Commentary on Statements of Fact or Opinion

The prompt to read this information appears on p. 35 of *Acting on Words*. A Practice box provides the following eight statements:

1. Christopher Columbus was the first person to discover North America.
2. Women are physically weaker than men.
3. Alberta has refused to support the Kyoto agreement due to self-interest.
4. Canada's national sport is hockey.
5. The birthplace of hockey was Victoria Rink, Montreal, March 3, 1875.
6. In 1763, under terms of the Treaty of Paris, almost all of New France was ceded to Britain.
7. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was the best series on TV during its seven-year run and should have been continued.
8. Oil, a fossil fuel, is a non-renewable resource.

Commentary

Of the eight statements, only the sixth can be safely called a fact. The first was widely stated as a fact in history textbooks for years; however, history, as we are often reminded, is written by "the winners." How could a European be the first person to discover a place already inhabited by a people whose distant ancestors had migrated there? As well, recent evidence in Newfoundland indicates that the Vikings also made the trip before

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Columbus. Yet this so-called fact of Columbus's discovery was seldom questioned because the mainstream point of view considered the Natives less civilized than Europeans and therefore not human. The so-called fact of European discovery was invented as a result of racism. So distinguishing genuine fact from entrenched opinion is heavily influenced by systems of beliefs, by cultural assumptions.

These assumptions are easier to spot in times and places apart from ours. For example, in 1577 an English preacher, Thomas White, declared "The cause of plagues is sinne, if you look to it well; and the cause of sinne are playes: therefore the cause of plagues are playes" (qtd. in Honan 100). Many of us today would smile at this syllogism (see p. 36 in *Acting on Words* and "Sam Spade's Use of the Syllogism," under this Chapter of the website, for more on the syllogism); we would view it as obvious religious dogma. The preacher's call for us to "look well" presumably does not include an invitation to critique the assumptions and barriers of his own system of thought. The same ethnocentric shortcomings, no doubt, though much harder for us to see, apply to today's institutionalized guidelines, including the advice in *Acting on Words*.

The second statement above is demonstrably untrue in certain cases, and with respect to certain muscle groups it is untrue in most cases. Women have very strong leg muscles, for instance, and have made greater gains in marathon running for their shorter history in the sport than men. There is no consensus on the third statement; in any case, in a 2004 poll 65.5 percent of Alberta citizens supported Kyoto, contradicting the official government position. The fourth statement is demonstrably incorrect; lacrosse remains Canada's official sport.

As for the fifth statement, while in 2004 an international ice hockey team of six writers and researchers published an 18-page report declaring the statement true, as of 2005, a highway sign on the way into Windsor, Nova Scotia, still announced the town's status as "Birthplace of Hockey." Other claimants to the throne of having spawned the passion at the heart of Canada include Kingston, Ontario, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and, most recently, Deline (formerly Fort Franklin), Northwest Territories. On June 15, 2006, the Northwest

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Territories legislature declared Deline the birthplace of hockey based on an alleged letter written by explorer Sir John Franklin in which he describes his men and himself engaged in a game on a frozen lake. Along with questions about authentication and interpretation of records, there remains a major debate over how to define "birth" in the case of hockey, which illustrates the limitation of analogies (see "False Analogy" and "Slippery Slope," p. 39). Since the authors of this book originally hail respectively from Quebec and New Brunswick, we have decided that Montreal will be the official birthplace of hockey in even years and Saint John in odd years. We will discount Kingston, Windsor, Halifax and Deline arbitrarily. So it is with the frequent cultural construction of facts.

The seventh statement above expresses a personal fondness for the *Buffy* series, one that has not been narrowed to any extent. Others could make similar sweeping claims for other series, raising a number of problems. On what grounds is Buffy being judged the best series of its time? Does this claim suggest that a certain genre of fiction is superior to another? What criteria of craft, social significance, and originality are being considered? Arguing that *Buffy* was the most inventive series of its era in mixing evocative genres while also achieving psychological and even social relevance would still be an opinion, but one that a thoughtful analyst might be able to support. Evaluative criteria need to be expressed, applied, and demonstrated. As for the eight statement, see the student sample speech, "The Peak Oil Theory: Are We Being Lied To?" under "Sample Speeches" at Chapter 20 of this website. It argues that North Americans assume as a fact that oil is non-renewable; Europeans tend to be taught that it might be non-renewable, that its origin remains uncertain. Oil does, in fact, replenish—but only with an enormous passage of time.

It seems we assign the quality of "fact" to any thing that appears evident to us, especially to something we believe we can touch, taste, smell, hear, or see. But is what we perceive truth? Hindu thought has been raising this question for ages. In *Gardening for the Future of the Earth*, the authors suggest that the advent of writing, shifting humans from the patterns of nature to a perception of symbols, has divorced us from experience beyond ourselves (Shapiro and Harisson 37). We thought it best not to mention this point too

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prominently (for obvious reasons of book sales), but the authors, in effect, argue that writing – our grand scheme for controlling reality—has in fact plunged us into illusion, into a realm of opinions removed from facts. A radical criticism this may be; nevertheless, a distrust of words runs through much of Shakespeare as well as the musings of other highly sensitive writers: writing, ironically, may separate us from rather than link us to the greater whole.

While such critiques are of course debatable, perhaps the safest approach is to consider that they may carry some truth; much—even all-- of what we think and say may be nothing more than an opinion. A Cree elder recorded in the 1970 documentary *Job's Garden,* by Boyce Richardson, was asked to swear on the Bible in court, to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He replied: "I cannot tell you the truth. I can tell you only what I know." Supporting the Cree elder, quantum physics suggests that no reality is certain, only probable, possible, or unlikely. Albert Einstein demonstrated the relativity of time, a measurement sometimes explained as an illusion, merely a mathematical conceit that is of collective service to humans. So even our suggestion that one of the above statements could be "safely" called a fact is called into question by ontological considerations

As suggested with the reference to Hindu thought, the debate over the material world as fact or illusion is ancient. Empiricists view the universe apart from humans as unintelligent, mere material. But is it? Depending on your personal inclination, these metaphysical ideas may seem like nonsense or truth. But again, since the question seems so unresolved, perhaps we should take our cue from the Cree elder and rather than trying to establish what we believe to be truth, focus instead on offering the grounds for holding to the opinions that we do. As far as your writing is concerned, our point is to remind you not to state opinions as facts, and to be careful to consider whether something you consider a fact may seem an opinion to certain readers. The advice to draw from this discussion is to support your claims, which you do best in academic discourse by carefully understanding inductive and deductive methods and by avoiding logical fallacies. See pp.38-42 on fallacies and Chapter 4 on supporting your claims in solidly written paragraphs.

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