

## DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

### Recognizing Ambiguous and Equivocal Statements

An important part of critical thinking is being able to recognize when a statement is *ambiguous* (am big' yū uhs). The dictionary defines ambiguous as "capable of being understood in two or more possible senses." This means that, although a statement may seem clear on first reading, there is something about it that is vague or misleading.

Often, an ambiguous statement is one that is unclear by accident. However, there are times when a statement has been made ambiguous on purpose. In this case, the statement is also *equivocal* (i kwiv' uh kuh). That is, someone chose to be ambiguous in order to mislead his or her audience.

Often, ambiguous statements result from a misuse of grammar or from the use of words that are too general. For example:

*Horses walked beside canals pulling barges.*  
What pulled the barges, canals or horses?

*When John Smith had to return to England, he told the colonists that he would be back soon.*  
To John Smith, "soon" may have meant "in one year." To the colonists, however, it meant perhaps "two months."

To identify a statement that is not only ambiguous but also equivocal, the following questions should be asked:

1. Who is speaking?
2. What are his or her personal views?
3. To whom is he or she speaking?
4. What is actually said?

For example, in 1640, King Charles I may have wanted to make his nephew a general in the English army. Had Charles asked Oliver Cromwell his opinion about this, Cromwell might have replied, "That is an interesting idea." Note that when the four questions above are applied to Cromwell's answer, it can be seen as purposefully misleading, or equivocal:

1. Cromwell is speaking.
2. Cromwell believed in choosing officers because they were good fighters and leaders, not because they were of noble birth.
3. Cromwell is speaking to the king, someone who at that time had power over Cromwell.
4. Cromwell said the king's idea was interesting because he did not think it was good, and he dared not say it was bad.

For further practice in this skill, identify the statements below as just ambiguous or also equivocal. Beside each answer, list reasons for your choice.

1. A worker writing to a relative: "We live in a city built around a factory and a mine, which houses 75 percent of the people."
2. An American colonist to an English soldier: "English tea has a unique flavor."
3. A politician to a reformer: "In the near future, women and children will not work in the mines."