



Media Bias

Word Choice



Example #1

- As an example, take the portion of an article an Accuracy in Media (AIM) blog quoted earlier this week. The article, from CNN, included the following:

Before departing the White House early Monday for a farewell tour of Europe, President Bush stole a page from his predecessor and suggested he feels American consumers' pain.



Example #1

- You'll find that the historically accepted idiom actually reads "take a leaf from the book" (though in recent years the word "leaf" has changed to "page;" to substitute "leaf" with "page" is hardly an example of incriminating bias). Searching for *take a page from the book* results in pages of examples of the idiom in use.
- However, when you search for *stealing* pages from a book, the references that come up refer to actual stealing.
- Here, the CNN writers have twisted an idiom by replacing the commonly accepted term "take" with the word "stole," which has a far more negative association. To "steal" a page from a book is not even an accepted variant of the familiar idiom.



Example #2

- Later in the same sentence, CNN writes that Bush “suggested he feels American consumers’ pain.” The key word here is “suggested.” Here are other ways the writers could have expressed the same idea:
- - Bush **said** he feels American consumers’ pain
- - Bush **argued** he feels American consumers’ pain
- - Bush **expressed that** he feels American consumers’ pain
- - Bush **stated that** he feels American consumers’ pain



Example #2

- Compare and contrast the connotations you notice with each of those variants. Does the word “said” evoke the same emotion as “suggested” does here?
- “Said” and “stated” are generally considered to be neutral words. “Suggested” is a word that can be loaded with implications in a way a word like “said” cannot.



Example #3

- This AIM article points out examples of word choice bias in a New York Times article published earlier this year:
- The word choice in the article, while subtle, definitely advances a pro-union and pro-McEntee agenda. “Public sector unions” are “under attack.” Wisconsin and Ohio laws will “cripple” the “rights” of union members, “jeopardizing” the union’s income stream and “political clout.” McEntee’s union is under “assault” in New Jersey and Florida, states attempting to “curb bargaining rights or achieve far-reaching concessions” on “health benefits and pensions.”



Example #3

- In that example, The New York Times used words with violent connotations to describe union-related events. The word choice there indicated that unions were being somehow victimized. The Times never came out and outright *called* unions “victims,” but that implication lay in The Times’ word choice.



Example #4

- Another AIM article examines the Washington Post's choice of words with regards to a story on President Obama's health care bill. The AIM article explains:
- The [Washington Post] article follows Prescott's work to find "poignant stories of Americans who might lose their health coverage under the Republican plan," work that involved "poring over hundreds of files. Among them were **heart-wrenching tales of hardship** faced by people whose **care is dependent on Medicaid**, the joint federal-state health insurance program for the **poor and disabled**" (emphasis added). Yet, despite how "heart-wrenching" those tales were, Prescott admittedly sorted through "hundreds" of files before finding just five she could potentially run with.



Example #4

- The bias in word choice here is relatively obvious: note the use of the word “heart-wrenching,” for example, and “hardship.” The reporter could have written that Prescott “pored” over files containing “information on the lifestyles of Medicaid dependents.” Which version sounds less biased to you?
- A. “Heart-wrenching tales of hardship faced by people whose care is dependent on Medicaid”
- B. “Information on the lifestyles of Medicaid dependents”
- Which style of writing seems more appropriate for a news outlet that purports to publish unbiased news?



Activity

- Break into small groups of three to four
- Select a copy of the newspaper and cut out the articles you think contain a value judgment. They should also highlight the word(s) and/or sentence(s) that you believe introduce a possible bias into the story; then answer the following questions:
 - Why do you think the words convey a value judgment?
 - Are these words or phrases found in a news story, a column, an editorial or a review? Why is this significant?
 - Each group to present its findings to the class, and compare and discuss each groups' conclusions.
- **Evaluation:** Instructor assessment of group presentations