

Persuasive Prose: News Reports

In this day and age of the internet, television and radios, news reports are some of the most widespread examples of persuasive prose and some of the most insidious, largely because we are conditioned to assume that our news providers are objective in their coverage, but this is seldom the case. The news is often not there to inform alone, as it also attempts to influence its audience to adopt its viewpoint regarding matters of politics, religion, popular culture and daily living.

In fact, if you take a close look at just about any news publisher, including esteemed sources, such as Time magazine, CNN and Sky News, you will notice that they often express views that are closely related to the governments and corporations that support them.

If you want evidence of this for yourself, go online and search for two well-known local news publishers, for example the Mail & Guardian and the Soweto Sun. Look at the different types of articles being published. Are there any popular events which are reported in both papers? If so, how are they presented? Are they presented the same way? What language is used? Are the articles more objective or more sensational? I suspect you already know the answers to all of these questions for yourselves, but then ask yourselves why there are differences between both papers, if they are supposed to present the news objectively.

While this inherent lack of objectivity may seem somewhat obvious, after a little bit of research, and one might be inclined to blame news outlets for being intentionally biased, it is important to remember that being objective is a very difficult task and everyone has biases, whether they know it or not. As an active reader, it is necessary to be able to identify those biases and how they are intended to influence your opinions and actions, which is why it becomes important to be able to successfully analyse a news report. This is a critical skill for free-thinkers, who want to understand the society they live in and develop their own opinions about society, politics, religion and government, rather than blindly supporting public opinion.

Obviously, due to the limitations of this course, we will focus our analyses on written newspaper articles, but you should be able to use the skills you develop from analysis of written articles to critically consider any sort of news report you encounter.

If you have undertaken the activity I uploaded for this Study Unit, then you will have already seen just how subtle bias can be in supposedly objective reporting, so when you encounter an article for analysis in an assignment or examination, make sure that you read it carefully, at least twice, before deciding whether or not it is persuasive in nature. Also make sure that you can support your conclusion with concrete examples you can explain well, as these examples are the foundation on which your assertions rest.