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# Fact and Opinion

L.N.2.5.1, L.N.2.5.2

There are certain passages that any thinking person will read with skepticism. When you read an advertisement, for example, you know that the author's purpose is to persuade you to spend money for something you don't necessarily need. Advertising is a part of commerce, but you understand that any facts you're reading are heavily laced with opinions. But that may be true of nonfiction written for any purpose, or even of fiction. An author may mix facts with opinions, or use opinions disguised as facts, to get you to believe or vote a certain way. To judge the validity and accuracy of what you are reading, you need to be able to:

- distinguish fact from opinion.
- analyze and explain the author's use of facts and opinions in a text.
- distinguish between essential and nonessential information in an author's argument.

Generally speaking, a **fact** is a statement that can be proven. An **opinion** is a statement that the author can't possibly know to be a fact. Here are some further criteria that may be used to identify opinions:

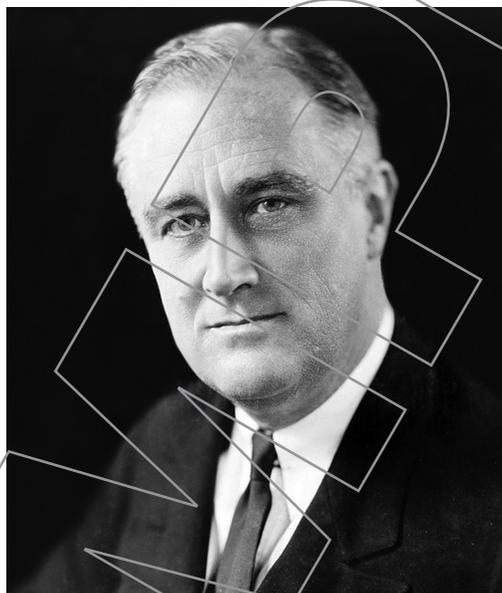
- **Judgments**—Some words are signals of opinions in and of themselves. Words like *think, feel, believe, best, worst, should* and *must* are often clues that the writer is stating something that he cannot prove is true.
- **Categorical generalizations**—Words such as *all, always, everyone, never, nobody, should, must* and *the people* should be examined critically. When an author begins a sentence with "As is well known..." or when a politician giving a speech asserts "The American people believe that..." ask yourself how he can know the statement is true in all cases, or for all Americans.
- **Subjective characterizations**—A statement such as "Mayor Ryan answered evasively when asked about city contracts being doled out to his supporters" should be taken as an opinion. The author hasn't proved that the mayor was evasive. What were the mayor's exact words? Is the author quoting them fully or taking a statement out of context?
- **Unverified statements**—Facts can be backed up with references to verifiable sources. How do you know that the author of an Internet blog is a qualified expert on health care? When an author is citing data, does she cite sources so that you can verify

her conclusions? If an ad cites statistics, how were the data compiled? If a politician blames “the media” for bias, what media is she talking about? And does “bias” amount to nothing more than reporting facts that conflict with the politician’s prejudices?

## GUIDED PRACTICE

Read the passage and answer the questions.

*President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave this speech to Congress in response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The attack killed 2,300 Americans, destroyed ships and planes, and brought the United States into World War II.*



**Franklin D. Roosevelt**

### **War Message to Congress**

Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with the government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific.

Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in Oahu, the Japanese ambassador to the United States and his colleagues delivered to the Secretary of State a formal reply to a recent American message. While this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or armed attack.

It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time, the Japanese government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.

The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian Islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. Very many American lives have been lost. In addition, American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.

Yesterday, the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island.

This morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area. The facts of yesterday speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation.

As commander in chief of the Army and Navy, I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense.

Always will we remember the character of the onslaught against us.

No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.

I believe I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost, but will make very certain that this form of treachery shall never endanger us again.

Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory and our interests are in grave danger.

With confidence in our armed forces—with the unbounding determination of our people—we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God.

I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, Dec. 7, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese empire.

Which sentence from the passage contains an opinion?

- A "The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with the government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific."
- B "The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian Islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces."
- C "It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago."
- D "The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation."

The United States had been attacked, people killed, and material destroyed, and although tensions had been building between the two nations for more than 20 years, it was a fact that Japanese diplomats were engaged in sham negotiations. But while "the people" did unite behind the war effort, it was by no means a provable fact on the day after the attack that Americans had fully formed their opinions, let alone understood their implications. Choice D is the correct answer.

Read this sentence from the passage.

*"No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory."*

What does the opinion used in this sentence contribute to the passage?

- A It rallies Americans to be strong and to persevere.
- B It emphasizes that the Japanese attack was planned.
- C It cuts off any possible argument against going to war.
- D It assures Americans that victory will be achieved swiftly.

President Roosevelt uses facts to gather people to his opinions. After describing in as much detail as wartime secrecy would allow the extent of the Japanese attack (the true measure of the damage at Pearl Harbor would not be revealed for years), Roosevelt is telling Congress, and the American people, that we are at war. Phrases like "righteous might" and "absolute victory" appeal to Americans' sense of pride, while "No matter how long it takes" reminds the people that they will have to endure for a long time. The answer is choice A.

Which detail is **least** essential to the overall understanding of the passage?

- A Many American lives were lost and ships sunk.
- B The United States had been at peace with Japan.
- C The Japanese had obviously been planning the attack.
- D The Japanese offensive extended throughout the Pacific region.

Americans were outraged by the attack on Pearl Harbor because it appeared to be an unprovoked “sneak attack.” In fact, the US and Japan had been spoiling for a fight, and both nations had been arming for war. It was enough that we had been attacked, that the attack had been planned for some time, and that it was part of a general Pacific offensive. We were already at war; that we had been at peace the day before was irrelevant to the message. Choice B is the answer you want.

Roosevelt’s war message is an example of how an author will combine facts with opinions to persuade people to his point of view. Roosevelt needed little in the way of opinion to convince the American people that war had come. But authors may use any of a number of techniques to appeal to a reader’s emotions or to create needs in the reader’s mind, as most product advertising does. To judge the accuracy and truthfulness of what you are reading, you need to be able to identify such uses of **bias**—the presentation of opinions that are not supported by facts—and **propaganda**—the systematic spreading of beliefs through a combination of facts, opinions disguised as facts, deliberate distortion of the facts, and repetition.

Bias and propaganda in political writing and other forms of prose nonfiction involve the same persuasive techniques that advertisers use when they offer products or services for sale. In fact, some languages make no distinction between “advertising” and “propaganda,” using the same word for both. Here are some common techniques of persuasion that may be hiding bias or propaganda:

- **Appeal to statistics**—Presenting data out of context in place of evidence. The results of a survey or opinion poll, for example, may represent what a certain group of people believes, but it should not be mistaken for fact.
- **Bandwagon**—influencing people by implying that “everyone” supports one’s position. The bandwagon approach is all about peer pressure. The idea is that “everyone” is doing something, so you should do it, too.

- **Card-stacking**—offering only one side of an issue to support one’s position.
- **Diversion**—focusing on trivial or side issues to divert attention from a central point. Calling fast-food consumption “a matter of personal choice,” for example, is a diversion from the fact that it can be harmful to health.
- **Elitism**—linking a concept or product with high social standing, education, wealth, or fame. A product endorsement by a well-known sports figure or an endorsement of a political candidate by a popular rock star are examples of this technique.
- **Emotional appeal**—prodding people’s feelings to distract them from unpleasant facts. A video clip of a political candidate leaving church with her family or relaxing with her dog may be an attempt to mask dishonesty or incompetence by appealing to religious believers and animal lovers.
- **Glittering generalities**—using words that produce a positive emotional response but that may mean different things to different people. A slogan such as “job creation” on a politician’s bumper sticker, for example, carries a positive message without offering any specifics about the candidate’s program. The word *natural* on a food product conveys an image of healthfulness without describing contents.
- **Name-calling**—also known as mud-slinging: pointing out negative qualities of the opposing position while ignoring any positive qualities. This is the opposite of the glittering generalities approach.
- **Plain folk**—the opposite of elitism: appealing to the common point of view or using language like “we, the people” that signals that product users or a candidate’s backers are just like everyone else. The technique was used successfully to portray the affluent railroad lawyer Abraham Lincoln as “Honest Abe, the rail splitter,” born in a log cabin.
- **Repetition**—saying the same message or using the same words or phrases more than once in order to make an impression on the reader or listener.
- **Stereotype**—ascribing characteristics to an individual based on the perceived characteristics of a group to which she belongs. Most people recognize the falseness in stereotypes based on race, religion, or ethnic group, but stereotyping of other groups—rich people, poor people, single mothers, overweight people, and many others—can be equally as false.
- **Testimonial**—using endorsements from celebrities or other people. A picture of a star athlete on a cereal box is a familiar example, as is your favorite rock star appearing in a commercial for a political candidate.

- **Transfer**—using a symbol to carry a message. A computer company, for example, might use an actor portraying scientist Albert Einstein in a commercial to convey the message that its product can make you smarter.

Read this sentence from President Roosevelt’s war message.

*“With confidence in our armed forces— with the unbounding determination of our people—we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God.”*

What persuasive technique does Roosevelt use in this statement?

- A diversion
- B plain folk
- C bandwagon
- D emotional appeal

President Roosevelt uses several persuasive techniques in this historic speech—the “bandwagon” in phrases like “our whole nation,” and “card-stacking” when he portrays the attack as “unprovoked” and “dastardly.” In this sentence, he is clearly calling on the American people to be resolute by appealing to our feelings about ourselves and our fighting forces. Choice D is the correct answer.

Read these sentences from the speech.

*“Yesterday, the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya.”*

*“Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.”*

*“Last night, Japanese forces attacked Guam.”*

*“Last night, Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.”*

*“Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island.”*

*“This morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island.”*

Why is the propaganda technique used in these sentences effective?

- A It persuades listeners that Americans are historically on the side of the powerless.
- B It emphasizes the apparent differences between the United States and its enemies.
- C It emphasizes that the attack on Pearl Harbor was part of a well-coordinated offensive.
- D It persuades listeners that the war effort is worth the sacrifices Americans will have to make.

Here the president uses repetition to emphasize that the attack was only part of a campaign of ruthless aggression. (Indeed, the Japanese aim was to conquer eastern and southern Asia, and Pearl Harbor was an attempt to knock out the American navy so that the United States could not stop them.) The sentences read like the drumbeat of an advancing army and are even more effective when you listen to a recording of the speech. Choice C is the correct answer.

Analyze how President Roosevelt constructs the argument in the passage. Use examples from the passage to support your analysis.

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This constructed-response question calls on you to consider Roosevelt's speech as a whole—how he uses facts, opinions, and techniques of persuasion to rally Congress and the people to go to war. Here is one possible answer:

The American people probably didn't need much persuading after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Roosevelt was telling them what they already knew, that the country was at war and there would

be major sacrifices ahead. His speech rallies the people for the struggle by combining facts and opinions to describe the nature of the enemy and appealing to the ways Americans like to think about themselves. He begins by naming the day of the attack as “a date which will live in infamy,” and it has, just as we remember September 11, 2001. He uses words like “suddenly and deliberately” and emphasizes that up until the attack there had been no war to vilify the enemy and to imply that the Japanese were devious and sneaky, in implied contrast with Americans, who “fight fair.” In fact in any fight someone has to throw the first punch, and this one had been brewing for some time, but that didn’t much matter when our people had been killed and our ships and planes destroyed. The list of other places the Japanese had attacked further emphasized that they were trying to build an empire and had to be stopped. Roosevelt knows that American opinion will be overwhelmingly on his side, but he bolsters that opinion by appealing to “the people of the United States,” “our whole nation,” “the American people in their righteous might” and their “unbounding determination.”

## IT'S YOUR TURN

Read the passage and answer the questions.

*This speech was given by another US president in a different kind of war. The “Cold War” (1947–1989) between the United States and the Soviet Union (Russia) was largely a war of propaganda between democratic capitalism and Soviet communism. Europe was divided between the two camps, with Germany straddling the line between them and the city of Berlin split into eastern and western sides. In 1961, the Russians built a wall across Berlin to prevent people from leaving the part of Europe they controlled for the freer West. President John F. Kennedy gave this speech at the Berlin wall on June 26, 1963.*

I am proud to come to this city as the guest of your distinguished Mayor, who has symbolized throughout the world the fighting spirit of West Berlin.

And I am proud to visit the Federal Republic with your distinguished chancellor

who for so many years has committed Germany to democracy and freedom and progress, and to come here in the company of my fellow American, General Clay, who has been in this city during its great moments of crisis and will come again if ever needed.

Two thousand years ago the proudest boast was “civis Romanus sum”<sup>1</sup>. Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is “Ich bin ein Berliner”<sup>2</sup>.

I appreciate my interpreter translating my German!

There are many people in the world who really don't understand, or say they don't, what is the great issue between the free world and the Communist world. Let them come to Berlin.

There are some who say that Communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin.

And there are some who say in Europe and elsewhere we can work with the Communists. Let them come to Berlin.

And there are even a few who say that it is true that Communism is an evil system, but it permits us to make economic progress. Lass' sie nach Berlin kommen. Let them come to Berlin.

Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in, to prevent them from leaving us.

I want to say, on behalf of my countrymen, who live many miles away on the other side of the Atlantic, who are far distant from you, that they take the greatest pride that they have been able to share with you, even from a distance, the story of the last 18 years.

I know of no town, no city, that has been besieged for 18 years that still lives with the vitality and the force, and the hope and the determination of the city of West Berlin.

While the wall is the most obvious and vivid demonstration of the failures of the Communist system, for all the world to see, we take no satisfaction in it, for it is, as your

mayor has said, an offense not only against history but an offense against humanity, separating families, dividing husbands and wives and brothers and sisters, and dividing a people who wish to be joined together.

What is true of this city is true of Germany—real, lasting peace in Europe can never be assured as long as one German out of four is denied the elementary right of free men, and that is to make a free choice.

In 18 years of peace and good faith, this generation of Germans has earned the right to be free, including the right to unite their families and their nation in lasting peace, with good will to all people.

You live in a defended island of freedom, but your life is part of the main.

So let me ask you as I close, to lift your eyes beyond the dangers of today, to the hopes of tomorrow, beyond the freedom merely of this city of Berlin, or your country of Germany, to the advance of freedom everywhere, beyond the wall to the day of peace with justice, beyond yourselves and ourselves to all mankind.

Freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free.

When all are free, then we can look forward to that day when this city will be joined as one and this country and this great continent of Europe in a peaceful and hopeful globe.

When that day finally comes, as it will, the people of West Berlin can take sober satisfaction in the fact that they were in the front lines for almost two decades.

All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words “Ich bin ein Berliner.”

<sup>1</sup>**Civis romanus sum:** Latin, “I am a Roman citizen”

<sup>2</sup>**Ich bin ein Berliner:** German, “I am a Berliner”

1 Which sentence from the passage contains an opinion?

- A "Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is 'Ich bin ein Berliner.'"
- B "There are many people in the world who really don't understand, or say they don't, what is the great issue between the free world and the Communist world."
- C "Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in, to prevent them from leaving us."
- D "Freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free."

2 Read the sentence from the passage.

*"I want to say, on behalf of my countrymen, who live many miles away on the other side of the Atlantic, who are far distant from you, that they take the greatest pride that they have been able to share with you, even from a distance, the story of the last 18 years."*

What does the opinion used in this sentence contribute to the passage?

- A It declares that the American people stand with the people of Berlin.
- B It implies that the United States is willing to fight for the freedom of Berlin.
- C It suggests that Americans are impressed by the president's attempts to speak German.
- D It shows that the president is anxious to make a strong impression on the Soviet Union.

3 What detail is **least** essential to the overall understanding of the passage?

- A Kennedy's criticisms of the Communist system
- B Kennedy's praise of West Berlin as a symbol of freedom
- C Kennedy's comment about the interpreter translating his German
- D Kennedy's acknowledgment of the presence of the mayor of Berlin and the German chancellor

4 What persuasive technique does Kennedy use with the use of the phrase, "Let them come to Berlin"?

- A transfer
- B repetition
- C emotional appeal
- D glittering generalities

5 Read the sentence from the passage.

*"Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in, to prevent them from leaving us."*

Why is the propaganda technique used in this sentence effective?

- A It compares the Communist system to a prison.
- B It suggests that Berliners are protected by the wall.
- C It makes apologies for the failures of the democratic system.
- D It assures the people of Berlin that in time the wall will come down.

6 Why does Kennedy speak in German at various points in his speech?

- A to prove a point about "the brotherhood of mankind"
- B to demonstrate America's empathy for the people of Berlin
- C to acknowledge differences between American and German cultures
- D to warn the Soviet Union that the US is prepared to fight for the freedom of Berlin

7 Evaluate the argument President Kennedy presents in this speech. Explain why it is or why it is not a convincing argument.

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SAMPLE

