
Questioning as we learn: An introduction to critical thinking

Material for Higher Education students in Sierra Leone by INASP, UK



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Unit 4 - Snippet 89

Distinguishing facts and opinions

As you are reading or listening to a speaker, it is often important to find out whether you are offered a fact or an opinion. Let's begin with what facts and opinions have in common: both are statements. The first distinction between the two is that a fact is objective, while an opinion is subjective. A fact can be proved by direct experience – observation or testing – to be true or false, and it can be objectively verified. An opinion, on the other hand, expresses feelings, judgements, preferences and predictions which you can agree or disagree with. Opinions can be supported with facts or knowledgeable opinions.

Sometimes, in communication – whether written or oral – it can be difficult to tell fact from opinion because the two become entangled. Take, for instance, this statement:

The preferred scientific name of the tiger is 'panthera tigris', as you can see in the 'IUCN Red List of Threatened Species'.

Is this a fact or an opinion? You can verify quite easily that the IUCN Red List (accessible at iucnredlist.org) does indeed give 'panthera tigris' as the scientific name for tigers. Just go to the IUCN Red List and look that up (<https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/15955/50659951>). And the IUCN Red List also states that there are synonyms such as 'Felis tigris Linnaeus, 1758'. However, the term 'preferred' in the statement above makes us ponder: Who has decided that this is the preferred name? And which criteria have been used for this decision? Has the preference been inferred from the fact that the term 'panthera tigris' is more often mentioned in scientific literature than synonyms? Or because other taxonomic sources list 'panthera tigris' as the scientific name too?

So it seems it is rather an opinion than a fact that the preferred scientific name is 'panthera tigris', as the preference is based on underlying criteria which not all people may accept. Now, to make sure that we express no opinion here, but only verifiable facts, we can change the statement above as follows:

According to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species', the scientific name of the tiger is 'panthera tigris'.