Identifying Bias

Guided Practice for Students
Example: Website

- **A Look Back at John Brown**

- **INITIAL OBSERVATIONS:**
  - I see that this page is called *Prologue Magazine* and that there’s an issue number and author’s name given.
  - I see links in the top ribbon for searching different databases and collections within the National Archives as well as previous issues of this online magazine.
  - As I scroll the page, I can read subheadings such as “Some Definitions of Terrorism,” “What Brown Did,” “Who Was John Brown?,” “Terrorist, Guerrilla Fighter, Revolutionary?,” and “Remembering, Honoring, John Brown.”
  - I notice five images of primary sources (photos and documents) with captions and source citations.
  - At the bottom of the page, I can read about the author and his credentials and the sources he used for this article. I can also find more information about the National Archives.
Example: Website

- **A Look Back at John Brown**

- **CREDIBILITY:**
  - This article appears in the online magazine Prologue which is housed on the National Archives website. I can learn more about the National Archives by clicking on the ABOUT US button at the bottom of the page.
  - The author’s name is Paul Finkelman, and his credentials are explained at the bottom of the page.
  - The purpose of the article is to inform anyone who has an interest in abolition, or the events related to John Brown’s Raid at Harper’s Ferry.
  - There is no advertising on the page. The National Archives is government funded, but there was a disclaimer indicating that the articles published in the magazine do not necessarily represent views of the Archives or any other government agency.
Example: Website

- A Look Back at John Brown

- ACCURACY:
  - This article was written in 2011 but was reviewed as recently as May 14, 2021.
  - The author provides sources at the end of the article.
  - The author presents detailed descriptions of Brown’s actions and how he was viewed by Northerners and Southerners, as well as making some comparisons of his actions to those in recent American history, all with appropriate language.
Example: Website

For abolitionists and antislavery activists, black and white, Brown emerged as a hero, a martyr, and ultimately, a harbinger of the end of slavery. Most Northern whites, especially those not committed to abolition, were aghast at the violation of his action. Yet there was also widespread support for him in the region. Northerners variously came to see Brown as an antislavery saint, a brave but foolish extremist, a lunatic, and a threat to the Union.

The future Republican governor of Massachusetts, John A. Andrew, summed up the feelings of many Northerners when he refused to endorse Brown’s tactics or the wisdom of the raid, but declared that “John Brown himself is right.” But most Republican politicians worried that they would be tarred by his extremism and lose the next election. Democrats and what remained of the Whigs (who would become Constitutional Unionists), by contrast, feared that Brown’s raid would polarize the nation, put the Republicans in power, and chase the South out of the Union.

For white Southerners, Brown was the worst possible nightmare: a fearless, committed abolitionist, armed, accompanied by blacks, and willing to die to end slavery. Indeed, in the minds of Southerners, Brown was the greatest threat to slavery the South had ever witnessed. Most Southerners had at least a vague fear of slave rebellions. But Southerners had convinced themselves that most slaves were content with their status and that, in any event, blacks were incapable of anything worse than sporadic violence. Brown, however, raised the ominous possibility of armed black slaves, led by whites, who together would destroy Southern white society.

• **A Look Back at John Brown**

• **BALANCED:**
  
  • This article outlines a reasonable account of John Brown’s life and the significance of the aftermath of his raid.
  
  • The author presents information that addresses perspectives of Northerners Southerners, supporters and opponents of John Brown, and the general population of the country at the time who were captivated by the story.
  
  • The only perspective I don’t see would be that of the slaves, particularly since Brown was convinced that they would join his raid. I would have to search for other resources to learn of their stories.
Example: Website

• A Look Back at John Brown
• SUPPORTED:
  • The author uses specific details such as dates and names of places and people significant to the events in John Brown’s life.
  • The author uses direct quotes a few times and provides the details for each source at the bottom of the page.
  • The author provides full captions and citations for the images used.

Perhaps we end up accepting the argument of the abolitionist lawyer and later governor of Massachusetts, John A. Andrew, who declared “whether the enterprise of John Brown and his associates in Virginia was wise or foolish, right or wrong; I only know that, whether the enterprise itself was the one or the other, John Brown himself is right.”

A Look Back at John Brown

SUMMARY

• Overall, I would consider this to be a reliable source with minimal bias. The author is a distinguished historian with considerable expertise in topics related to slavery.
• The information is accurate and aligns with other sources I have viewed about John Brown.
• The author presents a wide perspective of the events and significance for the topic.
• The article is well-supported with credible information and images.

QUESTIONS

• Are there any accounts of free blacks or slaves about the actions of John Brown?
John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War
Practice #1: Website

- John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War

Click on the link and skim the website’s structure and content. What do you see? What can you read or view? Is there any sound playing? Don't worry about evaluating what you see, you will do that in the next step.

Record your initial observations here:
John Brown’s Failed Raid on Harper’s Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War

Look again at the source and read only the article titled “John Brown’s Failed Raid on Harper’s Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War.”

Evaluate the article for its CREDIBILITY by considering:

1. What can you learn about the organization who runs the How Stuff Works website?
2. What can you learn about the author of the article?
3. Does the author use any wording that is overly positive or negative or leads you to believe they have a position on the topic of John Brown?
4. Is there advertising on the page? If so, how might it impact your understanding of this article?
5. What do you think is the purpose of the article? What makes you think that?
Practice #1: Website

John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War

Evaluate the article for its ACCURACY by considering:

1. When was the article published? Updated or reviewed?

2. Does the author provide any sources for the information in the article? If so, are they credible? If no sources are given, why do you think that is?

3. Does the author make any exaggerated claims or phrases?

4. Would you trust the information in this article? Why or why not?

Record your thoughts here

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Practice #1: Website

John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War

Evaluate the article for its **BALANCE** by considering:

1. Does the author present balanced information? If not, can you think of a perspective that should be accounted for?

2. Can you tell if the author favors one perspective over another? How?

Record your thoughts here
John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War

Evaluate the article for its **SUPPORT** by considering:

1. Does the author provide evidence-based information? If yes, list at least two pieces of evidence the author provides.

2. If sources are not provided, what about this article would encourage you to use the information for your own research?

Record your thoughts here
John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War

What would be your final judgment about this source and identifying potential bias?

What other questions do you have about this source or the information?

Record your explanation here:

JUDGMENT:
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QUESTIONS
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Practice #2: Book

John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry Graphic Novel
Practice #2: Book

John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry Graphic Novel

Click on the link and skim the book's structure and content. What do you see? What can you read or view?

Record your initial observations here:

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Practice #2: Book

John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry Graphic Novel

Look again at the source and read the graphic novel.

Evaluate the book for its CREDIBILITY by considering:

1. What can you learn about the Graphic Library series or the publisher Capstone press?
2. What can you learn about the author of the novel?
3. Does the author use any wording that is overly positive or negative or leads you to believe they have a position on the topic of John Brown?
4. Is there advertising present in the novel? If so, how might it impact your understanding of this book?
5. What do you think is the purpose of the book? What makes you think that?

Record your thoughts here

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Practice #2: Book

John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry Graphic Novel

Evaluate the book for its ACCURACY by considering:

1. When was the book published? Updated or reviewed?

2. Does the author provide any sources for the information in the article? If so, are they credible? If no sources are given, why do you think that is?

3. Does the author make any exaggerated claims or phrases? Do the illustrations reflect the language or tone in the novel?

4. Would you trust the information in this article? Why or why not?

Record your thoughts here

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Practice #2: Book

John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry Graphic Novel

Evaluate the article for its **BALANCE** by considering:

1. Does the author present balanced information? If not, can you think of a perspective that should be accounted for?
2. Can you tell if the author favors one perspective over another? How?

Record your thoughts here:

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Evaluate the book for its **SUPPORT** by considering:

1. Does the author provide evidence-based information? If yes, list at least two pieces of evidence the author provides.

2. If sources are not provided, what about this article would encourage you to use the information for your own research?

Record your thoughts here

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Practice #2: Book

John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry Graphic Novel

What would be your final judgment about this source and identifying potential bias?

What other questions do you have about this source or the information?

Record your explanation here:

JUDGMENT:

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QUESTIONS

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Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, October 31, 1859
Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, October 31, 1859

Click on the link and skim the page for this document. What do you see? What can you read or view? Be sure to look at all three images of the letter and accompanying envelope as well as the transcription on the left.

Record your initial observations here:
Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, October 31, 1859

Look again at the source and read the text of the letter.

Evaluate the letter for its **CREDIBILITY** by considering:

1. What can you learn about the writer Charles H. Ray?
2. Does the author use any wording that is overly positive or negative or leads you to believe they have a position on the topic of John Brown?
3. What do you think is the purpose of the letter? What makes you think that?

Record your thoughts here
Practice #3: Primary Source Document

Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, October 31, 1859

Evaluate the letter for its **ACCURACY** by considering:

1. When was the letter written?
2. Does the author provide any reference to events you’ve already learned in your research of John Brown?
3. Does the author make any exaggerated claims or phrases?
4. Would you trust the information in this letter? Why or why not?

Record your thoughts here
Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, October 31, 1859

Evaluate the letter for its BALANCE by considering:

1. Does the author present balanced information?
2. Can you tell if the author favors one perspective over another? How?

Record your thoughts here
Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, October 31, 1859

Evaluate the letter for its SUPPORT by considering:

1. Does the author provide evidence-based information? If yes, list at least two pieces of evidence the author provides.

2. If sources are not provided, what about this letter would encourage you to use the information for your own research?

Record your thoughts here:

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Practice #3: Primary Source Document

Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, October 31, 1859

What would be your final judgment about this source and identifying potential bias?

What other questions do you have about this source or the information?

Record your explanation here:

JUDGMENT:

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Sources


