

Facts, opinions and reading between the lines



We all tend to believe things that are in print, whether we read them on paper or online. But just because something's printed doesn't mean it's true. It might be true, but it also might just be someone's opinion. **OPINIONS** are things people **think** or **believe** which **may or may not be true**. But **FACTS** are statements that are true

and can be proved. It's important to be able to tell the difference in the exam so let's have a closer look at the difference between **facts** and **opinions**.

Facts

As I've just said, facts are statements that are true. Here are some facts about my life for example:

- My front door is yellow.
- My favourite hobby is art.
- I love to play the piano.
- I am not very good at cooking.

Can you think of four facts about your own life? Write them below:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

It's easy to write facts about ourselves because we know whether they are true or not. Plus we don't need to prove them. However, it's more challenging to spot the difference between fact and opinion in other people's writing.

There are ways of doing it though. One way to spot facts is that they often include **statistics**. These are put forward as either a **percentage** or a **number**. They might say something like '80% of dog owners like walking' for example. Also **facts** are often introduced by phrases such as '*An expert has said*' or '*Research has shown*'.

Let's see if you can spot the **facts** in this text which is about tea and coffee drinking. When you think you've found a **fact**, write it on one of the lines below. (Don't forget to look out for those numbers and percentages!)



An increasing number of people in the UK prefer coffee to tea. In the 1950s, tea was the preferred beverage with 800 tonnes of it being drunk daily in England alone. Recently coffee has overtaken tea in popularity. Research shows that 80% of people in the UK now prefer coffee to tea. A recent survey showed that 1% of the population actually mix tea with coffee. It is suspected that these people have very few friends.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

That wasn't too difficult, was it? Here's another one for you to try. Once again, see if you can spot the **facts**:



I think bottle-nosed dolphins are some of the most fascinating animals in the world. Everyone loves dolphins! Research shows that they prefer warm water and are usually found in tropical seas. Scientists have discovered that the dolphin brain weighs around 1500 grams and is 25% heavier than a human brain. I think this might make them as intelligent as humans. Research has shown they are quite fast swimmers and can swim up to 32 kmh. I hope to swim with dolphins one day!

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

How did you get on? You probably noticed that while some facts were obvious, such as the weight of a dolphin's brain, others were just something that the writer liked the idea of (such as swimming with dolphins one day). You might even agree with the writer's opinion, and that is fine. But in the exam it's important to know the difference between opinion and fact.

Now let's take a closer look at opinions.

Opinions

We know that **opinions** are things that people **think** or **believe**, which may or may not be true. In fact as I just said, **opinions** usually begin with 'I think' or 'I believe'. We all have **opinions** about things and there's nothing wrong with that. However in the exam you have to be able to tell whether something is a fact or an opinion. To show you what I mean, read the following statements. Some are true, but some are just opinions. Can you tell which is which? Cross out the wrong answer.



- | | |
|--|--------------|
| 1. I think chocolate ice cream is the best flavour. | Fact Opinion |
| 2. The majority of humans have two feet. | Fact Opinion |
| 3. Research has shown that birds are descended from dinosaurs. | Fact Opinion |
| 4. I believe the man in the moon gets sick of eating cheese. | Fact Opinion |

With these examples it's obvious isn't it? Ice cream flavour is a matter of opinion or preference. Some like chocolate while others (such as myself) prefer salted caramel. Some weird people prefer rhubarb, but that's another story... Sometimes, however, it is not so easy to tell whether a statement is a **fact** or an **opinion**. Take a look at this paragraph which will show you what I mean:



I think every town should have a permanent circus where people can go and learn circus skills and practise performing. This would create an uplifting focus in cities and would teach children important acrobatic skills. Everyone could exercise, which is good for them, but they'd have fun at the same time

Is this fact or opinion? Well, it might be fun to have a circus in your town – people who live in Blackpool are very lucky – but not everyone enjoys the circus and it would cost a lot of money to employ full time circus skills trainers. Maybe the money could be spent on things that appeal to more people, such as a leisure centre offering a wider variety of activities. This is definitely the writer's opinion being expressed here, isn't it? Those tell-tale phrases '**I think**' and '**I believe**' give away the fact that this is **opinion** and not **fact**. It's probably been written by an out of work clown.

Be careful, though. Some **opinions** look like **facts** because they use **language** that **looks believable**. Take a look at this text.

Every city would be better off with a retail park away from the city limits. This would cut down on traffic pollution and free the city centres for more leisurely activities. Everyone could shop in the same place which would save having to trawl around lots of different shops.



Well, this sounds believable, doesn't it? Traffic pollution in towns would certainly be less if there were more retail parks. But retail parks can suck customers away from town centres meaning small shops go out of business. No one wants to visit a city centre with streets full of closed shops like the one in the picture. There's probably some truth in the opinion but without facts, we can't know for sure.

Sometimes fact and opinion are mixed up in a single text. Take a look at this one.

The importance of playing a musical instrument



Most people enjoy listening to music and have their favourite genre. However, a survey showed that fewer than 25% of the population play a musical instrument. The rest are probably missing out.

Research has shown that playing a musical instrument has huge benefits. It makes you more patient for one thing and gives you a sense of achievement. Studies have shown that music practice improves memory and concentration, with 70% of musicians reporting that they feel sharper mentally. It's likely to improve your mood too.

The world would be a better place with more musicians. That means more people learning to play, and it should start with young people.

I think there is a mix of **opinion** and **fact** here. Let's have a look at some sentences to see whether they are fact or opinion. I suggest you do this with another hot chocolate... Put a cross in one of the last two columns, depending on whether you think it is a fact or an opinion.



Statement	Fact	Opinion
Most people enjoy listening to music.		
However, a survey showed that less than 25% of the population play an instrument.		
They are probably missing out.		
Research has shown that playing a musical instrument has huge benefits.		
Studies have shown that music practice improves memory and concentration with 70% of musicians reporting that they feel sharper mentally.		
The world would be a better place with more musicians.		
...it should start with young people.		

Presenting Opinion as Fact

Sometimes writers let their opinion affect how they presents the facts to make you think in a particular way. You see this a lot when there's been some sort of a disaster when the journalist wants to make things more dramatic to entertain you. Read the following report about Bakerhouse floods. Can you highlight where the reporter gives an **opinion** rather than **fact**?

Bakerhouse was recovering last night after the worst flash floods in over a century. The flood swept through the little Cumbrian village destroying a bridge and making 25% of the houses uninhabitable. With no sign of the rain abating, there are surely fears in the village that the floods might return without warning and with even worse consequences this time.

Did you notice that although the first sentence was probably based in fact the last sentence was pure opinion on behalf of the journalist! Let's look at it again.

With no sign of the rain abating, there are surely fears in the village that the floods might return without warning and with even worse consequences this time.



Well there might well be fears in the village of a repeat disaster, but the journalist can't know this. He isn't a weather expert and couldn't predict if there were more floods on the way! This is one of the more obvious ways in which a journalist presents **opinion as fact**. Because it is tagged onto the end of a factual statement, we accept it's a fact even though it's really just an opinion.

Another way to spot this sort of writing is that the writer will use **forceful language**, **humour** or **write things that aren't supported by evidence**. Let's look at these in turn: