

# Casebook Assignment

Effective Writing I: Spring 2005



At the heart of our free, democratic society is the notion of informed choice. Our “information age” seemingly provides all the necessary information we need to make informed choices about the complex issues that confront us. Fortunately, the Internet seems to make that information more readily available than it ever was. Unfortunately, however, the picture becomes less rosy when we consider that despite the wealth of information at our fingertips, we also live, undeniably, in an age of mass media “spin,” an age in which we are fed on a diet of opinions rather than facts. It’s been observed by countless critics how many of our traditionally “objective” sources of information have turned wildly sensationalistic, unabashedly profit-driven, or blatantly politically biased. When the top-rated cable news network is exposed for engaging in paid propaganda, when documentary filmmakers abandon standards of “objectivity” to produce films intended to swing presidential elections, we may feel we’re living in an age when “objective truth” has receded into virtual nothingness. Never has it been more difficult, and therefore more important, to gain the skill of separating fact from opinion. Only by doing so can we hope to arrive at an informed choice that is rational as well as “informed.”

**Objectives:** This collaborative exercise (1) helps students to learn methods for gathering and selecting information; (2) helps students become knowledgeable about a controversial or debatable issue by exploring and analyzing more than one side of that arguable issue; (3) provides an opportunity for students to practice critical thinking skills such as questioning, analyzing, and synthesizing; (4) helps students learn to identify and evaluate a writer’s use of argumentation by identifying claims, examining reasoning, and analyzing evidence; (5) asks students to collaboratively produce editorial writing that questions, analyzes, and evaluates; and (6) provides an opportunity for students to develop teamwork skills.

**Directions:** As a collaborative group, assemble a casebook composed of no less than four articles which demonstrate the range of positions that are possible on a debatable issue of your choice. The following steps are all necessary components of this assignment:

1. **Select four articles** that explore and help demonstrate the range of positions that people take on this issue. Aim to select articles that you feel are especially credible, that argue their position effectively or persuasively. You may also wish to explore pieces that you feel are especially not-credible to provide an instructive contrast. You may also wish to include articles which you feel are especially informative, though not persuasive one way or the other. These are the articles you will feature in your casebook, though you can include others in an Appendix.
2. **Write an Overall Introduction** to your casebook (1-2 pages) which (1) presents the topic, and the controversy surrounding the topic, to your readers in an engaging way; (2) explains the range of positions you discovered; and (3) introduces the four articles you will feature by placing them into the context of the range of positions you’ve described.
3. **Write a Headnote** (1-2 paragraphs) to each of the four articles you will highlight in the casebook. The Headnote appears before each article on a separate sheet of paper. Its purpose is to introduce your source by, first, stating the title and the author, as well as a short sentence or two to indicate the author’s credentials; second, stating where you found the article—in print (where?) on the Internet (where? describe the site). Your aim in presenting information about the author and the publication is to help establish the source’s credibility or lack of credibility. By this kind of careful examination, you may be able to determine whether the article is likely to be biased, and how. Any biases should be taken into consideration when considering the writer’s statements. Thirdly, the Headnote should contain a brief summary of the article and a reminder of how it fits into the overall context of the casebook as a whole. Finally, present at least one pertinent question arising from a consideration of this article.
4. **Write an Endnote** (1-2 paragraphs) to each of your four articles. At the end of each article, discuss whether you judge the article to be based on fact, opinion, or some combination of both. Explain whether you think the opinions are presented persuasively or not and why.
5. **Write an Overall Conclusion** to your casebook which outlines the major questions you think it reasonable to ask before making a decision on the issue. Then present your group’s assessment of the stronger position. Fully explain your reasoning. If there is dissent in your group, make sure everyone’s views are expressed in the conclusion.

## Special Instructions

- For all the writing you do in the casebook, your point of view should be first person plural (we, our) to reflect the fact that your group is the collective author.
- Make sure your finished casebook is assembled adequately. You can use a folder, a three-ring binder, etc.—whatever works for your particular project. The pages should be easy to flip through when assembled and they shouldn’t fall apart.
- Please include a cover page that reflects your chosen topic and states the name of everyone in your group.
- You can use graphics to lend a visual element to your project, or not, at your discretion.

