



## Lesson 5: Author's Purpose

You may have heard the following folktale about the three blind men and the elephant:

The men had never been near an elephant before. One day, they came across an elephant in the town square. Curious to know about the beast, each man felt the elephant to get an idea of what it was like.

One touched the trunk. "Oh, an elephant is like a snake," he said.

"No, no, no," the second man said as he felt the side of the elephant. "An elephant is like a great wall."

"You're both wrong," the third man said as he held onto the elephant's leg. "An elephant is like a tree trunk."

In a way, each of the men is right. Different parts of the elephant are like a snake, a wall, and a tree trunk. The problem is that each man understands the elephant only from his own point of view.

What does this have to do with reading? Almost any subject is bigger and more complicated than any one person can write about. Just like the blind men, all of us (including writers) see things from our own points of view. Even when writers are just giving you facts, they tell you only what they know themselves and think you should know, too.

When reading, keep in mind that the words didn't just magically appear on the page. Someone decided to use those words in that way. Ask yourself: *Why did the author organize the writing in this way? What is the author's point of view on the subject? Would other writers have a different point of view? Is the author giving accurate and complete information, or does he or she seem like a blind man touching only one part of an elephant?* If you think about the answers to these questions, you'll be a better judge of what you read.

Read the following passage. It will help you understand the tips in this lesson.

## *A World Made Beautiful by Dzine*

When Carlos Rolon was a young boy, he told his mother he wanted to be an artist. “She told me to make sure to take some business courses in school,” he laughs.

Today, Carlos is known throughout the world as the artist “Dzine.” He never took those business courses, but his paintings now sell for thousands of dollars. He travels throughout America and Europe, showing his work in museums and galleries. But life wasn’t always like that for this young man from the poor side of town.

### **It Began with “Bombing” and “Tagging”<sup>1</sup>**

Graffiti art started in New York City in the 1970s. Talented, young street artists started painting in public places. They painted subway cars, tunnels, building walls, and rooftops. Though everyone talked about the graffiti art, not everyone loved it. Some people didn’t even consider it “art,” calling the work vandalism.<sup>2</sup>

It wasn’t long before graffiti art made its way to Chicago. There, in the early 1980s, it attracted the attention of 13-year-old Carlos Rolon.

Rolon started doing graffiti because it was exciting. “It was a rush,” he told the *Chicago Sun-Times*. “I was a graffiti author doing rooftops along the Douglas [rapid transit] line, knowing that the next day hundreds of people would see my work,” he says. “I started ‘bombing’ and ‘tagging’ . . . and then formed an art collective<sup>3</sup> called Aerosoul. Graffiti art kept me out of [gang] trouble, but also got me into some other trouble.”

Today, the art world looks at graffiti art with a more positive eye. It is art that expresses the personalities and the way of life of the people who create it. Most graffiti artists are youths who go without many of the privileges other kids enjoy.

<sup>1</sup>“bombing” and “tagging”: terms used by graffiti artists to describe their work

<sup>2</sup>vandalism: damaging someone else’s property

<sup>3</sup>art collective: a group of artists who work together on a project



### Transforming Ugliness into Beauty

Right from the beginning, Rolon demonstrated the business sense that would help to make him famous. He had seen that graffiti really could be vandalism, and he realized that it could also be the opposite of vandalism. As he told the *Chicago Tribune*, "I would look at a territory, pick out a gang-infested wall, then go home and write a proposal to put art on that wall." Rolon's proposals interested people who were angry about the way graffiti made their communities look. Community leaders accepted Rolon's offer to paint over the gang graffiti with his art. And they paid Aerosoul a lot of money to do so.

Aerosoul covered walls with colorful paintings that show the many sides of life in America. In doing so, they turned ugliness into beauty. As one businessman who hired the group said, "It's a piece of art, certainly an improvement over gang graffiti. The neighborhood treated [the painting] with respect."

### Offers and Honors

Today, Rolon is known exclusively by his graffiti tag, Dzine. His works have been shown in Paris, France; Bologna, Italy; Tokyo, Japan; and Birmingham, England. He has had art shows throughout the United States and Canada. The Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art gave him a one-man show. He has won grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. He has even been hired to design part of a Batman ride for Warner Brothers' Six Flags Great America theme park.

But when Dzine was offered a chance to create a line of hip-hop clothes for the National Basketball Association, he turned down the offer. "I didn't want . . . my collectors to spend \$2,000 for one of my pieces, then be able to buy my work for \$15 at Kmart," he told a Chicago art magazine.

### Remembering His Roots

This is quite a success story for a young man from Chicago's West Side who did not take his mother's advice to study business in school. His accomplishments are impressive. But as successful as he has become, Dzine has never forgotten his roots. He still creates colorful works that celebrate America's diversity. The difference is that now he is paid to create that artwork. And one of his favorite activities is talking to school kids. He gives them this advice: Get a good education, and find something you love to do.

**TIP 1: Decide on the author's purpose for writing.**

The author's purpose is the reason why an author writes a text. It usually falls into one of the four major categories listed below.

- **writing to inform:** The author provides factual information in a balanced manner. If there are two sides to an issue, the author presents both sides and lets the readers draw their own conclusions.
- **writing to persuade:** The author wants to persuade the reader to think, believe, or act in the same way he or she does. The author also might encourage the reader to do something in response, such as vote for a certain candidate or become a vegetarian.
- **writing to entertain:** Some authors just want to entertain their readers—to make them laugh, cry, feel suspense, or otherwise enjoy the writing. Most works of fiction are at least partly designed with this purpose in mind.
- **writing to explain:** The author simply wants to explain what happened, what something looks like, or how to do something. This kind of writing comes from the writer's perspective, who is trying to describe something to the reader according to how the writer sees it.

Of course, many authors write with more than one purpose. For example, an author may try to influence you by sharing information, by expressing his or her deepest feelings about an issue, and by doing it all in an entertaining way.

1. What was the author's main purpose for writing "A World Made Beautiful by Dzine"?
  - A. to inform
  - B. to persuade
  - C. to entertain
  - D. to explain

**TIP 2: Understand the author's point of view.**

An author's **point of view**, or perspective, about a topic is the way that he or she feels about it. An author's point of view comes through in the kinds of words he or she chooses. Even though you cannot know whether authors are laughing or crying while they write, you can usually figure out how they feel about a topic by looking carefully at the author's choice of words.

In general terms, an author's perspective can be positive, negative, or neutral.

- A **positive** perspective might be cheerful, humorous, hopeful, joyful, or lighthearted.
- A **negative** perspective might be sorrowful, shameful, fearful, bored, angry, or sarcastic.
- A **neutral** perspective doesn't show strong feelings one way or another.



Here's a brief example. You read an article in which the author discusses the proposed construction of a new mall in his town. He says the mall will be an eyesore. It will steal business from small local shops and create a traffic nightmare. How would you describe this author's point of view regarding the mall? His choice of words—*eyesore*, *steal*, *nightmare*—are all negative. You can infer that he is strongly opposed to the mall. From his point of view, building a mall in his town is a terrible idea.

On the other hand, an author who writes that the mall will create much-needed jobs and stimulate the economy clearly has a different point of view. This author is strongly in favor of the mall.

2. Go back to the passage about Dzine and look for words and phrases that tell you how the author feels about Dzine's work. Underline any words that tell you whether the author views Dzine's work as something positive (good), negative (bad), or neutral (neither).
3. What is the author's point of view in the passage?
  - A. neutral
  - B. mildly positive
  - C. strongly positive
  - D. mildly negative
4. Which of the following best describes the author's point of view on Dzine?
  - A. The author does not understand Dzine's work.
  - B. The author thinks Dzine is overrated.
  - C. The author is annoyed with Dzinè.
  - D. The author respects Dzine.
5. The author's choice of words suggests that he believes
  - A. Dzine is a vandal who paints graffiti on public buildings.
  - B. Dzine is a talented young artist with good business sense.
  - C. Dzine is a creator of the graffiti art movement in Chicago.
  - D. Dzine is a wealthy artist who forgot his childhood community.

**TIP 3: Notice whether the claims made by the author are facts or opinions.**

One of the most important ways you can evaluate evidence is learning the difference between a fact and an opinion. **Facts** are statements that can be tested and trusted. **Opinions** cannot be proven as true or false. They state a person’s feelings about a topic.

Sometimes, we’re so certain that we’re right that we state our opinions as if they were facts. This can happen when we feel strongly about a topic, too. As a reader, it’s important to be on the lookout for evidence that is really just the author’s opinion. That doesn’t mean you should ignore the evidence—just keep in mind that it’s only one person’s feelings about the topic.

When considering an author’s claims, the following guidelines can help you decide whether what you are reading is a fact or an opinion.

- **Fact statements can be checked for accuracy.** You can look up a statement of fact in a reference book or some other resource to find out whether it is correct.
- **Opinion statements cannot be checked for accuracy.** Any number of people can have different opinions about the same thing. There is no way to check that a statement of opinion is correct.
- **Fact statements use words that have pretty much the same meaning for everyone.** For example, fact statements might use words such as *round, glass, blue, European, wooden, mammal, or toxic*.
- **Opinion statements often use words that mean different things to different people.** For example, opinion statements might use adjectives such as *beautiful, ugly, frightening, pleasant, expensive, or friendly* and adverbs such as *quickly or sloppily*. They may also use nouns such as *superstar* or verbs such as *improve or thrill*. Opinions tell you about someone’s feelings or views. They do not give you information that every person will agree with.

The important thing to remember about fact and opinion statements is this: Facts say, “Go ahead and check it out.” Opinions say, “Just take my word for it.”



6. Which statement from the passage is an opinion?
- A. His accomplishments are impressive.
  - B. Graffiti art started in New York City in the 1970s.
  - C. He has won grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.
  - D. The difference is that now he is paid to create that artwork.



### Practice Activity

See if you can tell the difference between the facts and the opinions listed below. Write “F” for Fact or “O” for Opinion in front of each statement.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Paris is the capital of France.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Reality shows have ruined television.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The American Civil War began in 1861.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. The blue whale is the largest animal on Earth.

## Evaluate the Evidence

To **evaluate** means to determine the worth of something. When you evaluate something, you judge it. Your job as a reader is not only to locate evidence that supports an author's reasons for writing, but to judge whether the evidence is **valid**. In other words, the evidence the author provides must be fair, logical, and well grounded.



### TIP 4: Decide whether the evidence is adequate, accurate, and applicable.

You can think of this as the “Triple-A” test. While you're reading, ask yourself if the information used as evidence is adequate, accurate, and applicable.

**Adequate** means “enough.” When you ask yourself if the information is adequate, you are questioning whether the author has given you the right amount of evidence to support his or her purpose for writing.

For example, if an author's purpose is to convince readers how delicious pickle ice cream is, then he or she might say, “Almost all of my friends love pickle ice cream.” That's not enough evidence. How many friends does the author have? How many is “almost all”? All but one? What makes these people good judges of ice cream flavors? The evidence isn't adequate.

**Accurate** means “correct.” When you ask yourself if the information is accurate, you are questioning whether the author gives you reason to trust that the facts he or she uses are true. You may be reading about a topic you don’t know everything about, which makes it hard to tell if a statement is true or false. But you can still get a good feeling for whether the author is giving correct information.

For example, an author might write: “Pickle ice cream is the most popular ice cream in the country.” You don’t know what the most popular ice cream is. But, it’s a safe bet that this statement is not correct. There are some things you do know. For instance, you’ve never seen that flavor in the grocery store, at a restaurant, or in an ice cream shop. If an author is wrong about any one thing, then he or she might be wrong about other things, too. You would probably want to research other claims this author makes.

**Applicable** means “useful and appropriate.” When you ask yourself if the information is applicable, you are questioning whether the evidence is related to the topic or makes you say, “So what?” If you find yourself saying, “So what?” the author is probably giving you evidence that doesn’t really support his or her purpose. Pay close attention to how the author elaborates on his or her ideas. Any examples have to relate to the topic and the purpose of the writing.

For example, our ice-cream author might write, “Pickle ice cream is a lovely pea-green color.” Now, the ice cream may indeed be pea green, so you know the statement is accurate. You may even agree that this color is “lovely.” But if the author’s purpose is to convince us that this ice cream is delicious, then its color isn’t important. It doesn’t say anything about how the ice cream actually tastes.

Now answer Number 7 about “A World Made Beautiful by Dzine.”

7. What evidence in “A World Made Beautiful by Dzine” best supports the claim that Dzine is a respected artist?
- A. quotations from Dzine talking about himself
  - B. definitions of special terms used by graffiti artists
  - C. a description of Dzine’s early life in urban Chicago
  - D. a list of the honors Dzine has received for his art



**TIP 5: Evaluate the author's argument.**

An **argument** is an attempt to persuade someone to think a certain way about a debated topic. For example, you might argue with a friend over which famous singer has the most talent. When authors write arguments, they try to convince readers to embrace an opinion or take action. For instance, an author might try to persuade you that snack vending machines should not be allowed in schools. Not everyone will agree with this point of view. The author must support the argument with evidence, facts, and relevant examples in order to get readers to see things his or her way. For example, the author might argue that the vending machines:

- encourage students to eat products saturated with sugar and salt
- create a garbage problem when snack wrappers end up on the floor
- attract rodents to the school, in search of crumbs and half-eaten snacks

Arguments usually reveal the author's bias. **Bias** is a feeling for or against something. We are all biased on certain issues. However, a strong bias can prevent an author from perceiving something accurately or objectively. His or her feelings may prevent the author from thinking logically. It is important to detect bias in a passage because bias sometimes leads authors to make generalizations, or sweeping statements without adequate evidence.

An extreme form of biased writing is propaganda. **Propaganda** is writing that tries to persuade by arousing strong emotions, often by misrepresenting the facts.

Read carefully for persuasive techniques that reveal an author's bias. An author who resorts to name calling or stereotypes, oversimplifies a situation, or makes unsupported claims is an author whose argument you cannot trust.

**TIP 6: Be on the lookout for conflicting information.**

When authors write **conflicting information**, they write ideas that are in opposition to each other. Remember the authors' arguments on constructing a mall? One author argued against building a mall in his town. The other author argued in favor of it. One author pointed out the negative consequences of building the mall; the other pointed out the positives.

Conflicting information is commonly seen in movie reviews. Have you ever wondered how two film critics can see the same movie and have totally different opinions about it? Critics often use different criteria to evaluate films.

Look at these reviews from two different critics.

Critic 1: *Why Me?* is an aptly named movie, for as you're sitting through this snoozefest, you keep asking yourself, "Why me?" The jokes lack wit or originality, and it has a totally predictable plot. The only funny thing about this movie is the acting because it's so bad, you can't help laughing.

Critic 2: *Why Me?* is highly entertaining. The jokes are crude, but you'll laugh in spite of yourself. It may not have an A-list cast, but the actors are likeable and fun to watch. It's not Shakespeare, but it's fun.

The critics judge the movies by two different sets of standards. For Critic 1, originality, wit, and acting are crucial elements. But Critic 2 thinks entertainment value is more important. They saw the same movie but interpreted it differently.

So how do you decide which conflicting argument is correct? Well, in the case of a movie, the best thing to do is to see the movie for yourself. In the case of written arguments, analyze each argument. Separate fact from opinion. Check the accuracy of each author's information. Look for bias or misleading statements. Think about the author's purpose and what he or she is trying to get you to feel, do, or think. Being an active and critical reader will help you get the most out of what you read.





## Lesson 5: Author's Purpose (Answer Key)

### *A World made Beautiful by Dzine*

1. "A"
2. Success, celebrate, impressive, successful, positive point of view
3. "B"
4. "D"
5. "B"
6. "A"

Practice Activity: 1. Fact 2. Opinion 3. Fact 4. Fact

7. "D"

### *Save Our Summers!*

1. "B"
2. "B"
3. "D"
4. "D"
5. "C"
6. "A"
7. Information in paragraph 5
8. Effective: His argument is organized and gives many reasons and examples to support his point of view. Not effective: His argument does not consider opposing points of view, and it needs to include stronger evidence such as statistics.

## Focus Lesson 12: Determining Author's Purpose Introduction to an office furniture catalog

1. The words "sturdy" and "strong" bring to mind things that are functional, lasting, and strong. The words "handsome" and "decorative" brings to mind things that are pleasing to the eye, add beauty to space, and will aesthetically enhance an area or a room.
2. The writer is trying to portray the *2000 Modular Line* as a line of office furniture that meets high standards in the areas of functionality and appearance. The writer is trying to create an image that makes the furniture more appealing to the reader.
3. The author's purpose is to convince the reader that the *2000 Modular Line* is a superior line of furniture and to persuade the reader to purchase it. The author emphasizes the furniture's versatility to make it appealing to a wide variety of readers.

