

Critical Reading IV: Detecting Bias

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.

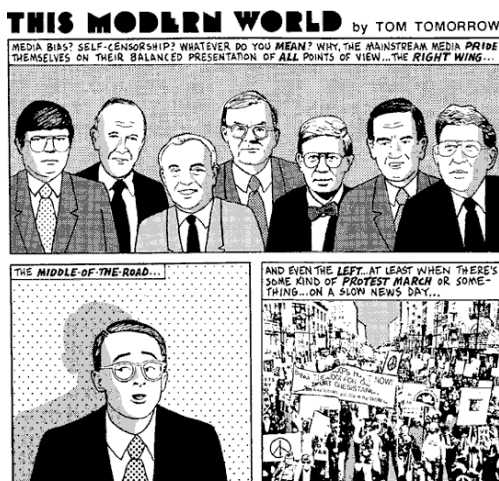
The skills involved in critical reading are explained in Critical Reading Tip Sheets I-VI.

What is Bias?

Good objective writing, research, or reporting always looks at both sides of a controversial issue. This is not to say that an author should not take a definite side, but a careful author should always respect and examine the other side’s views. If an author fails to do so, he or she is said to be biased. Bias refers to a writer’s prejudice for one side of a particular issue. A reader can identify bias by looking carefully at the following elements of a text:

- **Denotative and Connotative Meaning:** the denotative meaning of a word is its literal dictionary definition; connotative meaning is the positive or negative implied meaning associated with a word.
- **Descriptive Language:** words that an author uses to create an emotional or sensory impression.
- **Tone:** the attitudes the author expresses towards opposing viewpoints, as well as towards sources that support his or her side of the issue.
- **Fairness or Intellectual Honesty:** the degree to which the author’s claims are supported by evidence and the way in which the author deals with contradictory evidence.

Examine the two political cartoons, both dealing with the subject of bias in today’s media. Can you spot what each cartoon is biased for or against?



Failing to detect bias can lead a reader to believe something false or exaggerated based on shabby evidence or poorly supported arguments. Keep an eye out for too much bias!

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