

Critical Reading I: Sorting Out Fact and Opinion

You may think the word “critical” has only a negative meaning, as in “Professor Smith criticized my paper unfairly.” However, a critical reader is a careful reader. According to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, one meaning of the word critical is “exercising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation.” In other words, critical reading means being able to comprehend and make educated judgments about what you read.

The skills involved in critical reading are explained in Critical Reading Tip Sheets I-VI.

Sorting Out Fact and Opinion

Facts are statements that can be verified. A person can go and check the evidence that supports a statement of fact.

- A fact is something that is a certainty. A fact does not change from person to person, or from place to place.



Opinions, on the other hand, are statements based on feelings, attitudes, or beliefs. No matter how much you might agree with an opinion, it can never be proven either true or false.

Example of a factual statement: More than one million teenagers become pregnant every year. [This can be proven by checking hospital records for teenage birth rates.]

Example of a statement of opinion: Teenagers should have sexual education classes in high school. [This statement can’t be proven; it may make sense to you, or you may disagree for any number of reasons.]

Which one of the following statements is a fact?

Ask yourself, which one of these sentences does not change from person to person, or place to place?

In America the traffic laws are too strict.	Opinion: Some people believe that our traffic laws should be even stricter. They believe we should have lower speed limits and that no one should drive until they are eighteen years old.
In America a red traffic light means STOP.	Fact: In America, no matter which of the fifty states you drive in, a red traffic light means STOP. The second sentence is a fact, or a certainty.
In America the biggest cars are the safest cars.	Opinion: Other people believe that the size of the car does not make it safe. They believe that the way a car is made and what it is made out of make it safe to drive, no matter how big or small it is. Opinion is the same as belief.

Adapted from McWhorter, Kathleen T. Reading Across the Disciplines. 2nd Ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005.