

A Word from the Editor...

A Biased Opinion about Bias and Opinions

Case writers are a privileged class. Everything we write is truth. Whether we intend it or not, we are gods in the eyes of our readers. Our words create the world in which students exercise their judgment on important business and societal issues. Every detail of our writing contributes to the student's construction of reality. Because students must assume we are accurate recorders of fact, every detail we put on paper is, by definition, true. We cannot tell a lie.

Our challenge as case researchers and writers is to make our words describe reality through objective eyes, even when our own vision may be clouded by the biased information we collect (in the field or in the library). If we fail to recognize bias in what we hear, we will accept it as fact and pass it on as such to our students; they will be deprived of the chance to question it.

For example, one case writer might say, "Ajax was an exciting place to work. The president's door was open to all; major decisions were widely discussed and any employee could question policies at any time." Here the student has no choice but to believe. Ajax *is* exciting and management *is* open and consultative. It's a given. This is truth.

Another writer, reporting on the same situation, might say, "The president of Ajax was proud of creating an exciting working atmosphere. Any employee, he said, was free to come to his office any time, to comment on current issues or to question any company policy." Now the student has room to question the situation at Ajax. The only truth we know in this example is that the president *believes* he has built an exciting, open organization.

There may be other facts in the Ajax case that point toward different interpretations of the working climate there. The president's own actions may show he disregards advice from his people. Observable behavior may be inconsistent with the president's vision: high turnover, conflict, low productivity, poor customer service, and unilateral decision-making could be examples. Some employees may see Ajax as dull, repressive, autocratic, or hypocritical. Students will be free to look for signs of these opinions if the case writer leaves them the latitude.

Naive students will believe that everyone at Ajax feels free to interrupt the president whenever they have something to say. Experienced students, or those with critical thinking skills, will recognize that very few of us, at any level of an organization, take advantage of a professed "open door" policy when we have complaints or misgivings about presidential actions. Alert students may wonder how many employees actually walk through that open door. In class debate, the naive may learn from the experienced.

Bias is often conveyed in case writing through the choice of value-laden adjectives and adverbs. In the first example above, "exciting" is only an opinion of the case writer, but readers may rightfully take it as gospel. In the second example, "exciting" is a belief of the Ajax president, and all good students should know that company presidents can be wrong.

A sure sign of bias in a case manuscript is the use of “unfortunately” (or, more rarely, “luckily”) to start a sentence or a paragraph. A case author might write, “Unfortunately, just as Ajax began shipping its new product, all its employees went on strike.” In whose eyes is the strike unfortunate? Surely the Ajax CEO will think it is; he is the one who planted the thought in the case writer’s perception. But Ajax’s competitors may find the strike fortunate indeed. To the union stewards it may be a stroke of great luck. The temporary workers called in to cope with the strike might otherwise have starved. Case writers who define reality from the viewpoint of their research subjects bar their students from searching for any other view.

Filtering bias from our cases is a primary responsibility of writers, reviewers, and editors. It is our duty; we cannot ask students to evaluate a situation if we have already made up their minds for them. Unlike company presidents, case writers cannot be wrong when they state the facts. Case writers resemble baseball umpires more than they resemble company presidents.

The baseball umpire doesn’t call balls and strikes “the way he sees them,” or even “the way they are.” The balls and strikes *are* what the umpire calls them, regardless of where the pitcher threw the ball. His is the ultimate power to define reality, and the umpire’s power in the ball game is like the case writer’s power in the classroom. The facts are what we call them. For the sake of our students, we should define them carefully.