

**THINKING CRITICALLY
ABOUT MEDIA
AND POLITICS**

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scope of students' own critical thinking, reading, and writing capacities will be broadened so as to empower them to make their own autonomous judgments on opposing ideological positions in general and on specific issues.

All this being said, it would be hypocritical to deny that the dominant viewpoint in the book is liberal-to-leftist, as defined in Chapter 2, or to deny that this viewpoint most often characterizes college courses in the humanities and social sciences. I suggest that this fact does not indicate a "bias" so much as the justifiable mindset of scholars who devote their careers to a pursuit of knowledge and truth independent of (and providing a critical perspective on) the conservative bias of all the forms of information saturating the conservative society transmitted by corporations (or politicians and American society transmitted by corporations), through media of news, commentary, and entertainment that are also owned by corporations and that gain their profits through corporate advertising. My suggestion is more fully supported throughout the book, and like everything else here, it is not put forth as "the last word," but as one viewpoint that is contested by other ones, or as a hypothesis that you can test against evidence pro and con. One thesis of the book is that neither journalists, scholars, nor teachers can or should be expected to be completely balanced, neutral, or nonpartisan in evaluating opposed positions, which often are not equally balanced on their rhetorical merits, or the power of those who propagate them. What *should* be expected is an accurate, fair-minded exposition of what the opposing sides believe and argue, in the course of evaluating the relative merits of their arguments, and qualified by the previously discussed acknowledgment that any judgment posed, explicitly or implicitly, as the last word here can and should be regarded only as a prompt to possible counter-arguments.

This distinctive approach to evaluating public arguments, especially political ones, is visible throughout the book and can be previewed in the following four guides, all of which have multiple applications for students. First, you can apply them to the sources you read in your studies for course work or independently. Second, you can apply them to yourself in your response to what you read and to what you then say about it in discussion or in writing papers. Finally, you can apply them to this book's own viewpoints and its author's possible biases; I always welcome feedback from readers with disagreements or suggestions for refinements, updating, and so on. I can be reached at diazere@igc.org.

GUIDES FOR ANALYZING POLITICAL ARGUMENTS

Rhetoric: A Checklist for Analyzing Your Own and Others' Arguments

1. When you are expressing your views on a subject, ask yourself how extensive your knowledge of it is, what the sources of that knowledge are, and what restrictions there might be in your vantage point. When you are studying a writer on the subject (or when she cites a source on it), try to figure out what her qualifications are on this particular subject. Is the newspaper, magazine, website, book publisher, or research institute he is writing for (or citing) a reputable one? What is its ideological viewpoint?
2. Are you, as reader or writer (or is the author), indulging in rationalization, or **wishful thinking**—believing something merely because it is what you *want* to believe? In other words, are you distinguishing what is personally advantageous or disadvantageous for you from what you would objectively consider just or unjust?
3. Are the actions of the author, or those she is supporting, consistent with the professed position, or is she saying one thing while doing another? (This is one form of **compartmentalization**, the other most common one being internal inconsistencies in the author's arguments.)
4. Are all of the data ("facts") or quotations correct? Are any data used misleadingly or quotes taken out of context?
5. Semantic issues: Does the author make it clear, either by explicit definition or by context, in exactly what sense she is using any controversial or ambiguous words? In other words, is she using vague, unconcretized abstractions, or is she concretizing her abstractions? Any evasive euphemisms (i.e., "clean" words that obscure a "dirty" truth)?
6. Are the generalizations and assertions of opinion—especially those that are disputable or central to the argument—adequately qualified and supported by reasoning, evidence, or examples? In your own writing, if you haven't been able to provide this support, it may be a good idea not to make these assertions.
7. Is there any unjustifiable (i.e., not supported by adequate evidence) emotional appeal through empty "conditioned

- response" words (or "cleans" and "dirties"), **name-calling**, devaluing of a **straw man**, or innuendo?
8. Are the limits of the position defined or are they vulnerable to being pushed to absurd logical consequences (reduction to absurdity)? In other words, does she indicate where to draw the line?
 9. Are all of the analogies (saying two situations are similar) and equations (saying two situations are the same) valid?
 10. Does she honestly acknowledge the opposition, fairly balancing all the evidence and arguments of one side against those of the other, giving each side's accurate weight and evaluating them in accurate proportion to each other? (See "Ground Rules for Polemicists" below.)
 11. Any faulty causal analyses? Does he view any actions as causes that may really be effects or reactions? Any post hoc reasoning—that is, when she asserts that something has happened because of something else, might it be true that the second happened irrespective of, or even in spite of, the first? Has she reduced a probable multiplicity of causes to one (reductionism)? When he argues that a course of action has been unsuccessful because it has been carried too far, might the opposite be true—that it has been unsuccessful because it has not been carried far enough?
 12. Other logical fallacies, especially **evading the issue**, **non sequiturs** (conclusions that don't follow logically from the arguments preceding them, or two statements that seem to be related but aren't), **either-or** thinking, false dilemmas, or false dichotomies?
 13. Theory versus practice: Are the theoretical proposals practicable or the abstract principles consistent with empirical (verifiable) facts and probabilities, and based on adequate firsthand witness to the situation in question?

A Semantic Calculator for Bias in Rhetoric

This guide (inspired by various versions of Hugh Rank's "Intensity-Downplay Schema") can be applied to reading sources and to writing papers about them, in application to both those sources' biases and to your own.

1. What is the author's vantage point, in terms of social class, wealth, occupation, gender, ethnic group, political ideology,

- educational level, age, etc.? Is that vantage point apt to color his attitudes on the issue under discussion? Does he have anything personally to gain from the position he is arguing for, any conflicts of interest or other reasons for special pleading?
2. What organized financial, political, ethnic, or other interests are backing the advocated position? What groups or special interests stand to profit financially, politically, or otherwise from it? In the Latin phrase, *cui bono*?
 3. Once you have determined the author's vantage point and the special interests being favored, look for signs of ethnocentrism, rationalization or wishful thinking, sentimentality, one-sidedness, selective vision, or a double standard.
 4. Look for the following forms of setting the agenda and **stacking the deck**, reflecting the biases in No. 3:
 - a. **Playing up:**
 - (1) arguments favorable to one's own side
 - (2) arguments unfavorable to the other side
 - (3) the other side's power, wealth ("They're only in it for the money"), extremism, misdeeds ("A widespread pattern of abuses"), and unity ("A vast conspiracy," "A tightly-coordinated machine")
 - b. **Downplaying** (or suppressing altogether):
 - (1) arguments unfavorable to one's own side
 - (2) arguments favorable to the other side
 - (3) one's own side's power, wealth, extremism, misdeeds ("A small number of isolated instances," "A few rotten apples"), and unity ("An uncoordinated collection of diverse, grassroots groups")
 - c. Applying "clean" words (ones with positive connotations) to one's own side, without support; applying "dirty" words (ones with negative connotations) to the other, without support
 - d. Assuming that the representatives of one's own side are trustworthy, truthful, and have no selfish motives, while assuming the opposite of the other side
 - e. Giving credit to one's own side for positive events; blaming the other side for negative events

This calculator indicates the ways in which we all are inclined, intentionally or unintentionally, to react—often with anger and exaggeration—to our opponents' perceived faults and exercises of power, while not seeing our own side's comparable ones. Of course, emphasizing our side's "good" and the other side's "bad" is a perfectly legitimate

part of argumentation, so long as it is done honestly, accurately, with sufficient support, and with a sense of proportion. But good-faith efforts at doing so need to be distinguished from the bad-faith ones of propagandists who stack the deck by deliberately, dishonestly using these techniques to present a simplistic opposition between “good guys” and “bad guys,” or of sincere but closed-minded ideologues who resort to the techniques in a knee-jerk conditioned reaction to every public event. In any given case, differential semantic descriptions might serve to make an accurate, supportable judgment on the relative merits of opposing camps—or they might not; it’s for you to judge.

So if you don’t find blatant signs of the above biases, and if you judge that the emotional language is supported by adequate evidence, that’s a good indication that the writer is credible one. If there *are* many such signs, that’s a good sign that the writer is not a credible source. However, finding signs of the above biases does not in itself prove that the writer’s arguments are fallacious. Don’t fall into the **ad hominem** (“against the man”) fallacy—evading the issue by attacking the character or motives of the writer or speaker without refuting the substance of the argument itself. What the writer says may or may not be factual, regardless of the semantic biases. The point is not to let yourself be swayed by emotive words alone, especially when you are inclined to wishful thinking on one side of the subject yourself. When you find these biases in other writers, *or in yourself*, that is a sign that you need to be extra careful to check the facts with a variety of other sources and to find out what the arguments are on the other side of the issue.

Ground Rules for Polemicists

Do unto your own as you do unto others. Apply the same standards to yourself and your allies that you do to your opponents, in all of the following ways.

1. Identify your own ideological viewpoint and how it might bias your arguments. Having done so, show that you approach opponents’ actions and writings with an open mind, not with malice aforethought. Concede the other side’s valid arguments—preferably toward the beginning of your critique, not tacked on grudgingly at the end or in inconspicuous subordinate clauses. Acknowledge points on which you agree at least partially and might be able to cooperate.
2. Summarize the other side’s case fully and fairly, in an account

that they would accept, prior to refuting it. Present it through its most reputable spokesperson and strongest formulations (not through the most outlandish statements of its lunatic fringe), using direct quotes and footnoted sources, not your own, undocumented paraphrases. Allow the most generous interpretation of their statements rather than putting the worst light on them; help them make their arguments stronger when possible.

3. When quoting selected phrases from the other side’s texts, accurately summarize the context and tone of the longer passages and full texts in which they appear.
4. When you are repeating a secondhand account of events, say so—do not leave the implication that you were there and are certain of its accuracy. Cite your source and take account of its author’s possible biases, especially if the author is your ally.
5. In any account that you use to illustrate the opponents’ misbehavior, grant that there may be another side to the story and take pains to find out what it is. If opponents claim they have been misrepresented, give them their say and the benefit of the doubt.
6. Be willing to acknowledge misconduct, errors, and fallacious arguments by your own allies, and try scrupulously to establish an accurate proportion and sense of reciprocity between them and those you criticize in your opponents. Do not play up the other side’s forms of power while denying or downplaying your own side’s. Do not weigh an ideal, theoretical model of your side’s beliefs against the most corrupt actual practices on the other side.
7. Respond forthrightly to opponents’ criticisms of your own or your side’s previous arguments, without evading key points. Admit it when they make criticisms you cannot refute.
8. Do not substitute ridicule or name-calling for reasoned argument and substantive evidence.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

1. “In regard to any belief that you are convinced is based on facts or the truth, ask yourself how you came to believe it is true. In other words, what is your viewpoint on it, and how did you acquire that viewpoint? From what sources of information did you get the belief—your family, teachers, peers, church, political leaders, news, entertainment, and advertising media? Others? Where did those sources get their beliefs? What might be the limitations or biases in your knowledge, and in that

- of your sources?*" The next time you hear a personal acquaintance (or yourself!) express a strong opinion on a controversial public matter, ask these questions. Report the results to your class.
- How applicable to today's education and society do you think the quoted passages from Mario Savio's 1964 speech are? In his conclusion, speaking as an activist in the movements for civil rights in the South and campus political organizing, he declared, "But an important minority of men and women coming to the front today have shown that they will die rather than be standardized, replaceable, and irrelevant." Study the rise and decline of campus activism since the 1960s to find possible explanations, and speculate about whether any foreseeable course of events might lead to this kind of passion.
 - Study current political writers, speakers, or media commentators for examples of the patterns in "Rhetoric: A Checklist," "A Semantic Calculator for Bias in Rhetoric," and "Ground Rules for Polemicists."

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Thinking Critically about Political Rhetoric

Prestudy Exercises

- How would you define the words *liberal* and *conservative*? Just use free association, without too much deliberation and without looking the words up.
- How do you think an ardent conservative would define *liberal* and *conservative*? How do you think an ardent liberal would define the same words?
- Look up the following words in a current collegiate dictionary: *conservative, liberal, libertarian, radical, right wing, left wing, fascism, plutocracy, capitalism, socialism, communism, Marxism, democracy, totalitarianism, freedom, free enterprise*. Only note the definitions pertinent to political ideology, not any other senses.
- Either individually or in teams of classmates, compare the definitions of some of these terms in (a) two or more current dictionaries, (b) a collegiate-sized dictionary, an abridged dictionary, and (at the library or online) an unabridged dictionary.