

READING CRITICALLY

Facts versus opinions

Glossary

distinguish

If you can distinguish one thing from another or distinguish between two things, you can see or understand how they are different.

linguist

A linguist is a person who studies how language works.

How you judge a knowledge claim in a reading text depends partly on whether the claim is presented as a fact or an opinion. Some claims are clearly presented as facts, with expressions such as: *We know that ...*, *X has been shown to be ...*, *It has been verified that ...*, *clearly ...*, and *no doubt*. Expressions indicating an opinion include: *In our view ...*, *X is believed to be ...*, *The evidence suggests that ...*, *may*, *possibly*, and *likely*. However, simply presenting a statement as a fact or as an opinion does not make it necessarily one. You need to have some means of distinguishing fact from opinion for yourself.

This can be difficult to do. Sometimes, a statement can be considered a fact in one context but an opinion in another. For example, in everyday contexts it may be acceptable to make the statement *English is a world language* as a fact; however, linguists might consider the concept of 'world language' a debatable matter of opinion.

Glossary

verifiable

Something that is verifiable can be proved to be true or genuine.

In practice, it may be more helpful to see *facts* as claims that are widely accepted by scholars in your field and easily verifiable, and *opinions* as claims that are more debatable. As you become more familiar with your subject, you will gradually learn what counts as a fact and what counts as an opinion.

Tips

As a general rule, it is good to be cautious about claims which are presented as facts but which:

- ✓ are expressed with force or certainty
- ✓ are based on imprecise or poorly defined terms
- ✓ express cause and effect relationships, especially in relation to complex phenomena
- ✓ involve predictions about the future
- ✓ make value judgements

Tips

These are likely to be opinions and not facts because they cannot be easily verified.



Exercise 1

Read statements 1-10. What is the problem with each one?

- 1 The fact is, computers are simply too expensive.
- 2 John F. Kennedy is known to have been a good leader.
- 3 The economic downturn will no doubt persist for a further three years.
- 4 It has been proven that lack of opportunity for outdoor play leads to depression in children.
- 5 We know that all people feel envious at times.
- 6 Of course, the banking crisis was caused by excessive greed and inadequate regulation.
- 7 In fact, women have always been less ambitious than men.
- 8 Local residents are unhappy about the visitors' immoral behaviour.
- 9 The Louvre in Paris is, without a doubt, the world's finest museum.
- 10 The United Kingdom will never become a republic.

(A. Williams, Research)