

Evaluating Media Claims: Distinguishing Evidence from Opinion

— Teacher copy

Answers and suggested responses

Introduction: Fact vs. Opinion in Media

In media messages, writers often blend verifiable facts with personal opinions to persuade us. As critical readers, we must separate an author's bias and emotional appeals from objective data. Remember: **A statistic or named survey is a checkable claim, not automatically verified evidence.** We must always check the source, method, and relevance of the information. Factual claims can be false, and opinions can have supporting evidence.

Part 1: Engage — Screen Time Claims

Read the two claims below about screen time. Note that all sources and statistics in these examples are fictional.

- * **Claim A:** 'Screen time is ruining our brains because everyone feels distracted.'
Source Note (Fictional): 'MindfulParenting' blog, 2024 — a personal blog post with no cited study.
- * **Claim B:** 'Screen time increased 40% among teens, according to a national survey.'
Source Note (Fictional): 'National Youth Health Survey', 2023 — a self-reported questionnaire of 1,200 teens.

1. Identify opinion language and any checkable claims in each statement. (Note: Claim A contains a broad checkable claim as well as opinion). Explain your reasoning using specific details from the text. (2 pts)

Answer: In Claim A, the opinion language includes 'ruining our brains' (emotional language), but it also contains a broad checkable claim: 'everyone feels distracted' (which can be tested/surveyed, even if it is an overgeneralization). In Claim B, the statement 'Screen time increased 40% among teens' is a checkable claim because it cites a specific statistic and a national survey that can be verified, though we still need to evaluate its credibility.

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2. Is Claim B automatically verified evidence just because it contains a percentage and names a survey? What else would a critical reader need to check about this survey's source and method? (2 pts)

Answer: No, a statistic or named survey is not automatically verified evidence. A critical reader must check the source (is the 'National Youth Health Survey' a reliable, unbiased organization?), the method (is a self-reported questionnaire of 1,200 teens accurate and representative?), and the relevance of the data to the claim.

Part 2: Explore — School Uniforms

Read the two fictional texts below regarding school uniforms. Note that all sources, research groups, and statistics are fictional.

* **Text A:** 'Uniforms are excellent because they look neat and make everyone happy.'
Source Note (Fictional): Principal Smith's school newsletter editorial, 2024.

* **Text B:** 'Uniforms are unnecessary. A study by the Uniform Research Group (2022) showed no change in test scores, and a survey of 100 students showed 80% opposed them.'

Source Note (Fictional): Student opinion piece in the school newspaper, 2024; the Uniform Research Group is a fictional organization and how the 100 students were selected and the population they represent are not stated.

3. In Text A, identify the opinion-marking words that signal personal belief. In Text B, identify the checkable claims. (2 pts)

Answer: In Text A, 'excellent' and 'neat' are evaluative opinions. The clause 'make everyone happy' is an unsupported checkable generalization about all students, meaning the sentence mixes opinion and a checkable claim (we should not classify that whole clause as purely opinion based on the word 'happy'). In Text B, the checkable claims are that a study by the Uniform Research Group (2022) showed no change in test scores, and that a survey of 100 students showed 80% opposed uniforms.

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4. Compare the credibility of Text A and Text B. Why is Text B's statistic of '80% opposed' not fully verified evidence? What critical information is missing from its source or method? (4 pts)

Answer: Text A combines evaluative opinions with an unsupported checkable generalization. Text B cites a study and a survey, but those references alone do not establish credibility. However, within the scenario, Text B's statistic of '80% opposed' is not fully verified evidence because critical information is missing: we do not know how the 100 students were selected (survey selection), what population they represent, what specific survey questions were asked, or what research methods were used. We should not reject the source simply because it is fictional (as all practice sources in this classroom activity are fictional), and a sample size of 100 is not inherently inadequate without context; rather, the lack of methodological transparency is what prevents it from being verified evidence.

Part 3: Guided Practice — School Lunches

Analyze these four fictional sentences about school lunches. Think about whether they are Checkable Claims (C), Opinions (O), or a Mix.

1. *'This is the best lunch.'*
2. *'70 of 100 surveyed students chose the new menu.'* (Source Note: Fictional School Cafeteria Survey, 2024)
3. *'The menu lists three choices.'*
4. *'The school board should change the menu because fresh fruit is healthier.'*

5. Classify each of the four school lunch sentences as a Checkable Claim (C), an Opinion (O), or a Mix. Explain how signal words like 'best' or 'should' help you identify opinions, and how numbers or menu items indicate checkable claims. (4 pts)

Answer: 1 is an Opinion (O) because 'best' is a subjective judgment. 2 is a Checkable Claim (C) because we can verify the survey records. 3 is a Checkable Claim (C) because we can look at the menu to verify the count. 4 is a Mix because 'should change' is an opinion, but 'fresh fruit is healthier' is a checkable scientific claim. Signal words like 'best' and 'should' indicate personal values or recommendations, while specific counts and physical items can be objectively verified.

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Part 4: Independent Practice — Youth Sports Credibility Check

Read the fictional promotional text below and complete the credibility check.

* **Text:** 'Youth sports are the best way to build character. A survey by Sports For All (2023) claims 90% of kids who play sports are more successful, and the program won the Best Youth Initiative award.'

Source Note (Fictional): Promotional brochure for the 'Sports For All' league. The organization is fictional, the survey method is not disclosed, and the award is based on a popularity vote.

6. Identify the opinions and the checkable claims in the Youth Sports text. List at least one of each. (2 pts)

Answer: Opinion: 'Youth sports are the best way to build character' (uses subjective word 'best').

Checkable Claim: 'A survey by Sports For All (2023) claims 90% of kids who play sports are more successful' and 'the program won the Best Youth Initiative award' (these can be checked for existence, though their validity is weak).

7. Write a brief evaluation (4–5 sentences) of the overall credibility of the author's claim. Address the source, method, and relevance of the cited survey, and explain why a statistic alone is not verified evidence. (4 pts)

Answer: The author's claim has very low credibility. First, the source is a promotional brochure for the league itself, which has a clear bias to make sports look good. Second, the survey method is completely undisclosed, meaning we do not know how 'success' was measured or who was surveyed. Third, the 'Best Youth Initiative' award is based on popularity, not objective quality. This demonstrates that a statistic alone is not verified evidence; without a transparent, reliable source and method, the numbers cannot be trusted.

Part 5: Exit Ticket

Complete this quick check before leaving.

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8. In your own words, how can a reader tell if a media claim is supported by solid evidence rather than just strong opinions? What three things should you check when you see a survey or statistic? (4 pts)

Answer: A reader can tell if a media claim is supported by solid evidence by checking: 1) the Source/Expertise and possible interests (without requiring completely neutral experts, but understanding their perspective), 2) Transparent Methods, including how the sample was selected (survey selection) and the exact questions asked, and 3) Relevance of the data to the claim, plus whether there is independent corroboration from other sources.