

Offering a Fair-minded Account

This modelling the tools is incorporated into critical challenges at grade 10, however, it can be adapted for use at all grade levels.

Overview

In these activities students learn to identify bias, to recognize alternative perspectives and to rewrite an account in a more balanced or fair-minded manner. Students discuss bias and techniques for recognizing bias. They analyze a historical account and related visual for bias and then they write a more fair-minded account.

The example used is a short historical account of the Battle of Bunker Hill and a visual of John Trumbull's painting of the battle. Both appear in a textbook on the American Revolution. You may want to select a different event and use related print and visual support materials.

Session One

Introduce the event.

- Briefly set the context for the event by showing a visual such as the detail of Trumbull's painting, which is the right-hand third of the painting (see References). Invite students to comment on the painting and identify the key actions.

Introduce concept: Point of view.

- Discuss the notion of point of view. All observations and opinions are, of necessity, from a point of view with a perspective or set of presuppositions or values. Therefore each side will see the same event differently. Focus the discussion on the following questions:

Are there suggestions that the artist conveys a pro-American point of view in the portion of the painting? (e.g., the noble, brave-looking, almost solitary citizen in the centre of the picture, the large number of British troops that look to be running away)

How might a pro-British painter characterize the battle? (e.g., put the British troops in centre-stage, portray their courage, characterize the battle as a tragic event)

Introduce concept: Bias.

- Solicit student reactions to the following event:

In the United States the Hearst newspaper chain was concerned that an American textbook had a pro-British bias on the Battle of Bunker Hill. In the description of the battle, it is stated that "three times the British returned courageously to the attack." As a result of pressure exerted by

the newspaper chain, the textbook was revised to read "three times the cowardly British returned to the attack."

Discuss the notion of bias—that a point of view is unfairly prejudged because of an individual's preference for one perspective over another.

As a further example of a biased point of view, share with students the following descriptions in British newspapers appearing during the Gulf War (*Manchester Guardian*, February 1991). The left-hand column contains the words used to describe Allied forces; the right-hand column contains the words used to describe Iraqi forces.

Allied forces . . .	Iraqi forces . . .
are cautious and loyal	are cowardly and blindly obedient
are brave	are fanatical
are cautious	are cowardly
neutralize	kill
cause collateral damage	cause civilian casualties
launch first strikes	launch sneak missile attacks
hold press briefings	engage in propaganda

These accounts are biased because otherwise identical actions are described in significantly different language depending on whether they were performed by "friendly" or "enemy" troops.

Examine the text passage.

- Assign students to read the passage in the text:

In June 1775, British troops attacked American forces defending Bunker Hill, the heights overlooking the city of Boston. The heroic stand of American patriots in this battle inspired the colonists in their struggle for independence.

As a class discuss the following questions:

What words suggest that this battle is seen as a positive event from an American point of view? (e.g., "The *heroic* stand of American *patriots* in this battle *inspired* the colonists in their *struggle for independence*.")

How might a pro-British historian have rewritten this sentence? (e.g., "The *bloodthirsty* stand of American *rebels* in this battle *provoked* other colonists to *undertake further treachery against the British king*.")

Introduce concept: Fair-minded or balanced accounts.

- Define and discuss fair-minded or balanced account—that one's observations and opinions can be from a point of view that gives fair consideration to alternative perspectives on the question, i.e., not be biased, not be determined solely by the interests or preferences of the individual offering the observation or opinion, that some points of view are clearly biased and that we should try to consider alternative perspectives impartially before arriving at a final opinion.

Reveal the full picture.

- Present the entire Trumbull painting (available online at <http://www.americanrevolution.org/bunksm.html>) and compare it to the detail shown earlier. Present or ask students to read [Background to Trumbull's Painting](#) (Background Information), which gives an account of the battle and Trumbull's purpose in completing the painting. Notice how the perspective changes between viewing the entire painting or the smaller section. Discuss whether or not the full painting presents a fair-minded account of British-American actions in the battle. As an extension, consider the artist's point of view toward war generally. Present an additional critical challenge: Has Trumbull painted a fair-minded account of the horror and glory of military battle?

Pose the critical challenge.

- Invite students to write a fair-minded account of the battle using the information they have.

Discuss students' accounts.

- Form small groups to discuss students' accounts and then share results with the whole class. Point out that being fair-minded does not mean that we cannot make positive or negative judgements; rather, it means that we must reach these conclusions only after considering all sides impartially and with an open mind. It may be useful to move physically from one position in the room to another to illustrate the different things one may notice when a situation is viewed from different vantage points. A fair-minded account would try to be sensitive to many points of view.

Assessment

Assess the fair-minded, balanced accounts.

Evaluate responses by looking for evidence of fair-mindedness—the accounts expressly recognize and give equal treatment to the alternative perspectives, e.g., "The Americans viewed

the battle as a courageous first strike in their struggle for independence; the British viewed the battle as the rejection of law and order by an unruly band of rebels."; or the accounts may be written in descriptive, impartial language; e.g., "For a time it was a seesaw battle. The British lost nearly 50 percent of their troops. In the end, the American troops withdrew from their position on the hill. Other battles between promonarchy and proseparation forces followed."

Extension

- Invite students to consult additional sources on the event, e.g., Battle of Bunker Hill, to find other points of view that might be offered and to discover if new information causes them to reconsider their own fair-minded account of the incident.
- In the [Background to Trumbull's Painting](#) (Background Information), it is suggested that Trumbull distorted some of the particulars in order to tell a greater "moral truth" about the battle. Are deliberately fictionalized accounts, such as paintings or historical novels or movies, acceptable as sources of historical knowledge?
- Encourage students to look for other passages in a textbook and in newspapers for evidence of obvious bias. Students should first rewrite these passages from an opposing perspective and then develop a fair-minded account, mindful of what little information they have of these events. Encourage students to consult additional sources to supplement the information presented to them.

References

See AmericanRevolution.org for a copy of John Trumbull's painting and an explanation of the action and historical characters in the painting:

<http://www.americanrevolution.org/bunksm.html>.

Documents

The following documents are referenced in the above modelling the tools. They can be adapted for your needs and re-saved.

Background Information

- [Background to Trumbull's Painting](#) 