9 Everything's Biased: A Guide to Determining When Bias Matters

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Overview

The polarization of American society means almost every topic is ripe for controversy.[1] Students in first year writing classes reflect this noisy information ecosystem, commonly, by focusing on the degree of bias an author displays. In some cases, these observations result in savvy choices about source credibility, but in other instances, a focus on bias can lead students astray, even steering them away from reputable information. This chapter provides four classroom strategies—context awareness, genre awareness, classifying opinions, and evaluating counterarguments—to encourage students toward a more nuanced understanding of bias, which also can be applied to real-world situations.

In *Biased,* a 2019 book about racial bias, author and psychology professor Jennifer Eberhardt likens bias to a categorization effort by the human brain. Eberhardt also acknowledges that this trait is universal: it's our version of a short cut for processing vast amounts of information, "bringing coherence to a chaotic world" (24). However, these very same shortcuts have significant limitations, as they "impede our efforts to embrace and understand people who are deemed not like us" (24). This idea is at the heart of Eberhardt's research about implicit racial bias and its life-or-death consequences.

Tragically, in the years since Eberhardt's book was published, acts of violence have continued against Black individuals by law enforcement. Also,

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the COVID-19 pandemic began claiming lives globally, but disproportionately affected those over 65, those with compromised immune systems, people of color, people living in poverty, and those with limited access to information or health care.

It matters to first acknowledge the dire consequences of bias—such as violence against people of color, or policies rooted in ableism that threaten those who are vulnerable—to establish how systemic injustice, fueled by implicit biases, manifests in extreme forms. Misinformation can exacerbate these problems, further polarizing individuals on consequential issues. Many college students are aware of and upset by these realities. However, there is a lot of societal confusion over bias, too. Without more clarity about what bias is, when it matters, and when it does not, these egregious examples can get lost alongside inconsequential ones, leading to further confusion and division. In this chapter, I provide four strategies to help you better understand bias in a more nuanced way as both a reader and a writer. I also explain how bias conversations that start in our classrooms are also relevant to us as citizens.

Tip #1: Determine Writer and Reader Contexts

In their textbook, *So What? The Writer's Argument,* composition instructors Kurt Schick and Laura Miller describe context as the "where and when" of a writer's circumstances (8). In other words, it's useful to consider what sparked the writer's need to communicate a particular message. Now, let's consider an example. For Devoney Looser, author of the 2017 personal narrative, "Why I Teach Online," the spark was a family health emergency, which led her to seek the flexibility of remote teaching. Previously dismissive of online classes, she came to realize their value as her own experience disproved stigmas she previously believed.

Recently, it's been common for students reading this essay to remark that Looser seems "too biased in favor of online classes" to be credible. At first, these critiques may seem puzzling to you—wouldn't a professor who teaches online have *something* worthwhile to say about the subject? However, considering many students' experiences with online learning in 2020 and 2021, with technology platforms that didn't work and classes requiring them to read entire chemistry textbooks without guidance and teachers who had seemingly disappeared off the planet, it becomes clear that *readers'* contexts matter, too. Quite simply, COVID was making it too hard for some readers to imagine online classes in a positive light.

My own positive experiences teaching online for years *before* the pandemic probably led me to Looser's essay in the first place. In Fall of 2020, hearing students bemoan another semester online, I felt…defensive. It took some reflection on my part to separate my past context from the present reality: it just wasn't the same when everyone was being forced into it while a global pandemic raged around us. Noticing where my context diverged from many reader contexts in 2020 helped me acknowledge my own bias. I also encourage you to look beyond any of yours. For example, we shouldn't assume online learning was terrible for all students in the pandemic, as some individuals with disabilities reported feeling *more* connected by the same virtual experiences that led to others feeling isolated (Belle).

In conclusion, take inventory when you read: what was going on for the writer? How were those circumstances different from what's going on for you now? How are your experiences different from other readers'? Context awareness can train you to be a bit more receptive to potentially meaningful information that you might miss by dismissing it due to bias.

Tip #2: Clear Up Misconceptions about Genre

Chances are you've heard the word genre describing a TV show or movie, with labels like sci-fi and comedy guiding your expectations. Such labels are useful for any genre of the written word, too, for which Schick and Miller provide the following definition: "a typical, commonly recognized form of communication used to achieve a recurring (that is, repeating) purpose" (21). The more we read, then, the more we discover patterns in these categories that shape our expectations for the content.

Below are three genres you'll likely encounter as a student: academic, news, and opinion. We'll determine how the presence of bias impacts credibility in each. From there, hopefully you'll start to see that the word *bias* alone is too simplistic a way of expressing a complex set of reading and writing possibilities.

Academic

For college-level reading, the academic genre often refers to a scholarly article obtained from a library database. For writing, *academic* might describe the genre in which many professors expect you to compose. You might be quick to say academic work should be completely unbiased, which is correct *to an extent*, but let's go deeper.

If you tend to read a scholarly article and see it in terms of "biased in favor of x" or "biased against y," it may help to differentiate between bias and argument. There are indeed biases that threaten the integrity of academic work. One is called confirmation bias, or when a writer ignores evidence that complicates or disproves a claim; another is failure to disclose conflicts of interest, such as receiving funding from a company that monetarily benefits from certain findings.

However, writers seeking academic publication must undergo a peer review conducted by other subject experts, a process that checks not only for accuracy, but also for these troublesome biases. A writer favorably reviewed by peers, then, gets to confidently assert a position. A claim supported by responsibly-collected evidence is no longer a bias—it's a new academic finding. Sure, that finding might be refuted later, which doesn't mean the original work was biased, either; only that an academic perspective is subject to change.

Now that we've discussed the relationship between genre and bias for *readers*, let's consider how we can apply this knowledge to *our* academic *writing*. Schick and Miller note, "genre knowledge can provide instructions for how to write effectively" (23). Another composition expert, Amy Devitt, asserts that genre is a "dynamic patterning of human experience, [one that] enable[s] us to construct our writing world" (573). Combined, these ideas emphasize how a careful choice of genre not only gives writers control over their purpose but may even help determine their purpose.
The answer to the question about bias in your own work, then, depends on two factors:

(1) **The assignment's genre and purpose expectations.** Are you sure you're being asked to write a report, or is the assignment asking for something else? After all, how could a personal narrative possibly remain unbiased? What would an unbiased analysis of a poem even look like? To motivate peers into recycling, would you want to only list facts? Or might you want to do some strategic persuading?

(2) **What, precisely, you mean by bias.** Do you mean compiling facts with no original content from you? Chances are that's not what your professor wants, even in the most traditionally academic of assignments. On the other hand, if you mean researching multiple perspectives and citing a variety of sources, then, yes, that's what academic writing involves.

News vs. Opinion

Students often describe news articles as unbiased, which reflects what they *should* be, not what they always are. In some cases, bias creeps in, either through word choices that suggest a preference (or distaste) for one side, or from the glossing over or omitting of details that might have presented a more comprehensive report. News bias is actually quite problematic and is likely to go undetected, because we have to be knowledgeable about a topic to even spot instances of bias. Check out the *Writing Spaces* chapter "Effectively and Efficiently Reading the Credibility of Online Sources" by composition scholars Ellen Carillo and Alice Horning for some excellent source evaluation strategies. Among other tips, they remind us that it's a writer's job to "negotiate bias" shown in sources, remembering that we "can't somehow remove bias from these sources" (42), but that rather, it matters how we present these slants to our readers. For example, we can indicate to readers if an otherwise credible source is published in an outlet that leans to the political left, right, or center. We can also choose to disclose background information about authors we cite, especially if we think those details may be relevant to a particular viewpoint or position.

On the opposite end of the genre spectrum, an opinion article is often described by students as very biased, which isn't completely wrong, either; after all, the writer is favoring a side. However, with few exceptions (such as hateful language or deliberately false claims), readers aren't harmed by a clearly disclosed opinion, so you need not reject the content on bias alone. Although you don't want to depend solely on opinions, they can be useful because they're often short and easy to read. Hastily discarding an opinion for its bias may even prolong your information-seeking task, making you rely on dense articles intended for expert audiences.

Media literacy specialists, including *AllSides* marketing director Julie Mastrine, acknowledge that bias is everywhere and unavoidable. Like Eberhardt, Mastrine accepts that human beings are biased by nature. Specifically related to media, though, Mastrine argues that bias only becomes a problem when not disclosed, which may result in readers "being manipulated into (a biased outlet's) point of view and not able to evaluate it critically and objectively" (qtd in Sheridan). Experts like Mastrine also note that media outlets improve their credibility with the public by labeling content as news or opinion.

Tip #3: Categorize Opinions

While we're at it, the word opinion is pretty vague, so labeling alone might not be enough. In the article, "No, You're Not Entitled to Your Opinion," author Patrick Stokes notes that in everyday conversation, we toss the word around inconsistently, to describe anything from a preference, to a deeply held conviction, to an evidence-based argument (Stokes). Only in the last instance, though, does a writer's degree of bias really matter.

Let's dig into Stokes' categories, remembering from Tip #2 that it's a waste of energy to worry about author bias for a (clearly labeled) opinion or narrative. An author is writing about a preference to be vegetarian? So what? You're welcome to write an ode to carnivores in response, but unless the author hurls insults at meat eaters, author bias is mostly irrelevant to evaluating credibility here. Maybe the author expresses moral, ethical, or religious convictions against killing animals, a classic example of a bias, in this case a deeply personal belief unlikely to be changed. Without evidence to "prove" morality, bias doesn't matter much here, either. If your conscience permits you to eat meat, then you can agree to disagree.

On the other hand, if an author claims beef production should be reduced for climate reasons, a statement for which there is concrete evidence, then you can apply the following checklist, where an answer of "no" might indicate a credibility-reducing bias:

- Does the author have the appropriate credentials, experience, knowledge, or expertise to cover this issue? Be careful with credentials: does an astrophysicist necessarily know more about vegetarianism than a lifelong vegetarian?
- Does the author cite credible sources?
- Does the author mention any valid counterarguments and treat these fairly?
- Does the author use professional/respectful language?
- Does the author have any conflicts of interest? If so, are they candidly revealed?

In his essay, Stokes also discusses why this categorization matters beyond the classroom: a lack of precision about the word opinion can lead us down the dangerous road, societally, of affording the same merit to *all* opinions. Shielding bad faith ideas under the defense of supposedly "harmless opinions" can even contribute to implicit biases that erupt in racist violence, or to unsubstantiated ideas about a public health crisis that lead individuals toward risky behaviors.

Tip #4: Seek Valid Counterarguments Only

The previous paragraph may seem to contradict what you've likely been taught, which is to avoid bias by acknowledging the other side. Often, this is an advisable move. In an article about argument writing, authors Warrington et al. note, "…[representing] only one side of an argument… could make the audience believe that the author is either not knowledgeable about other possible arguments or not interested in these arguments" (191). Warrington et al. classify this one-sidedness as a type of bias, and it certainly can be. As readers, we need a balanced portrayal of a topic, particularly one new to us. As writers, one way to achieve this balance for readers is to cite high-quality sources from a variety of perspectives, a move that shows our familiarity with other viewpoints and a confidence in our own.

For a topic familiar to many students, such as pet ownership, the imbalance in a source that rambles about the joys of pets without acknowledging any challenges is probably easy to spot. But what about for a less familiar topic? How do you know what the counterarguments even are or if they're good ones to consider? First, you have to read many sources to determine if there are reasonable perspectives beyond what you plan to argue. You probably don't want to bother with a topic for which no sensible counterarguments exist. Sure, you *could* mention the flat earth theory, but what would that accomplish other than playing a not-very-meaningful game of Devil's Advocate? In fact, devoting time to bad counterarguments—much like treating all opinions as equally worthy—not only reduces your credibility as a writer, but it also perpetuates the false equivalence fallacy, mentioned earlier by Stokes, that is so pervasive in society.

When meritless positions are repeated over and over, as they often are on social media, they can *seem* more widespread than they are. Mere prevalence can convey an air of legitimacy. For example, First Draft, an organization dedicated to debunking misinformation, analyzed thousands of Twitter accounts in the summer of 2020, shortly after many countries had imposed mask mandates to control COVID spread. Casual social media users around this time might have been quick to conclude there were equal numbers of pro-maskers as anti-maskers; and therefore, that this was an issue worthy of a thoughtful two-sided debate. However, the organization's investigation revealed that while there were some opponents, a majority accepted the mandates, with only "a small minority provoking a backlash that end[ed] up amplifying their messaging."

The takeaway? Before you accuse someone of bias for not mentioning "the other side," make sure the side in question has credible evidence to back it up.

Putting It All Together

Have you ever heard anyone say they wish the media and experts would just "stick to the facts?" Sounds sensible, but here's the problem: I could read so-called "facts" 24/7 and still wind up dangerously misinformed if I'm not consulting reputable sources, or if I'm relying on a single outlet while ignoring other credible perspectives.

Let's revisit an idea from Tip #2, that opinions can offer valuable insights, and now apply it to the real world. You'd probably listen, for example, if your two closest friends warned you against a popular nutritional supplement after experiencing severe stomach pain. Sure, they're doing something other than just sticking to the facts, but because you trust your friends, their opinions might be more credible than any fact available to you on the supplement's website, which exists to sell the product.

In other words, *intent* matters too. If you're thinking, "But how can I possibly know someone's intent?" you're right. We can't know the motivations of every person or organization. But just because we can't know *every single* time doesn't mean we shouldn't make educated guesses some of the time. Here again, a checklist helps:

- Is the author being published by an organization (such as a national newspaper) that has a reputation to uphold?
- Is the publishing organization known for quality journalism or reports?
- If the claim is being made on social media, can the individual's identity be verified and deemed credible?
- Does the person stand to gain monetarily or in some other way [fame, attention, prestige] by putting out less-than-honest information?

In a blog post for Nieman Lab, Mike Caulfield, head of the Digital Polarization Initiative, writes that most COVID misinformation follows predictable patterns, meaning one way to combat it can involve our getting better at "pre-bunking" the claims instead of treating each one as worthy of serious explanation. Training ourselves to pay more attention to a source's intent may be one way to do this. If you notice that a particular Twitter user constantly posts about hoaxes just to provoke heated debates, then

meticulously refuting each claim may have the unintended effect of elevating a bad-faith user's credibility.

Another way to combat misinformation is to become more attentive to our own biases, and how these might prime us to overly criticize viewpoints that go against ours, while also remaining too receptive to poor quality content *just because* we agree with it. Zeynep Tufekci, a sociologist who studies technology's effects on the information ecosystem, writes the following in a 2018 *MIT Technology Review* article:

> …the new, algorithmic gatekeepers aren't merely (as they like to believe) neutral conduits for both truth and falsehood. They make their money by keeping people on their sites and apps; that aligns their incentives closely with those who stoke outrage, spread misinformation, and appeal to people's existing biases and preferences.

The entities mentioned by Tufekci have interests other than keeping us educated. It's a common tactic among those who deliberately spread bad information—either for monetary gain, or to sow political discord—to hide behind the veneer of plausible-sounding facts, while accusing any challenger of being biased. Here, a charge of bias even functions as a form of misinformation *in itself* by making people overly skeptical of writers or organizations who publish the truth. Unfortunately, once truth is doubted on a large enough scale, societal chaos can ensue. Some people will remain in a perpetual state of skepticism; others may even reach for conspiracy theories in an attempt to make sense of a confusing situation.

To summarize, I've book-ended this chapter with two examples of urgent importance, first where biases can lead to life-or-death consequences for people, and where the language around the word *bias* is used as a tool of manipulation. In the middle, we discussed some strategies for sharpening your own critical thinking so that you can be better equipped to determine for yourself—in the classroom and beyond—when bias matters and how much.

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Teacher Resources for "Everything's Biased: A Guide to Determining When Bias Matters"

Overview and Teaching Strategies

Building on students' natural tendencies to recognize bias, this chapter might fit into a critical reading or research unit. I have found that if students can identify relevant instances of bias as they read, they become not only better at choosing high-quality sources for their writing projects, but also more aware of how their own biases might impact their approach to writing topics.

For claims of author bias that may more accurately describe students' own strong feelings about a topic, the discussion of context may help identify where tensions could occur between readers and writers. For students using the word bias to describe any non-neutral material, a review of genre may prompt them to differentiate among actual biases, academic arguments, and accepted features of some genres.

Discussion Questions

1. How many different **genres** do you encounter in a typical day? For which does the author's or publisher's bias affect your understanding the most? The least? Why?

2. Free-write about a past experience of significant importance to you. How does the **context** surrounding this experience contribute to your memory and retelling? How does your present context compare or contrast with your past context?

3. Which topics of controversy often simplified into two sides actually have more than two valid positions? How should writers handle topics for which a pervasive **viewpoint** has little or no credible supporting evidence?

4. Write down an **opinion** about which you feel strongly. Is it a preference, a moral belief, or an informed viewpoint? What would it take (if anything) for you to change your mind?

Activities

Inhabiting a biased reader's perspective. This activity can be done in small groups, or it can be the subject of a low-stakes exercise. First, ask students to imagine a strongly negative response to an assigned text. Next, ask students to write a summary of the text using this biased tone/style. Finally, discuss how these loaded summaries can be revised for more neutrality. (Note: I suggest asking students to embody a *hypothetical* reader rather than prompting them to use their own biases as examples. Of course, the latter is the eventual goal as they begin to transition from thinking of these concepts as readers to applying them in their own writing.

Viewpoint Summary Project. Assign students to small groups (3-4 is ideal). As a group, students will choose a debatable issue for which there are several reputable viewpoints. Next, they will summarize various articles that express opinions on the topic. Finally, they will present their neutral summaries to a peer audience. This can be a stand-alone project to reinforce skills of source evaluation and summary, or it can serve as an early annotated bibliography if you plan to scaffold this activity to a research assignment.