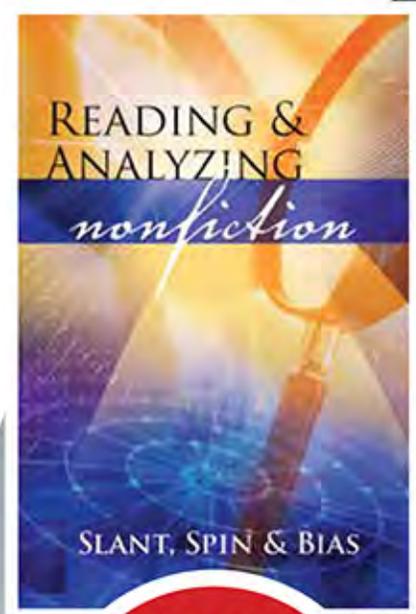




Reading and Analyzing Nonfiction

Slant, Spin & Bias

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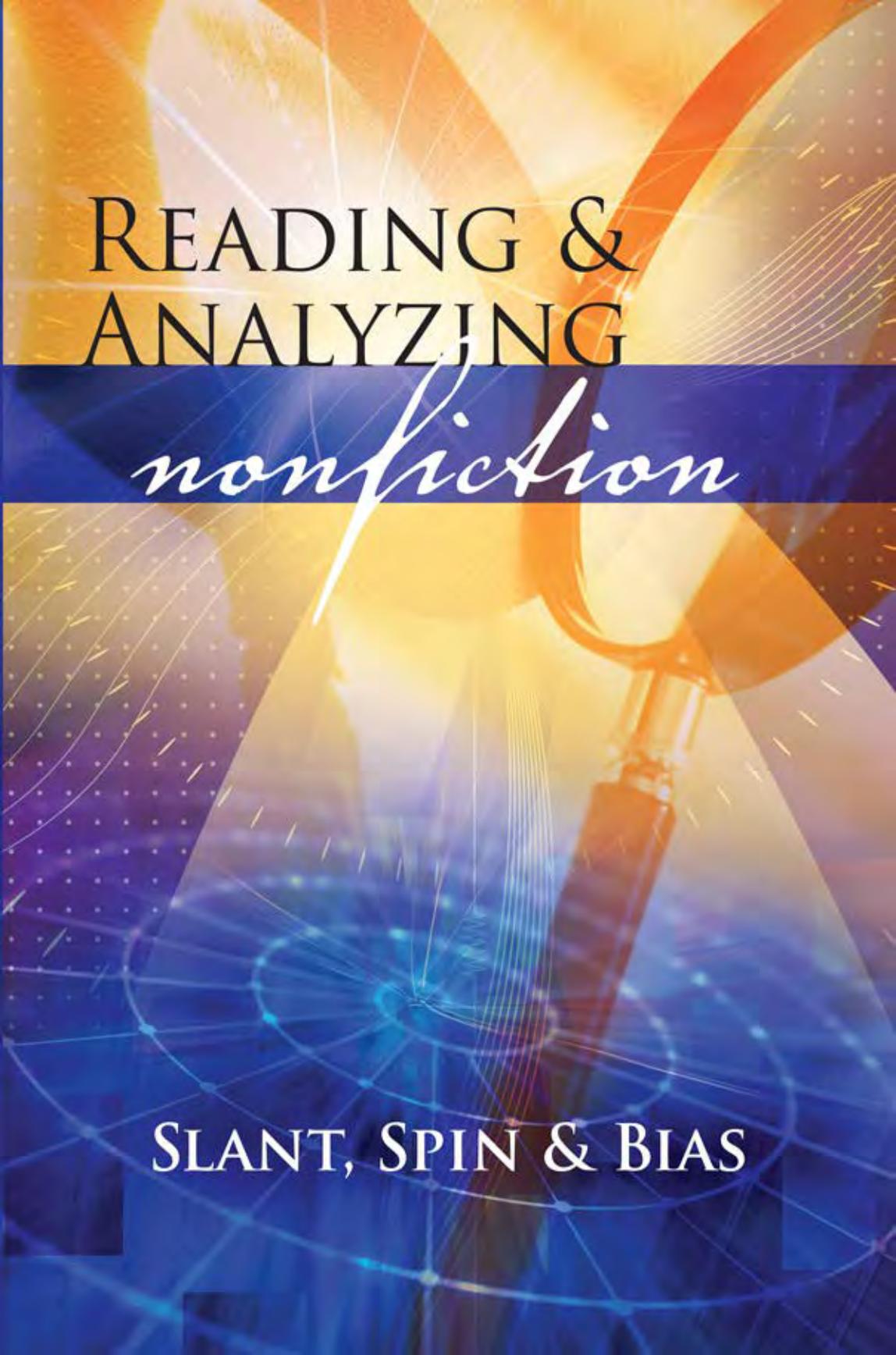
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The background of the cover is a complex, abstract composition. It features a central fountain pen with a dark, textured barrel and a silver-colored nib, positioned diagonally. The pen is set against a backdrop of warm, golden-yellow and orange tones, with a prominent curved band of orange and red. Below the pen, the background transitions into a deep blue, where a network of glowing blue lines and dots forms a complex, interconnected web, reminiscent of a neural network or a data visualization. The overall aesthetic is modern and intellectual, suggesting themes of analysis, technology, and communication.

READING &
ANALYZING

nonfiction

SLANT, SPIN & BIAS

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INTRODUCTION:

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Reading and Analyzing Nonfiction: Slant, Spin, and Bias is a book that will help your students understand that virtually every writer—even the reporter who claims only to be providing information—has a purpose, an angle. Further, this book will help your students become familiar with the conventions and devices writers use to achieve their purposes. It describes how all writers, from the diarist to the propagandist, apply a degree of slant, spin, and sometimes outright bias to advance their points. Articles, letters, and speeches—both contemporary and classic—each annotated and accompanied by a thought-provoking exercise, will ensure your students’ understanding and test their ability to recognize and distinguish among the various devices nonfiction writers employ.

Frequent writing prompts provide your students with the opportunity to hone their skills and apply the conventions they’ve been studying in their own writing.

This book is somewhat unique among textbooks in that, although the chapters are numbered, they are not necessarily written to be used sequentially. As the *genre* of nonfiction is so broad, and the characteristics of the various *subgenres* overlap to such a great extent, there is no need to study the news article before the memoir or *vice versa*.

Thus, if your need is simply to locate some excellent examples of nonfiction literature, this book can certainly be a worthwhile resource for you—even if you choose not to avail yourself of the exercise questions and writing opportunities.

If, however, your objectives include analyzing the interplay of rhetoric, logic, and emotion in the creation of nonfiction, then you will find the second chapter, which defines the key terms “slant,” “spin,” and “bias,” and the final chapter, which defines and illustrates the most common logical fallacies and techniques of propaganda, to be particularly helpful.

EXERCISE THREE:

Read the following excerpts from an online article about global climate change. For each numbered and underlined statement, identify whether the statement is fact/analysis, interpretation, or opinion. Then, explain briefly why you believe as you do.

(1) Scientists estimate that (2) Global Warming may cause two thirds of China's Himalayan glaciers to melt by mid-century placing at least 300 million people at risk in China alone. (3) "Of China's 1.3 billion people, 23 percent live around glaciers in the western part of the country for the rich water resources they provide" (release from People's Daily Online). Himalayan glaciers feed seven great rivers of Asia that run through China and India, the world's most populous Nations, ensuring a year round water supply.

In January 2004, according to a recent scientific study published in the prestigious Scientific Journal Nature, (4) "between 15 and 37 percent of the world's species may face extinction by 2050 due to Global Warming." In one of the biggest mass extinctions since the demise of the dinosaurs, (5) this loss could total 1.25 million species. The Report's Authors are calling for a "rapid implementation of technologies" to combat the human causes of climate changes.

U.S. Pentagon researchers have concluded that as the planet warms, drastic changes in weather will result in worldwide ecosystems changes, which in turn will cause massive political and social instability.

And finally from the L.A. Times article (June 28, 2004) entitled "Early Snowmelt Ignites Global Warming Worries": (6) "The Sierra snow pack appears to be melting earlier, while another major water source, the Colorado River, is in (7) a drought that appears to be the region's worst since 1590 to 1594, according to the U.S. Geological Survey."

The Sierra snow pack includes three mountain ranges: Sierra, Cascade and Rocky that provide the bulk of the water supply to Western United States. The Western States and U.S. farmers are at great risk with enormous concern about this Global Warming Event.

...

An article by Brad Lemley, published in Discover Magazine (September 2002), clearly outlines this scenario: "The Gulf Stream, which warms both North America and Europe, could be affected by this trend causing a fall of the northern penetration of Gulf Stream waters. The freshwater mass that is accumulating now could shut down the entire system favoring conditions for a 'mini-Ice Age' that

THE UNANIMOUS DECLARATION OF THE THIRTEEN UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, *a decent respect to the opinions of mankind* requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, *deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed*. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is *the right of the people* to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they

Considering that the three world powers at the time—England, France, and Spain—were all monarchies to one degree or another, there is absolutely no basis for this claim.

The “Self-Evident Truth” is a basic logical fallacy. The writer making such a claim either cannot conceive of someone's holding a different view or completely abdicates any responsibility to support the claim. There is no room for discussion or disagreement.

Again, this statement is being offered as a “Self-Evident Truth.” And, given the time in which it was written, such a government, exercising “just powers” with the “consent” of the masses of people, did not exist—and had never existed.

Again, the concept of people's rights is essentially being invented. Even in countries like England in which “the people” enjoyed certain rights protected by law, “the people” did not include the poorest classes, women, or children.

Remember that all of these ideas are included under the “Self-Evident Truth” umbrella, so the writers claim there is no need to defend their assertion that “the people” have the “right” to “alter or abolish” their current government and institute a new one.

EXERCISE TWO:

Answer the following questions about Arthur Brisbane's editorial, "Why Women Should Vote." Be certain to base your answers on what the editorial actually says and not on your reaction—either positive or negative—to the editorial or the editor who wrote it.

1. How many theses does this editorial argue? What is it? / What are they?

Beginning with the fourth paragraph, Brisbane makes 20 claims in support of his argument(s). Of these...

2. ...approximately how many are facts?

Give one example:

Notice the two similes, both comparing the Mount Rushmore monument to ancient archeological treasures. The author's point is subtle but clear. To him, Mount Rushmore is a valuable work, newer than, but comparable to, such wonders as the pyramids and Stonehenge.

The tone is sympathetic to both the artist and the monument.

Note the structural shift in the feature. The last paragraph was still telling us about Perrottet's experience. This paragraph begins to give us some factual background. If this were a short story, it would be part of the plot exposition.

The use of dashes and the insertion of a relatively irreverent reference to money help to create an informal, conversational, and mildly humorous tone.

people might find Mount Rushmore as enigmatic as Stonehenge, the sculptor also wanted to store information about the four presidents, as well as a record of American history and an explanation of, as he put it, "how the memorial was built and frankly, why."

The vault was never finished. Today, it's an ever-narrowing passage, honeycombed with drill marks, that stretches about 80 feet into the rock. Still, in 1998, Borglum's wish was partly fulfilled when the park service placed a teak box in a titanium cast in a hole they drilled at the hall's entrance. The box contained 16 porcelain panels covered with historical data, including a biography of the artist and his struggles to carve the memorial.

But the highpoint of the climb was yet to come. As Oestmann led us up the last steep stairway, we burst from the shadows into brilliant sunshine—on top of George Washington's head, 500 feet above the visitor center and 5,725 feet above sea level. As I wandered jelly-kneed over to Jefferson's and Lincoln's white pates—thankfully, their tops are relatively flat—the exhilarating view across the craggy, pine-covered Black Hills seemed never-ending.

Gutzon Borglum first stood on this spot in August 1925, when the memorial was still a half-formed dream. The idea for a titanic public sculpture came from South Dakota state historian Doane Robinson, who hoped it would lure more tourists—and their dollars—to the remote and impoverished state. The Black Hills, which boasted some of South Dakota's most spectacular scenery, were the obvious location,

3. In what ways is this feature article different from a work of fiction?

4. Perrottet makes it a point to comment on the sculptor's artistic arrogance. Does he seem to dislike Borglum? How do you know?

5. How does Perrottet signal to his reader that the tone and focus of his feature are going to change?

Chapter Eight

COMMON LOGICAL FALLACIES AND PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES

While using this book, you have encountered—and been asked to use—a few words and ideas that might be absolutely new to you. The fact that you can accept or reject someone else's argument, not because you agree or disagree with it, but because you can evaluate the validity of the argument itself is an often-overlooked concept. We somehow tend to labor under the misconception that, since everyone has a right to his or her opinion, all opinions are equal in the consideration we must give them.

This is absolutely not true, as your examination of the opinion-based pieces in the other chapters of this book have probably already shown you. The opinion of a person who has no knowledge or experience to support it is not worth any serious consideration, nor is the argument of a person who has made no attempt to argue fairly and reasonably.

Two key types of arguments that can be rejected as bad arguments are those that employ **logical fallacies** and those that degenerate from argument into **propaganda**. When you learn to recognize the most common fallacies and propaganda techniques, you will be able to improve your own argument as well as your understanding of others' arguments.

Logical Fallacies are exactly what their name suggests—they are errors in logic, faulty reasoning. Usually the person who is basing his or her argument on a logical fallacy is simply mistaken, not aware that the reasoning is flawed. Often, all it takes is to point out the fallacy, and the person will abandon the argument. Likewise, it is important to be able to recognize errors in logic so as not to be drawn into supporting an argument that is, ultimately, flawed.

Depending on your source, there are dozens of logical fallacies. The most common, however, are the self-evident truth, the false or weak analogy, begging the question, the *cum hoc* and *post hoc* fallacies, and the hasty and/or sweeping generalities.

EXERCISE TWO:

In the spaces provided, note whether each of the following statements is a legitimate statement or an example of propaganda. If it is propaganda, identify the technique. Because some of the techniques are so similar to others or involve the use of other techniques, you may note more than one for some of the statements you identify as propaganda. It is much more important that you recognize the propagandist at work than that you be able to name the technique he or she is using.

1. Do you *really* want your children to attend school with a [*insert the gender, age, racial, ethnic, national, religious, etc., epithet of your choice*]?

2. Reports from state departments of health to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta indicate a strong correlation between vaccinations and a decrease in incidence of disease.

3. The choice is clear: more funding for school or increased unemployment and crime.

4. When the last glacier melts and Denver, Colorado, is a seaside resort, we'll all wish we'd voted for this Clean Energy Bill.
