 miles away) as fodder for the same argument is less than satisfactory. However, I am even more disheartened by the sentiments that abet Sen. Paul’s speech, which are exclusionary in nature.

Religious persecution, in any form, is unequivocally deplorable. In his speech, Sen. Paul conflates acts of terrorism perpetrated by extremist Muslims clearly directed toward Christians (both foreign and American) with those that were not, all under the pretense that they constitute a “war against Christians.” To categorize an attack such as the Boston bombings as an affront to Americans “as a Christian people,” as Sen. Paul did, completely mischaracterizes an attack whose effects were felt by the entire American population, irrespective of religious tradition. Americans of all religious backgrounds mourned the tragedy, and intently desired justice to be exacted on the perpetrators of the crime. This sort of rhetoric not only slights victims (who may or may not have been religious), but it also fallaciously posits that individuals who are American and Christian must be especially concerned by terrorism.Politicians should not have to justify addressing terrorism by enumerating its effects on one subset of the American population. The fact that individuals are willing to harm any and all Americans should be enough information to inspire action.
An attempt such as this to boil the complicated and nuanced issue of terrorism down to a single motivation (such as Christian-specific persecution) precludes all justifications for governmental action, other than on the premise that attacks against American Christians are occurring, from being considered. What about those who subscribe to other religious beliefs? What about those who subscribe to no beliefs at all? Is their security of a secondary concern, regardless of whether they are citizens of the same nation?

Beyond this puzzling logic is Sen. Paul’s contradictory stance on Islam. During his speech, Sen. Paul accurately states that most Muslims do not support the Muslim extremists who committed the acts to which he is referring. However, in reference to the assassination attempt of Malala Yousafzai (who, as he notes, is not Christian), he asks why those members of Islam who do not sympathize with Muslim extremists have yet to “stand up and condemn this.”

It is unclear whether “this” refers specifically to the attack against Malala or the position that extremists have taken on the education of women on a larger scale. Regardless of this ambiguity, however, it seems that Sen. Paul failed to consult statements such as these. These are, after all, explicit condemnations of both the attack on Malala and Muslim extremism coming from the very mouths of those Muslims who Sen. Paul claims have failed to condemn extremism.

Despite this important discrepancy between Sen. Paul’s claims and reality, Sen. Paul’s proposition that “Islam must police Islam” implies that the international Muslim community is accepting of extremism, which contradicts his note that most Muslims object to acts of terrorism justified by Muslim extremists.

In this sense, Sen. Paul’s stance on combatting terrorism is not a delineated one. He advocates that the United States ought to refrain from granting aid or intervening militarily in tempestuous regions as proactive steps toward mitigating religious extremism, but then proposes that the best course of action is to passively hope that mainstream Muslims chide extremist Muslims (something that is already occurring).

All that is clear is that Sen. Paul despises religious persecution and terrorism. However, the arguments he cites to arrive at this position are demeaning and ultimately exclusionary. Like most people, I too oppose religious persecution and terrorism. However, I don’t believe that I must frame terrorism, which affects multitudes of people, as a “war against Christians” to encourage action. Instead, I oppose religious persecution and terrorism on the premise of their very principles—as dangerous to human dignity, world stability and progress.
Fact vs. Opinion vs. Informed Opinion: Worksheet E

Complete this worksheet using the news and opinion pieces that you printed after conducting research. Staple them to the back of this worksheet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News</th>
<th>Opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headline of News Item #1 (from newspaper)</td>
<td>Headline of Opinion Item #2 (about same topic as #1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarize the content of News Item #1</td>
<td>Summarize the content of Opinion Item #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the language of these two articles differ? What kinds of words do you see in each? How would you describe the words?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List the instances of opinion that are present in both articles. Are there any special words or sentence structures that make the opinion obvious? Describe.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does News Item #1 cover the facts thoroughly? Explain.</td>
<td>Does Opinion Item #2 address both sides of the opinion? Explain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which article did you remember the most? Why?</td>
<td>Which one told you more information about the issue? Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fact vs. Opinion vs. Informed Opinion: Worksheet F

Use the opinion piece you printed from a recent News Blog (or similar source) and compare it to the News article about the same topic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Blogs</th>
<th>News</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headline of News Blog Item</td>
<td>Headline of News item about same topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarize the content of News Blog Item</td>
<td>Summarize the content of News Item #2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How does the language of these two articles differ? What kinds of words do you see in each? How would you describe the words?

List the instances of opinion that are present in both articles. Are there any special words or sentence structures that make the opinion obvious? Describe.

Does the News Blog Item appeal to any emotions in the reader? Explain.

Does the News article cover as many facts as possible? Explain.

Which article did you remember the most? Why?

Which one told you more information about the issue? Why?