

## DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

### Distinguishing Between Fact and Opinion

An important part of critical thinking is being able to *distinguish*, or tell the difference, between fact and opinion. A fact is something that can be proved true or false by checking books, records, or other resources. An opinion is something one believes, thinks, or feels. It cannot be proved true or false. Opinions often use such terms as *I believe, probably, may, could, ought, they say, all, none, every, and always*. They also may use words of approval or disapproval such as *good, bad, poor, and satisfactory*, and words that compare, such as *greatest, worst, bigger, and finest*. Facts remain the same no matter who states them, but opinion can change from person to person.

For example, look at the four sentences that follow:

1. The world's largest plain is the North European Plain, which stretches for more than 1,000 miles, or 1,600 kilometers, from the western coast of France to the Ural Mountains in the Soviet Union.
2. In 1985, an earthquake in Mexico City killed about 7,000 people and destroyed almost \$4 billion worth of homes, factories, offices, schools, and shops.
3. Around 1700, some Italian farmers discovered they were living on top of a Roman city named Herculaneum that had been buried over 1,000 years.
4. The first type of *Homo sapiens* is Neanderthal, named after the Neander River in West Germany where remains were first discovered in 1857.

These are facts. Each sentence can be proved true by checking books, records, or other resources.

Now, read the following:

1. Based on my knowledge of history, I feel that waterways played the most important part in helping people decide where to live.
2. The Chinese legend about the beginnings of China is much more interesting than the Rumanian legend about the creation of mountains and valleys.
3. Cro-Magnons believed everything was alive and filled with spirits, and they thought that drawing or creating an animal in paint gave them a kind of magic power over its spirit.

These are opinions. Each tells something that a person or group believes, thinks, or feels. This may not be as easy to understand for the third sentence as it is for the first two. There is, however, a clue in the third sentence. The clue is the word "thought." Since it is impossible for anyone other than the Cro-Magnons to know for sure what they thought, the sentence is opinion.

To practice this skill, complete the following:

1. Read the subsection "Developing Language" on page 38 of this book.
2. Decide whether each sentence in the passage is fact or opinion.
3. Write two facts about the development of language.
4. Write two opinions about the development of language.