

A lesson in the fine line between spinning and misleading

A sixth-grade teacher gave us an assignment that remains of great value.

By Jennifer Baker | MAY 3, 2019 — 6:13PM

In sixth grade, I had a fantastic teacher who gave us an inspired assignment. We were to choose a famous “good guy” from history and write a research paper that showcased the hero as a villain. I chose William Shakespeare.

We had to cite our sources (this was well before the days of Wikipedia, so my sources were all books) and ensure that the paper was well-researched. Many hours in the library ensued.

In the end, I turned in a paper that showed that Shakespeare had been a fraud, a terrible husband and father, uneducated and all around not someone I’d want to know. And I hadn’t technically made anything up.

I used well-respected sources including the Encyclopedia Britannica and cited them for all facts and quotes. It was just that many, if not all, of the facts in my paper were taken completely out of context.

A source that related “although no attendance records for the period survive, most biographers agree that Shakespeare was probably educated at a school in Stratford” was cited in my paper as reporting: “There are no records that Shakespeare ever attended school.”

Not a lie. Not wrong. But certainly not the whole truth.

I wish I still had a copy of that paper. I remember it decades later, which is not something I can say of many details of my middle-school education. It was an incredible assignment to give to a 12-year-old. I wonder if any teachers give similar assignments today.

What stuck with me, and this was probably my teacher’s intent, was how easy it was to twist information to suit whatever message you are aiming for. It reinforced the importance of context and of knowing the whole story, rather than taking information at face value.

In the face of today’s information onslaught and accusations of “fake news,” I sincerely hope someone is still teaching 12-year-olds to dig a bit deeper.

I think about that old assignment a lot in my job. I work in communications and marketing for a nonprofit organization. The messages I work with are a pretty easy sell — we feed the hungry, help the homeless, empower families toward self-sufficiency and fight to end poverty. All objectively good things. Even so, there are times when I find myself spinning information so that it appears in the best possible light.

I don’t ever lie; there is no need to. But it tends to sound better to say in a newsletter that “a promising new initiative impacted 30 families in its first year” rather than saying the program failed to reach its original goal of helping 50 families. This is a part of my job that requires a type of creative wordsmithing that I truly enjoy. It is fun to find new ways to say things, better ways to communicate a message or a goal.

But that old assignment from sixth grade has served as a reminder of the fine line between spinning and misleading. The lesson has stayed with me for 20 years.

Honesty is not something to be tossed aside in the name of sales, ratings, propaganda or some so-called “greater good.” It is one thing to present a fact in the best possible light, but another to disregard truth in favor of popularity. If that is something a 12-year-old



ISTOCK

An assignment covering William Shakespeare taught this writer about the fine line between spinning

can learn from a single research paper, I imagine adults are capable of grasping it as well.

Jennifer Baker lives in Minneapolis.
