

Thinking critically

If you get your news from the papers or TV, you have to make up your mind about what you read or see.

Who can you believe? Whose opinions can you respect?

In this exercise, you will look at some statements of fact and opinion and try to evaluate them critically.

The foot and mouth epidemic of 2002

Foot and mouth disease is a very infectious disease that affects sheep and cattle. During 2001, an epidemic of foot and mouth disease spread throughout England. There was a fierce national debate about how best to control it. In the end, the government decided on two main measures to stop it spreading:

- Preventing the movement of animals.
- Slaughtering whole herds ('culling') when new cases were identified.

Some people argued strongly that healthy animals should be vaccinated so that they could not become infected, but this was not done. By the end of 2001, the disease had finally been eradicated. Almost 10,000 farms had been affected and over 4 million animals had been slaughtered.

During the crisis, the press reported statements from all the affected parties. These statements typically mixed together facts with opinion. In this exercise, imagine you are a civil servant, whose job is to read the newspapers daily and brief the Minister for Agriculture. You need to read the reports **critically**. Can you tell the minister what is fact, and what is opinion? How sure can we be of the statements being made?

What to do

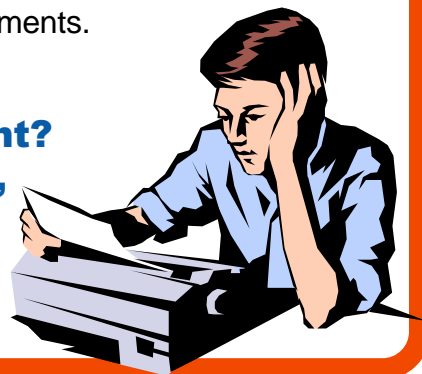
Read each of the statements carefully, and try to separate **fact** from **opinion**.

- If you think a statement is fact, underline it.
- If you think a statement is opinion, draw a ring around it.
- If you are uncertain, do not mark the statement.

Take care! Some statements may be part fact, part opinion.

When you have compared your ideas with others in the class, select a few statements which interest you. Try to decide how you could test these statements.

What evidence would you look for which might support or undermine the statement? If you are advising government ministers, they might want to set up an inquiry, or arrange for some research to clear up areas of uncertainty.



A farmer says:

- 1 In the interests of animal welfare, vaccination should be used in preference to slaughter as a means of controlling foot and mouth disease.
- 2 My children have not been able to go to school because of the ban on movements.
- 3 Vaccinated animals carry the virus and may be *contagious* even if they remain healthy.
- 4 Rare breeds of sheep and cattle may be permanently destroyed by the policy of culling. Genetic diversity will be lost.
- 5 The village has been deeply affected by the culling policy, with many families in crisis.



A government vet says:

- 1 Healthy animals are sometimes killed because even experts cannot tell whether an animal has foot and mouth disease in the early stages.
- 2 There are 240,000 livestock farms in the country.
- 3 Wild deer are likely to remain for many years a source of infection for livestock.
- 4 Some farmers are totally irresponsible and try to move their livestock under cover of darkness.
- 5 Animals that 'recover' from the disease continue to suffer with poor health, so it is better for them if they are saved from suffering and are killed.



An animal rights activist says:

- 1 The government is taking such severe action only because it wants the crisis to be over before the General Election, scheduled for June.
- 2 Cows and sheep may not be intelligent, but they have feelings just like us.
- 3 Farmers are very selfish in the way they treat their livestock.
- 4 Other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, show more respect for animals.
- 5 Vaccination of healthy animals would be a better way of controlling this disease.



An army commander says:

- 1 Because of the huge numbers involved, we were called in to help with culling and the disposal of animal carcasses.
- 2 The number of infected animals can double every 8 days.
- 3 Once a new herd is infected, every delay of 4 days or more before culling, allows a new cycle of infections to occur.
- 4 The burning of carcasses before burial is both essential and environmentally safe.
- 5 Having broad public support for a policy makes it more effective.

