Distinguishing between fact and opinion

• Being able to discern the differences between fact and opinion will help your evaluation of the reliability and usefulness of texts you encounter.

• Critical thinking is the best possible way of determining which statements are fact and which statements are opinion.

• It may seem at first that the differences are easy to see; however, not everything is as black and white as it first seems.
What is a fact?

A fact is something which can be verified with evidence, for example, the river which flows through London is called the Thames.
What is an Opinion?

An opinion is based on belief and viewpoint. Opinions are often personal interpretations and cannot be verified with evidence. For example, 'summer evenings are nicer than winter evenings'. Opinions are often (though not always) preceded with terms such as 'I think', or with adjectives, comparatives and superlatives, such as, 'good', 'better', 'the best'.
Quite often, writers use opinions and fact interchangably. Critical thinking skills can help us, the reader, distinguish facts from opinions quickly and easily.

Fact or opinion

Has the writer used (subjective) adjectives?

Yes  No
Opinion  Fact

Is there any evidence?

No  yes
Fact  opinion

Have they used the words 'think' or 'seem'?

yes  no
Opinion  Fact

Is the evidence reliable?

no  yes
Fact  opinion

Is there any counter evidence?

no  yes
Fact  opinion

Remember: these are not hard and fast rules - some facts will use the words 'seem' and some opinions will not use adjectives, or 'hedged' language.
The earth is round.

Summer follows spring.

The 2010 world cup took place in South Africa.

The British Winter of 2009/2010 was the coldest for 30 years.
I think that rock music is awful.

The legal age for drinking should be lowered to 16.

London is the best city in the world.

Today seems hotter than yesterday
Do you remember that the first page of this .pdf said...

"It may seem at first that the differences are easy to see; however, not everything is as black and white as it first seems"
Indeed, opinions and facts are not always easily identifiable and separable.
How you would classify the following statements: fact or opinion?

You are studying at a University.
You are studying at a good University.
It is one of the best in London.

Queen Mary is a better University than Brunel and Roehampton.
World Marche is the best cafe on the Mile End campus.
You are studying at a University.

You are reading material which is only available on Queen Mary's intranet site, therefore you must be a student at Queen Mary. This statement is a fact.
We first need to qualify the term 'good' before we can make a judgement about whether this is fact or opinion. 'Good' is a very subjective term which could be interpreted in many different ways. For example, the research ratings are very high, the University offers a wide range of subjects and disciplines, the University is multicultural, it is in the east end of London, or it fits the needs of the person who made the statement.

This could be either fact, or opinion, or possibly even both. It depends on whether the statement is based on evidence, or if it is an unsupported idea. That is, you would need league tables to verify this claim.

Whilst this may at first seem to be a factual statement, (given that we all know Queen Mary is a well respected and high achieving University), this could be an opinion. If evidence had not been referred to before the statement was made, this would be an opinion.
It is one of the best in London

This could be either fact, or opinion, or possibly even both. It depends on whether the statement is based on evidence, or if it is an unsupported idea based on belief. You would need statistics on all the Universities in London to verify this claim and make it a fact. This would not be difficult to do.
Queen Mary is a better University than Brunel and Roehampton

This could be either fact, or opinion, or possibly even both. It depends on whether the statement is based on evidence, or if it is an unsupported idea based on a viewpoint or belief. You would need statistics on all 3 Universities to verify this claim.

You would also need to qualify which areas you are referring to. Are you talking about the disciplines, the grounds, the catering?
World Marche is the best cafe on the Mile End campus

Whilst at first this appears to be an opinion (because it uses the superlative 'best'), it could be a fact. You would need to qualify what you mean by 'best' and then you would need to either verify this statement with statistics or with student opinion.
It is also important to remember...
...that facts can be influenced by opinion and bias, especially in the media and in (some) research projects (especially qualitative research). That is, even facts presented as facts, are not always completely objective and 'sacred' as once claimed (Scott, C.P. cited in Edwards, D & D. Cromwell (2009).
In other words, a selector must select the facts he/she will present. In doing so, he/she is exercising a judgement about what he/she thinks is important. This is, in essence, an opinion, as it reflects the beliefs and values of the person writing (Edwards, D & D. Cromwell., 2009. p239).
Edwards and Cromwell point out that, 'Facts] are gathered by human beings guided by mundane, earthy, often compromised beliefs and motives. To choose 'this' fact over 'that' fact is already to express an opinion. To highlight 'this' fact over 'that' fact is to comment (Edwards, D & D. Cromwell., 2009. p3).
Whilst this is quite a philosophical argument, it is good to be aware that bias can influence even the most objective pieces of information.