

Who Do You Believe?

by Elsa Roberts Auerbach

If you read two articles that provide conflicting information about a topic, how do you decide whom to believe? For example, how do you make sense of one report saying immigrants cost the government money and others that say they contribute more in taxes than they will ever use in services? Which information is accurate? The following questions may help you figure out your own stance about such complicated questions.

Your questions

Start by asking some basic questions about the topic. Think about what YOU want to know about the topic. For example,

- How much do immigrants pay in taxes?
- Do all immigrants pay taxes?
- What kinds of services do immigrants use?
- What kinds of jobs do immigrants do? Who else does these jobs?

Your experience and values

Think about what you already know about this topic based on your experience and beliefs. Naming your own point of view will help you figure out your first reactions to the articles. Ask yourself,

- What direct experiences do I have that provide information or insight about the topic?
- Do I have beliefs or values that are relevant to this discussion? Do I already have a stance about the question?

Questions about the author

Next look at each article by itself and ask some questions about the author or source of information. For example,

- Who wrote this piece?

- What do you know about the author? What difference does it make if the author is a union organizer, a religious leader, an academic, or a corporate lawyer?
- Look up the author and any organizations that he or she is affiliated with. What are the political perspectives of that organization? How do you know?
- How might the author's values shape the information he/she chooses to use? Does the author have any interest in one view or another? Based on what you discover, what can you say about the point of view, beliefs and values of the author?

Questions about the purpose of the text

Different texts have different purposes. Some are designed to persuade; others are designed to provide information; others are designed to inspire. Think about the following:

- What are you looking at? Is it an opinion piece? Is it a newspaper article? Is it a scholarly article?
- What is the purpose of the text? Is it designed to persuade you of a point of view?
- Does it present one side of an argument or many sides?

Questions about how the text is written

Authors can influence readers by the ways they set up texts and choose words, as well as what they leave out. Ask yourself:

- What do the images, charts, or graphics suggest?
- What are the vocabulary choices of the author? Why does the author choose these words? What do the words suggest?
- Why is the text written this way? How else could it have been written?



Questions about the message of the text

Only after you have stepped back to look at the author, the kind of text, and the way the text is written can you think critically about what the author wants readers to get from the text. Then you can ask,

- What is the message in the article? What does the author want you to believe?
- Whose views are heard or represented in the text? Whose views are NOT in the text?
- What questions does the author answer? What questions does the author NOT answer?
- Whose interests might be served by this text? Who benefits from the text?

Questions outside the text

Sometimes it's necessary to look outside a text to get a perspective on the text.

- Is there a source that you trust on another issue? What do they say about THIS issue?
- Whose voice is missing in this text?

- How else could this text have been written?
- How would you talk back to the author? What would you say?

Putting it all together

After you have addressed these questions for both articles or points of view, think about how the articles compare to each other and to your experience and beliefs.

- Do the articles challenge, confirm, or contradict your beliefs? Have your ideas changed? Has either author convinced you?
- Is there a third way to look at the issue? Is there a perspective which goes beyond either of the positions represented by the authors? Do you now have new questions?

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