

Bias

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What is it? Why did we need to recognise it?



Bias is putting across an unfair or unbalanced opinion.

If you were asked to write fair and balanced account of a football match between Manchester United and Arsenal you would have to describe exactly what happened truthfully.

If you supported Arsenal, you might describe any Manchester United goal as 'lucky', but any Arsenal goal as 'fantastic' or 'skilful'. Doing this would be biased. You would be putting across an unfair or unbalanced opinion.

This is an account of a football match written by a Manchester United fan.
Manchester United lost 4-0 !

"Arsenal were so lucky at the match. The superb and skilful Man United players were beaten by the lucky, cheating Arsenal players. The referee was totally biased, he allowed four goals that were all offside. I have never seen so much luck and cheating."

Here the writer is showing bias. Arsenal are always described a lucky or cheating, whereas Man United are always described as superb. He insults the referee and gives no credit to the Arsenal players.

As historians we have to be very careful of bias - if we are using a source from a long time ago, it is important to know who wrote the source, who created the source and, most importantly, why they wrote what they did. Did they have a reason for writing what they did? Were they being fair and balanced, or were they showing bias?

Bias can be very useful though - it allows us to learn about people's opinions, what they believed, including what or who they supported. Recognising bias is a skill that all historians need to develop.

Questions

1. Copy and complete the box on the right, adding in the words in the table below:

unbalanced	opinion
fantastic	beliefs
opinions	unfair
show	lucky
terrible	supports

Bias is where someone has an _____ opinion about something. We can recognise bias by finding _____. Bias is useful to us, as it helps us find out a person's _____ or _____.

If someone _____ a particular football team, they are likely to _____ bias when describing a match. Everything their team does would be described as _____, and everything the opposing team does would be described as _____ or _____.

2. Copy out the biased report of the football match. In your own words, explain why the report is biased.
3. Now rewrite the football report pretending you are an Arsenal supporter - think how it would change.
4. You now have two biased accounts - what do you need to do to work out what really happened?
4. Why do historians have to be careful of bias?
5. How is bias useful to historians?
6. Imagine you are investigating the Battle of Hastings. You have six sources and you know they are all biased. Would this be a problem? [Explain in a paragraph - think carefully about your earlier work.]