

in accordance with the way things actually are. People frequently misrepresent or falsely describe things, especially when they have an interest in seeing them in a certain way. Advertisers often do this to keep a buyer from seeing the weaknesses in a product. If an advertisement states, "Our water is 100% pure," when in fact the water contains small parts of chemicals such as chlorine and lead, it is inaccurate. If an advertisement states, "This bread contains 100% whole wheat," when the whole wheat has been bleached and enriched and the bread contains many additives, the advertisement is inaccurate.

Good thinkers listen carefully to statements and, when there is reason for skepticism, question whether what they hear is true and accurate. In the same way, they question the extent to which what they read is correct when asserted as fact. Critical thinking, then, implies a healthy skepticism about public descriptions of what is and is not fact.

At the same time, because we tend to think from a narrow, self-serving perspective, assessing ideas for accuracy can be difficult. We naturally tend to believe that our thoughts are automatically accurate just because they are ours and, therefore, that the thoughts of those who disagree with us are inaccurate. We also fail to question statements others make that conform to what we already believe, while we tend to question statements that conflict with our views. However, as critical thinkers, we force ourselves to accurately assess our own views as well as those of others. We do this even if it means facing deficiencies in our thinking.

### 5.3, 5.4 *Think for Yourself*

#### RECOGNIZING INACCURATE STATEMENTS

Can you identify a statement you heard recently that was clear but inaccurate? You will find an abundance of examples in everyday statements that people often make in praise or criticism. People in general have a tendency to make two kinds of inaccurate statements: *false positives* about the people they personally like (these would be untrue positive statements about people they like) and *false negatives* about the people they personally dislike (untrue negative things about people they don't like). Politically motivated statements tend to follow a similar pattern. See whether you can think of an example of an inaccurate statement from your recent experience. Write out or orally explain your answer.

#### IN SEARCH OF THE FACTS

One of the most important critical thinking skills is the skill of assessing the accuracy of "factual" claims (someone's assertion that such-and-so is a fact). In an ad in the *New York Times* (Nov. 29, 1999, p. A15), a coalition of 60 nonprofit organizations accused the World Trade Organization (a coalition of 134 nation states) of operating in

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secret, undermining democratic institutions and the environment. The nonprofit coalition argued that the working class and the poor have not significantly benefited as a result of the last 20 years of rapid expansion of global trade. They alleged, among other things, the following facts:

1. "American CEOs are now paid, on average, 419 times more than line workers, and the ratio is increasing."
2. "Median hourly wages for workers are down by 10% in the last 10 years."
3. "The top 20% of the U.S. population owns 84.6% of the country's wealth."
4. "The wealth of the world's 475 billionaires now equals the annual incomes of more than 50% of the world population combined."

Using whatever sources you can find (including the website of the Turning Point Project, the nonprofit coalition, at [www.turnpoint.org](http://www.turnpoint.org)), discuss the probable accuracy of the factual claims. For example, find the website (if there is one) of the World Trade Organization. The group might challenge some of the facts alleged or advance facts of its own that put the charges of the nonprofit coalition into a different perspective.

## Precision

Questions focusing on making thinking more precise include:

- Could you give me more details?
- Could you be more specific?

A statement can be both clear and accurate but not precise, as in "Jack is overweight." (We don't know how overweight Jack is—one pound or 500 pounds.) To be precise is to give the details necessary for someone to understand exactly what is meant. Some situations don't call for detail. If you ask, "Is there any milk in the refrigerator?" and I answer, "Yes," both the question and the answer are probably precise enough for the circumstance (although specifying how much milk is there might be relevant). Or imagine that you are ill and go to the doctor. He wouldn't say, "Take 1.4876946 antibiotic pills twice per day." This level of specificity, or precision, would be beyond what is useful in the situation.

In many situations, however, specifics are essential to good thinking. Let's say that your friend is having financial problems and asks you, "What should I do about my situation?" In this case, you want to probe her thinking for specifics. Without the full specifics, you could not help her. You might ask questions such as, "What precisely is the problem? What *exactly* are the variables that bear on the problem? What are some possible solutions to the problem—in detail?"