

We're coming down to the wire. So, with all that in mind, here's a little Q&A that might help you emerge with a grade you're proud to put on the refrigerator door.

I still confuse *transparency* and *context*. Both help news consumers put things in perspective, right?

Yes, they do — but different things in different ways.

Transparency is a window into the reporting process that lets you see how reliable or complete the information you are being given is. If the reporter tells you a comment came from a prepared statement, you know the wording was chosen with greater care than the answer to a question at news conference. If a reporter tells you why a source requested anonymity or whether that source was in position to know what he's talking about, it helps you decide how reliable those comments are. And sometimes transparency involves journalists telling us what they don't know and *why* they don't know it. In that way, transparency helps put the information and evidence being presented in perspective so you can decide how reliable it is, so you can figure out what you know, how you know it and what don't you know.

Context is background information that helps you put news developments in perspective by letting you know how important, unusual, poignant or ironic the latest news is. Think of how many news drivers depend on context to determine a story's newsworthiness — importance, unusualness, timeliness ... In the case of the Walter Reed story, facts about the hospital's history and stellar reputation along with presidential promises to offer the best care possible there made the revelations of shoddy treatment of the soldiers that much more tragic. Context also is extremely important in stories that develop over a period of time. Imagine a jigsaw puzzle: Each new piece doesn't tell you much when viewed out of context, but when you look at the big picture, you see how it fits in.

Aren't *fairness* and *balance* really the same thing — and how does *bias* fit into the picture?

Balance guarantees fairness, but **fairness** doesn't always require balance.

Fairness means making sure all sides of a story are reflected, especially in a story about a dispute. **Balance** requires equal time or space for both sides.

The TV news report about the rats running around the KFC restaurant in Manhattan arguably was unfair because the reporter never gave the owners a chance to explain. But in this case, **fairness** did not require **balance**, which would have meant giving the owners' explanations the same amount of airtime as the on-the-scene video and consumer comments. There was no question about whether the rats were there. We could see them with our own eyes. Balance, though, is the rule when covering a political campaign or telling a story in which the facts are in dispute.

When students talk about a story being **biased**, most of the time they mean **unfair**. The absence of a KFC explanation in the rats story may have been unfair, but it wasn't the result of bias. While an individual report might provide indications of bias, you can only establish bias by finding a pattern over time in the reports of an individual journalist or news organization. So use the term with precision, and remember, declaring the entire news media biased would be as valid as generalizing about all college students.

In the *I'M VAIN* method of assessing news sources, what do you mean by "sources who verify"?

Mnemonic devices help you remember things, but they have their limitations. The distinction here is between fact and assertion, so think of the "V" this way: Source who provide **verifiable facts** are more reliable than sources who make **unverifiable assertions**.

And, please, no more references to *verified sources*. Information — not people — may be verified or unverified. Remember that for journalists, **verification** is a process that begins with reporters, involves their editors and, finally, a form of **peer review** in which colleagues keep each other honest as facts are checked by other news organizations going after the same story.

Are authoritative sources people in authority?

Sometimes, but for our purposes, we're talking about people whose position, experience or direct knowledge allows them to speak authoritatively about a subject. Think of *authoritative sources* as the opposite of *uninformed sources*.

Can interviews with eyewitnesses or a reporter's personal observations be considered direct evidence?

Yes, but it's a good idea for news consumers to see a spectrum here. Compared with an interview with someone with secondhand information, comments from an **eyewitness** provide direct evidence. But they are probably not be as reliable as photos or video of an event or a document that is not subject to exaggeration or the tricks our memories play on us. So if you're asked for examples of **direct evidence**, go for the photos, videos or documents first.

Do comments made by self-interested, unnamed, singular or even uninformed sources have any value?

Of course. While an **independent** source's information is less likely to be skewed, it's far more common for news sources to have some self-interest. In the "Electronic Wasteland" piece, Jim Puckett is a great source, but an environmental activist running an organization dedicated to stopping the kind of things this story exposed is by definition as **self-interested** as the mayor trying to cover it up. And in the Walter Reed story, the commander of the hospital is self-interested because it's his job to represent the institution. But he is clearly the most reliable source of the hospital's side of the story. Self-interest is something to identify and take into account. Independent is better, but the best source in a story may be self-interested.

In the Watergate story, the most important source Woodward and Bernstein had was unnamed — "Deep Throat," the anonymous government official giving them deep background. And sometimes — imagine the comments of the only survivor of a plane crash — it's just not possible to get a second source.

The point is that while you may be asked to rate a source's reliability on a scale of 1 to 10, this isn't math. It's more like detective work. You need to factor all of these things in when evaluating reliability, but don't automatically dismiss what someone is saying because he is self-interested or anonymous.

And don't confuse reliability with value.

When presidential candidate Herman Cain called Occupy Wall Street protesters "jealous," he made headlines with a story in which the most important source — Cain himself — was making an unverifiable assertion. And in the Anderson Cooper story we studied, even the least reliable sources — the uninformed, self-interested family members making unfounded assertions — were valuable because their comments gave the story an emotional, human dimension.

If independence is a key attribute of journalism, isn't opinion journalism a contradiction in terms?

Nope. **Independence** is an attribute of the news organization that is presenting the clearly labeled opinion piece, not the writer or the individual column or editorial. Along the same lines, **opinion journalism** goes through a verification process to assure whatever facts are presented are, well, factual. It's opinion because it takes a side — it doesn't pretend to be objective, balanced or fair to more than the facts. But the *news organization* that presents the opinion piece puts it through a verification process, it is independent and it is as accountable for its accuracy as it is for its news stories.

Is it really true that I can write a great final essay and ace the tests and still flunk?

Yup. The final exam and essay and the two other tests make up just half your grade. Homework makes up 40 percent, so if you're missing several assignments, I recommend doing the "All the President's Men" extra credit assignment. Also, you might be able to turn in a couple you missed (send me an email or see me after class). And if you've missed a couple of classes, don't miss any more to avoid seeing your final grade reduced.

Hope this helped ... See you in class,

Jack