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Objectivity and Fairness in Journalism

How to Keep Your Own Opinions out of the Story

By Tony Rogers**Updated December 04, 2019**

It is often touted that reporters should be [objective](#) and fair. Some news organizations even use these terms in their slogans, claiming they are more “fair and balanced” than their competitors.

Objectivity

Objectivity means that when covering hard news, reporters don't convey their own feelings, biases or prejudices in their stories. They do this by [writing stories](#) using neutral language and by avoiding characterizing people or institutions either positively or negatively.

This can be difficult for the [beginning reporter](#) accustomed to writing [personal essays](#) or journal entries. One trap beginning reporters fall into is the frequent use of adjectives which can easily convey one's feelings about a subject.

Example

The intrepid protesters demonstrated against the unjust government policies.

Just by using the words “intrepid” and “unjust” the writer has quickly conveyed their feelings on the story—the protesters are brave and just in their cause, and the government policies are wrong. For this reason, hard-news reporters usually avoid using [adjectives](#) in their stories.

By sticking strictly to the facts a reporter can allow each reader to form their own opinion about the story.

Fairness

Fairness means that reporters covering a story must remember there are usually two sides—and often more—to most issues and that those differing viewpoints should be given roughly equal space in any [news story](#).

Let's say the local school board is debating whether to ban certain books from school libraries. Many residents representing both sides of the issue are at the meeting.

The reporter may have strong feelings about the subject. Nevertheless, they should interview people who support the ban and those who oppose it. And when they write their story, they should convey

both arguments in neutral language, giving both sides equal space.

A Reporter's Conduct

Objectivity and fairness apply not only to how a reporter writes about an issue but to how they conduct themselves in public. A reporter must not only be objective and fair but also convey an image of being objective and fair.

At the school board forum, the reporter may do their best to interview people from both sides of the argument. But if in the middle of the meeting, they stand up and start spouting their own opinions on the book ban their credibility is shattered. No one will believe they can be fair and objective once they know where they stand.

A Few Caveats

There are a few caveats to remember when considering objectivity and fairness. First, such rules apply to reporters covering hard news, not to the columnist writing for the op-ed page or the movie critic working for the arts section.

Second, remember that ultimately, reporters are in search of the truth. While objectivity and fairness are important, a reporter shouldn't let them get in the way of finding the truth.

Let's say you're a reporter covering the final days of World War II and are following the Allied forces as they liberate the concentration camps. You enter one such camp and witness hundreds of gaunt, emaciated people and piles of dead bodies.

Do you, in an effort to be objective, interview an American soldier to talk about how horrific this is, then interview a Nazi official to get the other side of the story? Of course not. Clearly, this is a place where evil acts have been committed, and it's your job as a reporter to convey that truth.

In other words, use objectivity and fairness as tools to find the truth.