

Ethics and Analysis of Informative Writing

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial describes how ethics and informative writing intersect, and analyzes examples that illustrate that intersection, in three parts:

1. Ethics and Informative Writing
2. Informative Writing: Example #1
3. Informative Writing: Example #2

1. Ethics and Informative Writing

Good informative writing communicates information and ideas objectively. When writing informatively, writers must do their best to maintain a perspective that is free of bias, and to exclude unstated assumptions from their work. Although it is not possible to satisfy these requirements completely (since all writing requires interpretation of Information), writers must make their best effort to do so. This sometimes requires them to reveal biases and personal background information to readers. Readers should be able to assume that writers are communicating as honestly and accurately as they can.

When written work is labeled as informative — explicitly or inferentially — readers expect information to be presented in an objective, neutral way. It is unethical for informative writers to misrepresent, omit, ignore, or skew information.



THINK ABOUT IT

If, as you flipped through a health magazine, you came across an article about a new vitamin supplement, would you assume that the writer is *not* a paid representative of the company that makes the supplement? Would you also assume that whatever the writer claims about the supplement is true, and that he or she hasn't omitted important information? Written work that does not satisfy these assumptions is not good informative writing — it's advertising. Readers read advertisements differently than articles that they assume were written from a neutral perspective.

Informative writers are held to a higher ethical standard with respect to objectivity than those who write advertisements.



EXAMPLE Suppose a student writes an article for a college newspaper about a series of meetings in which administrators consider whether to allow certain political groups to operate on campus. If the student

misrepresents what happened at the meetings — to make his or her article more inflammatory or interesting, or to persuade readers to support or oppose a position — he or she is behaving unethically.

It's important to note that if the student in the preceding example wanted to express his or her opinion about the issue, he or she could write an *editorial* — an article in which readers expect to find personal opinion. Because editorials are not informative writing, the objectivity standard is not applied as strictly to them.

2. Informative Writing: Example #1

The following example demonstrates how informative writing can be used to accomplish a writer's goals without betraying readers' trust. It was taken from a book of travel journalism titled *Oregon, Washington, and Alaska — Sights and Scenes for the Tourist*. As you read this excerpt, look for evidence of the writer's biases and assumptions (if any), as well as his or her purpose.

Crater Lake is situated in the northwestern portion of Klamath county, Oregon, and is best reached by leaving the Southern Pacific Railroad at Medford, which is 328 miles south of Portland, and about 90 miles from the lake. The lake is about six miles wide by seven miles long, but it is not its size which is its beauty or its attraction. The surface of the water in the lake is 6,251 feet about the level of the sea, and is surrounded by cliffs or walls from 1,000 to over 2,000 feet in height, and which are scantily covered with timber, and which offer at but one point a way of reaching the water.

The depth of the water is very great, and it is very transparent, and of a deep blue color. Toward the southwestern portion of the lake is Wizard Island, 845 feet high, circular in shape, and slightly covered with timber. In the top of this island is a depression, or crater--the Witches' Cauldron--100 feet deep, and 475 feet in diameter, which was evidently the last smoking chimney of a once mighty volcano, and which is now covered within, as without, with volcanic rocks. North of this island, and on the west side of the lake, is Llao Rock, reaching to a height of 2,000 feet above the water, and so perpendicular that a stone may be dropped from its summit to the waters at its base, nearly one-half mile below.

So far below the surrounding mountains is the surface of the waters in this lake, that the mountain breezes rarely ripple them; and looking from the surrounding wall, the sky and cliffs are seen mirrored in the glassy surface, and it is with difficulty the eye can distinguish the line where the cliffs leave off and their reflected counterfeits begin.

The writer of these paragraphs seems to have met his or her ethical responsibility to write objectively. This writer's purpose was to share information about a beautiful location, Crater Lake. He or she uses facts (e.g., the elevation of the lake and the height of the cliffs), and personal data (e.g., the observation that the water is so clear and still that it's hard to tell the cliffs from their reflection) to inform readers about the setting.



This kind of personal detail is commonly included in travel writing because, in addition to providing information about a place, good travel writing lets readers know what it's like to be there.

This example may be overly objective. Most travel writers include more about their experience of a place than

this writer has. For example, if he or she mentioned that the cold wind makes it a good idea for visitors to bring a coat, even during summer, or talked about the bright sun or the fresh, clean air, the account would be more vivid and memorable. Readers would have a better idea of what it is like to be there. However, though the article provides lots of facts and little description, it is a valid example of objective (and ethical) informative writing.

3. Informative Writing: Example #2

Informative writing encompasses a variety of written work that addresses different subjects, is written in different ways, for different purposes. The following example is an excerpt from a report of the results of a scientific study about trends in word usage on Facebook. The study considered the words used by members of different age groups, ethnicities, and genders, the ways in which they used them, and with what frequency.

Our technique leverages what people say in social media to find distinctive words, phrases, and topics as functions of known attributes of people such as gender, age, location, or psychological characteristics. This yields a comprehensive description of the differences between groups of people, and allows one to find unexpected results...

Gender provides a familiar and easy to understand proof of concept for open-vocabulary analysis. We scale word size according to the strength of the relation and we use color to represent overall frequency; that is, larger words indicate stronger correlations, and darker colors indicate frequently used words. For the topics, groups of semantically-related words, the size indicates the relative prevalence of the word within the cluster as defined in the methods section.

Many strong results emerging from our analysis align with our results and past studies of gender. For example, females used more emotion words (e.g., "excited"), and first-person singulars, and they mention more psychological and social processes (e.g., "love you"). Males used more swear words, object references (e.g., "xbox").

One might also draw insights based on the gender results. For example, we noticed "my wife" and "my girlfriend" emerged as strongly correlated in the male results, while simply "husband" and "boyfriend" were most predictive for females. Investigating the frequency data revealed that males did in fact precede such references to their opposite-sex partner with "my" significantly more often than females. On the other hand, females were more likely to precede "husband" or "boyfriend" with "her" or "amazing" and a greater variety of words, which is why "my husband" was not more predictive than "husband" alone. Furthermore, this suggests the male preference for the possessive "my" is at least partially due to a lack of talking about others' partners.

This writer's purpose was quite different from that of the writer of the previous example. Though both writers provide information to readers, the information in this example is more complicated than in the last. It requires readers to do more interpretation.



THINK ABOUT IT

Although this excerpt is a good example of objective informative writing, do you detect any bias? Why, for

example, is the last paragraph focused on the possessiveness of male speech? Does it indicate that the writer has made some assumptions that he or she has not revealed to readers?

Whenever writers convey complex information, interpretation is necessary. Writers cannot eliminate *all* bias from their work, but they must write as objectively as possible.

The excerpt in this section was taken from the article summary, so it does not contain many details about research methodology, experimental controls, etc. However, it still demonstrates the writer's interest in conveying what the study was about, and not just what was discovered. It begins by identifying filtering techniques that were used. Before readers are presented with the findings, they are invited to examine the methods used to arrive at those findings.



This presentation sequence (i.e., what was studied, why it was studied, how it was studied, what was found, what it means) is commonly used in scientific writing. Transparency is a priority, as is informing readers how results were achieved, not just what those results are. This enables readers to evaluate the writer's biases and assumptions — which enables writers to avoid ethical complications.



SUMMARY

This tutorial examined the role of ethics in informative writing, including the ethical requirements related to this type of writing. Several examples were analyzed to clarify this role. Informative writers must take and maintain an objective perspective that is as free of bias and unstated assumptions as possible.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall