

“The Trouble With Television” by Robert MacNeil

Reading: Use Clue Words to Distinguish Fact From Opinion

A **fact** is information that can be proved based on evidence. An **opinion** may be supported by factual evidence, but it cannot be proved. A **generalization** is a conclusion based on facts. Like an opinion, a generalization can be supported by facts. However, an author may sometimes use an **overgeneralization**, a conclusion stated in a more extreme way than can be supported by facts.

Statements may be a combination of opinions and generalizations, or they may be opinions written to sound like facts. As you read, **use clue words** to determine when a statement should be read carefully and evaluated to determine whether it is an opinion, a fact, a generalization, or an overgeneralization.

- Words that communicate judgment, such as *best* and *worst*, or specific words that suggest the writer’s good or bad feelings about the topic usually indicate an opinion. Sometimes, opinions are signaled directly with words such as *I believe* or *I think*.
- Words that indicate connections, such as *therefore*, *so*, and *because*, may signal generalizations or opinions that should be supported by facts. Extreme statements that include words such as *always*, *everything*, *anything*, *nothing*, *never*, and *only* may be overgeneralizations.

As you read nonfiction, distinguish facts and supported generalizations from opinions and overgeneralizations to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a writer’s argument.

In “The Trouble With Television,” Robert MacNeil makes a strong argument for limiting the time many people spend watching television. He uses a combination of all of these devices to convince his readers. His essay leads to a logical conclusion based on long observation and careful thought.

DIRECTIONS: Read the passages from the selection, and then answer the questions.

1. “Yet its dominating communications instrument, its principal form of national linkage, is one that sells neat resolutions to human problems that usually have no neat resolutions.”

On what fact is this generalization based?

2. “One study estimates that some 30 million adult Americans are ‘functionally illiterate’ and cannot read or write well enough to answer a want ad or understand the instructions on a medicine bottle.”

How could you prove that this statement is a fact?

3. “But it has come to be regarded as a given, . . . as though General Sarnoff, or one of the other august pioneers of video, had bequeathed to us tablets of stone commanding that nothing in television shall ever require more than a few moments’ concentration.” Why might this statement be considered an overgeneralization?
