

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Detecting Bias

Almost everyone has an opinion or idea about certain subjects. For this reason, written material is not always free from an author's own views or emotions. When this happens, the material is said to show *bias*, a set opinion or idea about something or someone. Bias may be either in favor of or against an idea or person.

There are many ways of putting bias into written material. One way is to use certain colorful words. These "loaded" words work to set off the reader's emotions, rather than simply to present information.

Another way of putting bias into written material is to emphasize certain words by underlining or italicizing them. This draws the reader's attention to a select few words, causing a biased view.

A third way of putting bias into written material is by using certain types of punctuation. This may cause a sentence to be read in a more forceful or sympathetic way.

For example, read the following four sentences:

1. The brutal Vikings attacked people throughout much of western and southern Europe.
2. The Vikings *attacked* people throughout much of western and southern Europe.
3. The Vikings attacked much of western and southern Europe!
4. The Vikings attacked much of western and southern Europe.

Note how the first three sentences are biased. In the first sentence, the adjective "brutal" makes the reader feel anger toward the Vikings. In the second sentence, the italicized verb "attacked" makes the reader feel sorry for the Europeans. The exclamation point at the end of the third sentence leads the reader to feel excited or horrified that the Vikings attacked Europe. The fourth sentence, however, uses no loaded words or unusual punctuation. It is a *neutral*, or unbiased, sentence. It lets the reader develop his or her own feelings on the subject.

For further practice in the skill of detecting bias, read the following five sentences. Note the ways in which they are biased. Then, rewrite the sentences in a neutral form.

1. Justinian's jealous advisers urged him to leave Constantinople.
2. Mohammed was horrified by the drinking, the gambling, and the corruption that was being displayed in Mecca!
3. Mecca's leaders began *persecuting* Mohammed and his followers.
4. The savage Mongol chiefs grew weaker while the proud princes of Moscow grew stronger.
5. The members of the Oprichniki dressed in black, attached a dog's head to their saddles, and *terrorized* the countryside.