



# Writing Center

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## FACT, OPINION, BELIEF, PREJUDICE, UNSUBSTANTIATED CLAIMS

Most statements we hear, read, or make in speaking and writing are assertions of fact, opinion, belief, or prejudice, or are unsubstantiated claims. In an argument the acceptability of an assertion depends partly on which of these categories it falls into.

**A FACT** is verifiable--that is, one can determine whether it is true. It may involve numbers or dates: "The football field is 100 yards long" or "World War II ended in 1945." Or the numbers may be implied: "The earth is closer to the sun than Saturn is." Or the fact may involve no numbers at all: "The President vetoed the bill." The truth of the fact is beyond argument if one assumes that measuring devices or records or memories are truly objective and therefore correct. Facts provide crucial support for the assertions of an argument. But, because they are inarguable, they do not make worthwhile assertions by themselves.

**An OPINION** is a judgment based on facts, an honest attempt to draw a reasonable conclusion from evidence. For example, a writer who knows that millions of people can not afford proper medical care may form the judgment that the country should institute national health care insurance even though it would cost billions of dollars. This opinion expresses a viewpoint. It is arguable because the same facts might lead another reasonable person to a different opinion (e.g., that people are already taxed enough, that government would bureaucratize it into inadequacy, etc.). An opinion is potentially changeable: with more evidence, the writer might conclude that the problem might be solved differently.

**A BELIEF** is a conviction based on personal, religious, or cultural faith; morality; or values. Many beliefs are irrevocably tied to the holder's ego; that is, you cannot challenge the belief without challenging the person who holds the belief. A belief is inarguable, as it is not necessarily based on facts or other evidence. Statements such as "Capital punishment is legalized murder" and "The primary goal of government is to leave its citizens alone" are often called opinions because they express viewpoints. Unlike opinions, however, such beliefs cannot be disproved by facts or even contested on the basis of facts. Thus, they are not arguable, not open to challenge, and should not serve as the central assertion of an argument. However, if the audience already knowingly shares the writer's feelings, statements of belief can serve as a kind of evidence in an argument, and they often form the assumptions linking assertions and evidence.

**PREJUDICE** is an opinion based on stereotypical or irrational beliefs and insufficient or unexamined evidence, most often involving overgeneralizations: "Women are bad drivers" or "Fat people are jolly." Over the years, the term "prejudice" has taken on a very negative connotation, usually being linked to racism, sexism, and other forms of oppressive behavior. Unlike a belief, a

prejudice is testable: it can be contested and disproved on the basis of facts. Very often, however, we form prejudices or accept them from others – parents, friends, the media – without questioning their meaning, testing their truth, or uncovering their motivations. Writers who display prejudice do not warrant the confidence or agreement of their readers, who, if they accept the writer's prejudices, would not be thinking critically.

**An UNSUBSTANTIATED CLAIM** is almost the same as a prejudice--without the

negative connotations. If I were to accuse someone of being prejudiced, he or she would be branded as a bigot, or racist, or sexist, etc. If, on the other hand, I were to accuse someone of making unsubstantiated claims, he or she would be seen as being uninformed (possibly lazy, in not doing his or her "homework" before speaking). Like prejudices, unsubstantiated claims are testable: they can be contested and disproved by facts. This is the chief cause of bad grades in persuasion essays: writing something and not being able to back it up.

*Factopin.doc by J. Konec, Fall 1996;*

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