

THE TINTED LENS OF BIAS

Everyone has bias—even the media. Critical thinking is key.

Imagine a new student has joined your class. They share many of your interests, both in and out of school, and are excited to talk about the things you both enjoy. You will probably be really excited and think they're pretty cool. Someone else in the class who has different interests may not be as excited to be their friend. That's because of your "bias." So just what is bias? Bias is when your personal opinions, your likes and dislikes, influence the way you think about the world around you. Everyone has bias and it can be helpful to think about bias as a pair of glasses everyone wears. Our bias tints the lenses and changes how we perceive things. Bias influences what is written and published in the media as well as how something is understood by readers. Political beliefs, personal values and individual experiences shape how we see the world and that affects journalists, too. A journalist's job is to report the truth as neutrally as possible, but what does that really mean? Have you ever noticed how the same story can be reported in several different ways?

Some news organizations show bias by what they choose to include and more importantly, by what they leave out. Journalists strive to include all of the facts in the articles they write; however, sometimes the writer or the publisher has an "unconscious bias." In other words, a bias they're not even really aware of. That can result in points-of-view, details and facts being left out. Bias influences what someone does or does not think is important.

On the other hand, a journalist can intentionally leave out a fact, to make things seem a certain way. Part of being media literate is examining the source and trying to determine how trustworthy it is. Is the

goal to share facts or spread popular opinions or world-views? When reading any type of media coverage, ask yourself: "What could be missing from this story that would change the way it comes across?" and "Why was this not included?"

Images and photographs can also change the way information is presented and received. Statistics, graphs and numbers can have a big impact on a story's overall message. How easy is it for the reader to see the source of the data and other information needed to truly understand what it means? For example, a phrase such as "75% of those

surveyed" makes it seem like most people share that viewpoint. However, readers must consider how many people were surveyed, how they were selected and what their biases might be, to truly understand the statistic.

As much as we consider what is missing from the news articles we

read, we must also consider what is emphasized. Font choices, headlines and images all send messages about the importance of ideas being presented. Words are the most powerful tool in a journalist's toolkit. As you read an article, pay attention to the descriptors the writer has used. They are tinting the lenses through which the article is read. Words can be used to present a topic as favourable or, just as easily, problematic.

It is the job of a journalist to be as neutral as possible when researching and writing their story and it is the reader's job to think critically. When both are doing their job as well as possible, the media can help to keep the public informed. And that's important, because information is power.



...personal opinions and lived experiences influence the way you view events

DIG DEEPER



Some articles aren't meant to be neutral. "Editorials" and "columns" are written to present opinions, and even to try to persuade the reader to agree with those opinions. They're written by columnists and editors, whose job it is to share their perspective on various topics, often in the form of a weekly column. Sometimes, experts in a particular field are invited to write a column as part of a special focus. As much as it's important to consider all

sides of an argument and form our own opinions, sometimes it is helpful to hear someone else's perspective. Columns and editorials provide that opportunity. The Toronto Star has an entire section where journalists and subject matter experts share their opinions about current topics in the form of a debate. Use the links below to read two editorials about Canada's Food Guide.

The **BIG** DEBATE

Did Canada's new Food Guide get it right?

YES <http://tiny.cc/thebigdebateyes>

NO <http://tiny.cc/thebigdebateno>

After reading both articles, consider...

How do you know that the articles are written from a particular perspective and not in a neutral way?

Provide specific examples from the text to support your thinking.

For each article, sum up the bias you notice in one or two sentences. How do you know what it is?

What point-of-view is not presented?

Which article did you like best? Which side of the debate do you support?

What specific examples from the article made you decide that?

DID YOU KNOW?

Journalists have standards to guide their reporting and writing. Those standards are intended to limit bias and promote fair and balanced reporting.

Visit thestar.com/about/statementofprinciples to learn more.

THINK, TRY, SHARE!

Headlines give the reader a glimpse into what an article will be about, but they can also be biased. Find an article about something that interests you and re-write the headline to change the message being communicated. Think about how easy or difficult it was to do this. What did you consider when rewriting the headline?

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

As informed, critical consumers of information, these questions can help you to be aware of media bias.

- How does the placement of the article in the publication communicate how important it is?
- How has language been used to discuss the topic?
- What might be missing from the article that would change the story?
- How have images, graphics or numbers been used in the text?
- What sources have been used? What sources have been left out?