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Acting Bias: Staging Media Analysis in First-Year Writing

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Acting Bias: Staging Media Analysis in First-Year Writing

Freddie (Fiona) Harris Ramsby

Overview

In first-year writing classrooms, embodied teaching methods, such as Kathryn Dawson and Bridget Kiger Lee's drama-based pedagogy (DBP), "[provide] an innovative means to stimulate students' creativity...to foster learning that sticks, cultivating brains that retain information" (Harris Ramsby 1). Combining Newman P. Birk and Genevieve B. Birk's analytical framework for identifying frames and slanting in language, as well as Brazilian theater director and activist Augusto Boal's Image Theater (*Theatre of the Oppressed*, 112), this assignment uses DBP to assist students' analysis of political bias in news media, helping them assess how left-leaning and right-leaning sources construct divergent versions of the same reality. The assignment's ultimate goal is to help students build foundational media literacy skills they can then apply to evaluating other news sources.

With their instructor in a facilitator role—guiding movement and prompting observations—students craft physical tableaux to render *visibly tangible* how news sources frame the same event differently. Specifically, to use the Birks' heuristic, students enact how news writers subtly and sometimes not so subtly *select facts*, *emphasize information*, and *charge* language to slant an event favorably, unfavorably, or neutrally. Indeed, by positioning their bodies to represent what sources include, exclude, elevate, or marginalize, students might understand this analytical heuristic kinesthetically rather than abstractly.

This dramatic approach is especially vital for developing college writers' critical literacy, where over-reliance on AI might threaten cognitive development if not appropriately mediated (Gerlich 1). Instructors can adapt this activity for any first-year or advanced writing course focused on critical reading and media literacy, rhetorical analysis, and/or research source evaluation.

Time Commitment

3-4 class sessions.

Materials

Instructors will need access to [Tangle News](#), a newsletter that curates and compares news coverage of current events across the political spectrum, presenting left-leaning and right-leaning perspectives side-by-side. Additionally, they should be familiar with the Birks' "Selection, Slanting, and Charged Language" (in [Language Awareness: Readings for College Writers](#)), as well as Boal's "Image Theater." An overview of this approach can be found in Chapter 4 of Boal's [Theatre of the Oppressed](#), "Poetics of the Oppressed" (112). Finally, Chapter 6, "Image Work," in Kathryn Dawson and Bridget Kiger Lee's [Drama-Based Pedagogy: Activating Learning Across the Curriculum](#), offers excellent ideas for understanding Boal's image theater in educational settings.

The class should have access to a space that allows for movement and physical arrangement of participants. With this in mind, instructors should be familiar with how what gets emphasized, centered, or marginalized in text can be demonstrated through guided positionality in a performance space. The following table offers a foundational understanding of staging these positions and the power they endow or withhold.

	STAGE DIRECTIONS & POWER POSITIONS	
Upstage Right: Actor Looking Downstage left = less powerful	Upstage Center, Looking Downstage: Somewhat powerful	Upstage Left: Actor looking downstage right = less powerful
Downstage Right: Actor looking upstage diagonal = not as powerful	Downstage Center: Actor looking straight at audience = very powerful	Downstage Left: Actor looking upstage diagonally = not as powerful
	AUDIENCE	

Table 1: Stage Directions and Power Positions

In addition, blocks or platforms of varying heights can demonstrate emphasis through vertical staging levels. Indeed, higher elevation = more power/dominance.

Students will need printed or digital copies of the *Tangle News* comparisons (choosing from 2-4 different sources covering the same event), as well as copies of Birk and Birk’s “Selection, Slanting, and Charged Language” for reference. Highlighters or colored pencils/pens for text annotation are also helpful, as the colors help differentiate between slanting by facts, emphasis, or charged language. For students who prefer not to use color, different underlining styles (single, double, wavy) or margin labels (F, E, CL) can serve the same purpose.

Assignment Process

Session 1: Introduction to Performing Slanting

- Students read Birk and Birk's framework on slanting (selection of facts, emphasis, and charged language) and review one *Tangle News* comparison of how multiple sources covered the same event.
- The instructor leads theater warm-up games exploring how bodily positioning, stage levels, and spatial relationships (upstage/downstage, center/periphery) demonstrate emphasis and visibility. See, for instance, Dawson and Lee, "The Great Game of Power," Exercise 6.g.iv (*Drama Based Pedagogy* 192).
- Using a sample *Tangle News* comparison, the instructor introduces the concept of image theater tableaux—frozen images created with students' bodies. This demonstrates how physical positioning can represent how media sources slant events favorably or unfavorably through:
 - Facts that are made visible/invisible, central/peripheral, or emphasized/minimized.
 - Information that gains emphasis or loses importance based on where it is positioned in the source.
 - Charged language that constructs events or persons favorably or unfavorably.
 - Note, Dawson and Lee's "Body as Image" is a helpful introduction to this process (194).
- The instructor facilitates a discussion connecting the physical sensations of positioning (high/low, center/margin, visible/hidden) to the effects of slanting identified in the *Tangle* texts.
- *Note:* For this day, the instructor should prepare the sample tableaux prior to the class, then arrange students into individual tableau positions *first* so they can feel the

concepts in their bodies. Students then return to their seats to circle or highlight parts of the sample *Tangle News* text where they identify these slanting techniques at work.

Session 2: Rehearsing Source-Specific Tableaux

- Students form small acting teams (3-5 students), with each team assigned to represent one news source's framing of an event from their chosen *Tangle News* comparison. (This should be different from the sample source used for the previous session's introduction).
- With the instructor's assistance, teams collaborate to create a frozen tableaux that uses all three slanting techniques, each technique being explored 1 at a time. The instructor can help shape the actors' positions to show
 - which facts their source includes/excludes (selection)—reminder: Students could be on stage or off stage. Or they could explore levels as facts are deemphasized or missing altogether.
 - How vertical levels and spatial relationships show what their source emphasizes (emphasis).
 - How contrasting body language and/or facial expressions convey the emotional tone of charged language choices.
 - See further suggestions for these positionings in Appendix 1.
- The instructor circulates, helping the students translate each news source into their tableaux. They can ask guiding questions like, "Which fact does your source feature most prominently?" And "How can you show that with your bodies?"
- Teams rehearse and refine their tableaux, making adjustments based on instructor feedback and peer observation.

Session 3: Presentations and Critical Analysis

- The student teams present their rehearsed tableaux side-by-side so that the class can observe how the same event is slanted across different news sources.
- The instructor prompts audience observation. For instance, the instructor could
 - Ask the audience, "What do you notice?" about what's emphasized and deemphasized, and "Who or what has the power here?"
 - Tap actors to speak their represented "fact" aloud, or in a comparison of tableaux, ask, "What's missing from this picture?" compared to another tableau about the same event.
- Class debriefs collectively by identifying specific slanting techniques visible across all tableaux and discussing how different physical choices represented these strategies.
- Students snap pictures of the different tableaux to aid written analysis in the next session.

Session 4: Written Analysis

- Teams use their highlighters/colored pencils — or numbered/symbol codes for those who prefer not to use color — to connect photographed tableaux to examples of slanting in their given *Tangle* sources.
- In a shared document, the teams write a formal analysis that reflects on how each tableau choice represented their source's slanting strategies. They should connect specific physical demonstrations to specific quoted textual evidence.
- Teams share excerpts from their written analysis with the rest of the class, discussing how the embodied experience changed or deepened their understanding of media bias.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will be able to

- Identify and analyze how news sources slant events through selection of facts, emphasis, and charged language using Birk and Birk's analytical heuristic
- Use drama-based pedagogy to help them understand rhetorical strategies kinesthetically by creating physical tableaux that represent bias in news media
- Assess source credibility and apply media literacy skills to evaluate research sources across the political spectrum

Learning Accommodations

- Students may participate as performers or directors (telling performers where to stand and suggesting gestures and facial expressions) to accommodate different comfort levels with embodied performance.
- For students with mobility limitations, tableaux can be adapted using hand gestures, seated positioning, or facial expressions, or students can direct other performers.
- Material should be presented in multiple formats, including verbal instruction, visual demonstration, photographed evidence of tableaux, and written handouts of Birk and Birk's framework.

Works Cited

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Tangle News, <https://www.readtangle.com/>.

Appendix A

The following offers ideas for how students can embody slanting techniques to represent the Birks' heuristic:

Slanting by Selection of Facts

Who's present/absent or maximized/minimized on stage reveals what facts each source includes/excludes or backgrounds/foregrounds.

Suggestions for tableau arrangement.

- After a comparison of sources, actors representing excluded facts could stand offstage or face upstage with their backs to the audience, while included facts are onstage/face forward.
- Students could also stage a scene with all facts in all sources present. An audience member could then be instructed to

physically remove/turn away actors representing facts their news source omits.

- Actors representing downplayed facts could crouch on the ground or hide behind prominent facts. They would be present but not very visible.

Slanting by Emphasis

Stage levels, positioning, and the number of actors (size) show what gets stressed.

Suggestions for tableau arrangement.

- Information given emphasis in a source is positioned at a higher level. For instance, a student could stand on a platform or blocks.
- The most important information could be placed center stage, while less important information stands upstage or stage right or left.
- Multiple actors embody heavily emphasized information (like a clickbait headline). Single actors can represent information that is minimized.

Slanting by Charged Language

Physical qualities and confrontational/less confrontational stances on stage mirror emotional connotations of word choices.

Suggestions for tableaux arrangement

- Use body language to represent emotion. For instance, "Protestor" vs. "Domestic Terrorist" could be visualized by an actor standing peacefully waving a sign or lunging aggressively.

- Students could use sharp, aggressive hand gestures and facial expressions to enact negatively charged words, while open, flowy gestures and smiles could indicate positively charged words.
- Spatial relationships can also demonstrate how words are charged. For instance, students can stand close/far, facing/turned away, and/or clustered/dispersed to physically embody the emotional connotation of the word choices.