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Free Lesson of the Month January, 2010

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This month’s Free Lesson comes from [Reading and Analyzing Nonfiction: Slant, Spin, and Bias](#) author Douglas Grudzina. It includes:

- A lesson on Fact versus Interpretation in non-fiction works
- Student exercises
- Teacher Answer Key

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Chapter Two:

THE ELEMENTS OF NON-FICTION

It still might be useful to define non-fiction in terms of what it is, in terms of its elements; for, like prose fiction, drama, and poetry, non-fiction is essentially the working together of certain elements.

Fact: A fact is any statement that can be verified as true. One's knowledge or ignorance of a fact does not alter that fact. What one does with his or her knowledge of a fact does not alter the fact. A fact, by definition, is indisputable.

Facts can be as finite as a person's age, height, or weight; the date, time of day, or weather during a given event; or the measurable results of a test, survey, poll, etc.

Remember, however, that the presence of facts—or their accuracy—is not necessarily the *first* element of non-fiction; as we discussed above, it is the absence of creation that defines non-fiction.

Analysis of Fact: There are entire college and graduate-school courses devoted to methods of gathering facts. Even your high school research projects have probably included instruction in gathering facts. Rarely, however, is it appropriate simply to report facts (“raw data”). Most of the time, the people who have gathered the facts will examine their data and then translate it into terms more understandable—and probably more interesting—to a broader audience. Note that analysis is not interpretation; the gatherers and reporters will not tell their audience what the data means, they will simply find more convenient ways to look at and talk about the data.

For example, the Constitution requires that the federal government conduct a census of the entire United States every ten years. Imagine that the census takers find the following (the following numbers are *not* really facts, they have been chosen to make the comparison between raw data and analysis easier to see):

RAW DATA

1,000,000 (1 million) people live in the United States
700,000 (700 thousand) are gray.
200,000 (200 thousand) are green.
50,000 (50 thousand) are yellow.
40,000 (40 thousand) are blue.
10,000 (10 thousand) are transparent.

500,000 (500 thousand) people live in cities.
400,000 (400 thousand) live in suburban developments
and/or small towns.
100,000 (100 thousand) live on farms.

350,000 (350 thousand) city dwellers are gray.
80,000 (80 thousand) city-dwellers are green.
40,000 (40 thousand) city-dwellers are yellow.
20,000 (20 thousand) city-dwellers are blue.
10,000 (10 thousand) city-dwellers are transparent.

The census-gatherers could keep presenting these numbers, and eventually, your eyes would glaze over and you'd stop breathing (if you haven't already). If you wanted to write an article on the results of the most recent census, you'd want this information in a more useable form.

For example:

ANALYZED DATA

1,000,000 (1 million) people live in the United States

70% are gray.

20% are green.

5% are yellow.

4% are blue.

1% are transparent.

50% of Unites States residents live in cities.

70% of city-dwellers are gray.

2% of city-dwellers are transparent.

50% of gray people live in cities.

100% of transparent people live in cities.

Notice that changing the numbers into percentages *does not change the facts at all*. Gray people are still 700,000 people out of a total of 1 million. They are still 10,000 out of 500,000 city dwellers. 10,000 transparent people out of a total of 10,000 transparent people live in cities. Presenting these numbers in percentages instead of raw numbers simply states the same information in terms that are easier to understand.

This is what analysis does: the information is translated into a variety of different formats, *but the information is not changed*. In fact, as long as the analysis is based on sound data (the census-takers collected all of the forms and counted them accurately), the analysis can be treated as fact itself (but there are times when you'll want the data to support the analysis).

The analyst, however, does not tell you *what to think* of the fact that all of the transparent people in the United States live in cities.

That is *interpretation*.

Interpretation: While facts are indisputable, they are subject to interpretation. Interpretation does not alter what a fact means (it is either raining outside, or it is not), but interpretation places the fact in a context and attempts to explain its significance. Interpretation helps provide a conclusion based on the fact or sometimes a reason for the fact. Two thinking human beings can take the same fact (the Incredible Hulk is green), and develop two very different interpretations (green represents the creature's rage; green is a color suggesting alien life—little green men—and illness).

For example:

If it is raining outside [fact], then farmers are pleased [interpretation] that their newly-planted crops will sprout soon [interpretation].

The sun rises in the east and sets in the west [fact], and the shadow on a sundial moves “sunwise” (from the top of the circle toward the right) [fact]; this is probably why the hands of a clock move in the same direction, commonly called “clockwise” [interpretation].

Interpretation is the basis of much non-fiction as the author of the editorial, review, biography, or memoir will most likely take the facts of his or her subject and lead the reader to a desired interpretation.

EXERCISE ONE:

Below are several statements. Identify each as either a verifiable fact or interpretation. For each interpretation, speculate what fact is likely being interpreted.

1. Typically, only ___% of Americans eligible to vote actually do.

2. Americans have grown largely cynical and apathetic.

3. Several organizations exist to encourage non-registered voters to register and vote.

4. They have not been overly successful.

5. The moon cycles from new to full to new through a twenty-eight-day cycle.

6. The melody to which *The Star Spangled Banner* is sung was originally an English drinking song.

7. *The Star Spangled Banner* was adopted as the United States' national anthem by a congressional resolution in 1931.

8. *America the Beautiful* was another song under consideration.

9. *The Star Spangled Banner* was more beloved.

10. The song is a celebration of war and conquest.

EXERCISE ONE:

Below are several statements. Identify each as either a verifiable fact or interpretation. For each interpretation, speculate what fact is likely being interpreted.

1. Typically, only ___% of Americans eligible to vote actually do.

Fact

2. Americans have grown largely cynical and apathetic.

Interpretation: probably based on the stated fact about the low rate of voter participation.

3. Several organizations exist to encourage non-registered voters to register and vote.

Fact

4. They have not been overly successful.

Interpretation: based on statistics about the number of people the above groups have actually gotten registered.

5. The moon cycles from new to full to new through a twenty-eight-day cycle.

Fact

6. The melody to which *The Star Spangled Banner* is sung was originally an English drinking song.

Fact

7. *The Star Spangled Banner* was adopted as the United States' national anthem by a congressional resolution in 1931.

Fact

8. *America the Beautiful* was another song under consideration.

Fact

9. *The Star Spangled Banner* was more beloved.

Interpretation: based on the fact that this was, ultimately, the chosen song.

10. The song is a celebration of war and conquest.

Interpretation: based on the song's lyrics.
