Distinguishing between facts and opinions

**Facts and opinions.**
If you want to write a convincing argument, you need to learn how to distinguish between facts and opinions. Below is a list of some of the main differences between facts and opinions.

- Facts can be proven with evidence or observation
- Facts can be based on experience
- Facts are specific and certain
- Opinions demonstrate thoughts, opinions and feelings of people
- Opinions vary between people
- Opinions do not rely on evidence

There is sometimes a merging between facts and opinions. For example, if a research study demonstrates that most Australians believe that the moon is made of cheese, does this mean it is a fact that the moon is made of cheese? Of course not. But can we say it is a fact that most Australians believe the moon is made of cheese? This, too, may not be a fact, because the study itself may be badly designed, wrongly interpreted or badly written. The only fact in this example is that a particular research study has reported that most Australians believe the moon is made of cheese. Everything else at this stage is simply guessing or giving opinion.

However, unless we find evidence for every statement that is ever made, we have to take certain statements as factual. This is why skill is required in distinguishing fact from opinion.

**Activity 1: Finding facts and opinions.** In the film review below, try to find five examples of facts, and five examples of opinions.

**Lost in Translation: A review**
This film, directed by Sofia Coppola and released in 2004, tells the story of an ageing film actor, brilliantly portrayed by Bill Murray, who is on location in Japan to film a whiskey commercial. While he is there, he meets up with Charlotte, the young wife of a photographer, who is staying in the same hotel. The film tells the story of their unfolding relationship, set against a backdrop of exotic foreignness and lack of communication. Charlotte, convincingly played by Scarlett Johansson, has been abandoned in the hotel for a few days by her endlessly busy and possibly unfaithful partner while he takes up a photographic assignment. Murray’s character, it is intimated, is trapped in a stale marriage where communication consists of snatched telephone conversations about house renovations. It is not the first Hollywood film to describe the attraction between a young, attractive woman and a man old enough to be her grandfather, but it is probably considerably more restrained than most films in its approach to this attraction.

Very little actually happens in the film. The characters meet, sing karaoke and talk in a desultory way with each other. Yet it is not at all boring. This is mainly due to the exceptional quality of the acting, the superb cinematography and the intensity of the direction. Japan is made to seem a place that is completely foreign. Of course, for many Americans, that is exactly what it is. But even for those who know Japan well it is presented in an unfamiliar way, using unusual camera angles, close-ups of flashing neon and strange fish-eye shots of rooms and spaces.

Language is used in this film to emphasise the lack of communication rather than the opposite. Bill Murray’s actor does not understand the instructions of his Japanese director, whose speech has to be mediated through a translator. Other foreign visitors to the hotel can
be heard speaking in their own languages, for example in the sauna, incomprehensible and isolating for the listener. Snatches of conversation are overheard, passed by, murmured and whispered. Misunderstanding and lack of communication are everywhere.

This is a film that will probably be a critical success but is unlikely to reach out to the masses. Its target audience is likely to be fairly small, and will consist of thoughtful, intelligent cinema goers with an appreciation for detail. I enjoyed it, but I cannot forgive Sofia Coppola for succumbing to that old Hollywood obscenity of the young girl and the old man. Even though the gulf between them chronologically was no doubt part of the Grand Plan denoting chasms of communication, it still, in this reviewer’s opinion, played to a certain type of ego encapsulated in the financiers of the Hollywood film industry.

Activity 2: Using adjectives and adverbs to give opinions. One very common way of giving opinions is by using adjectives and adverbs, in particular those that are quite open to interpretation such as ‘ugly’ or ‘disgusting’. Find 6 adjectives or adverbs in the review above that are used to emphasise the opinion of the review writer.

More about facts and opinions
There are other ways of distinguishing between facts and opinions than just by examining the adjectives and adverbs that are used. It is also possible to identify opinion by the inclusion of expressions of doubt and probability such as: maybe, possibly, probably, perhaps, might, may, could, and so on.

Opinions are also sometimes introduced by verbs such as: I think, I believe, I feel, in my opinion, and so on. Have another look at the reading text above and see how many expressions of doubt and possibility you can find, and how many verbs expressing opinion you can identify.

You have already learnt that a fact is something that can be verified, but that even some ‘facts’ are really opinions in disguise. Of course, you cannot independently check every fact that you are told, but there are ways of checking whether the facts are likely to be correct. These ways are described below.

- Ask yourself whether the writer has anything to gain by not telling the truth. In the article on ‘Lost in translation’ it is stated that the film is directed by Sofia Coppola. This is probably a fact, because it is easy to check and the writer has nothing to gain by not telling the truth.
- Check whether the ‘facts’ are used to persuade you to adopt a particular point of view. Do you feel that the ‘fact’ is presented in a balanced way, without emotional language and with both positive and negative elements?
- Find other sources of the same information. Have you seen the ‘fact’ presented in more than one source? It is more likely to be correct if many people produce the same information than if only one or two people do.
- Evaluate the quality of the writer and the source of the text. Do you trust the writer? For example, is he or she a respected expert in the area, or is he or she a complete stranger with no qualifications to comment on the issue?