

Identifying Bias

An important part of evaluating an author's ethos is identifying that author's bias. **Bias** is any opinion that influences a person's thoughts, feelings, or actions. A person can be biased against something or have a bias for something. **An author's bias** is any opinion or prejudice that affects that author's writing and prevents the author from being completely neutral about the topic or issue about which s/he is writing.

How to determine what an author's bias is:

The author may state directly some of his/her biases by telling the reader his/her opinions on certain topics or admitting that s/he has a conflict of interest or preference. But when an author does not acknowledge his/her own bias, a skilled reader can infer what an author's bias may be by looking at the author's diction and use of evidence.

When looking at the author's use of evidence, ask yourself:

- Does the author present more positive evidence for one side of an issue than the other?
- Does the author present more negative evidence for one side of an issue than the other?

These are both clues that the author may be biased for or against a particular side.

When looking at the author's diction, ask yourself:

- Does the author use words with more negative connotations when referring to one side of an issue or particular people?
- Does the author use words with more positive connotations when referring to one side of an issue or particular people?

These connotations are another clue to what or whom the author may be biased for or against

Now, practice identifying authors' biases by reading the excerpts below. For each set of paragraphs, determine what the author's bias is by looking for patterns in that author's diction and use of evidence.

Excerpt # 1:

The following paragraphs are the opening to an article by Peg Tyre that explores changes in the academic demands of kindergarten and first grade. As you read these first paragraphs, try to identify what Tyre's bias is. Is she biased for or against the new academic demands of kindergarten and first grade?

Brian And Tiffany Aske of Oakland, Calif., desperately want their daughter, Ashlyn, to succeed in first grade. That's why they're moving--to Washington State. When they started Ashlyn in kindergarten last year, they had no reason to worry. A bright child with twinkling eyes, Ashlyn was eager to learn, and the neighborhood school had a great reputation. But by November, Ashlyn, then 5, wasn't measuring up. No matter how many times she was tested, she couldn't read the 130-word list her teacher gave her: words like "our," "house" and "there." She became so exhausted and distraught over homework--including a weekly essay on "my favorite animal" or "my family vacation"--that she would put her head down on the dining-room table and sob. "She would tell me, 'I can't write a story, Mama. I just can't do it'," recalls Tiffany, a stay-at-home mom.

The teacher didn't seem to notice that Ashlyn was crumbling, but Tiffany became so concerned that she began to spend time in her daughter's classroom as a volunteer. There she was both disturbed and comforted to see that other kids were struggling, too. "I saw kids falling asleep at their desks at 11 a.m.," she says. At the end of the year, Tiffany asked the teacher what Ashlyn could expect when she moved on to the first grade. The requirements the teacher described, more words and more math at an even faster pace, "were overwhelming. It was just bizarre."

So Tiffany and Brian, a contractor, looked hard at their family finances to see if they could afford to send Ashlyn to private school. Eventually, they called a real-estate agent in a community where school was not as intense.

In the last decade, the earliest years of schooling have become less like a trip to "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" and more like SAT prep. Thirty years ago first grade was for learning how to read. Now, reading lessons start in kindergarten and kids who don't crack the code by the middle of the first grade get extra help. Instead of story time, finger painting, tracing letters and snack, first graders are spending hours doing math work sheets and sounding out words in reading groups. In some places, recess, music, art and even social studies are being replaced by writing exercises and spelling quizzes. Kids as young as 6 are tested, and tested again--some every 10 days or so--to ensure they're making sufficient progress. After school, there's homework, and for some, educational videos, more workbooks and tutoring, to help give them an edge.

Excerpt # 2:

The following paragraphs are from an article by Amy Alkon that examines the effects of beauty on people's (particularly women's) lives. As you read these paragraphs, try to determine what Alkon's biases are. How does she feel about feminists? About people who try to improve their physical appearance?

Men's looks matter to heterosexual women only somewhat. Most women prefer men who are taller than they are, with symmetrical features (a sign that a potential partner is healthy and parasite-free). But, women across cultures are intent on finding male partners with high status, power, and access to resources—which means a really short guy can add maybe a foot to his height with a private jet. And, just like women who aren't very attractive, men who make very little money or are chronically out of work tend to have a really hard time finding partners. There is some male grumbling about this. Yet, while feminist journalists deforest North America publishing articles urging women to bow out of the beauty arms race and "Learn to love that woman in the mirror!", nobody gets into the ridiculous position of advising men to "Learn to love that unemployed guy sprawled on the couch!"

Now, before you brand me a traitor to my gender, let me say that I'm all for women having the vote, and I think a woman with a mustache should make the same money as a man with a mustache. But you don't help that woman by advising her, "No need to wax that lip fringe or work off that beer belly!" (Because the road to female empowerment is...looking just like a hairy old man?)

Excerpt # 3:

The following paragraphs are from the beginning of an article by Hara Estroff Marano that looks at current trends in parenting and their effects. As you read these paragraphs, try to determine what Estroff Marano's biases are. How does she feel about the situations she describes? How can you tell?

Maybe it's the cyclist in the park, trim under his sleek metallic blue helmet, cruising along the dirt path...at three miles an hour. On his tricycle.

Or perhaps it's today's playground, all-rubber-cushioned surface where kids used to skin their knees. And...wait a minute...those aren't little kids playing. Their mommies--and especially their daddies--are in there with them, coplaying or play-by-play coaching. Few take it half-easy on the perimeter benches, as parents used to do, letting the kids figure things out for themselves.

Then there are the sanitizing gels, with which over a third of parents now send their kids to school, according to a recent survey. Presumably, parents now worry that school bathrooms are not good enough for their children.

Consider the teacher new to an upscale suburban town. Shuffling through the sheaf of reports certifying the educational "accommodations" he was required to make for many of his history students, he was struck by the exhaustive, well-written--and obviously costly--one on behalf of a girl who was already proving among the most competent of his ninth-graders. "She's somewhat neurotic," he confides, "but she is bright, organized and conscientious--the type who'd get to school to turn in a paper on time, even if she were dying of stomach flu." He finally found the disability he was to make allowances for: difficulty with Gestalt thinking. The 13-year-old "couldn't see the big picture." That cleverly devised defect (what 13-year-old can construct the big picture?) would allow her to take all her tests untimed, especially the big one at the end of the rainbow, the college-worthy SAT.

Behold the wholly sanitized childhood, without skinned knees or the occasional C in history. "Kids need to feel badly sometimes," says child psychologist David Elkind, professor at Tufts University. "We learn through experience and we learn through bad experiences. Through failure we learn how to cope."