

Great White Sharks

Magazine Article by Peter Benchley

Can you tell **FACT** from fiction?

Artists and writers often use what they know to be true about the world to create imaginary situations that can seem more real than life itself. But how do you know when a work of fiction is technically accurate and when it's not? Peter Benchley has become well-known for writing factual and fictional works about great white sharks.

LIST IT Choose a movie or a book you have enjoyed that features animals or natural events. For each movie or book, list some of the details that were included, explaining whether they're true or not.

Homeward Bound

1. *Animals can find their way home across hundreds of miles.*

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Text Analysis: Evidence in Informational Text

Writers of informational texts usually support their claims with evidence, such as **facts**, which are statements that can be proved. Be sure you can tell the difference between factual claims, opinions, and commonplace assertions.

Evidence in Informational Text

Factual Claim

a statement that can be proved from evidence such as a fact, personal observation, reliable source, or an expert's opinion

Opinion

a statement of personal belief, feeling, or thought, which does not require proof or evidence

Commonplace Assertion

a statement that many people assume to be true, but which is not necessarily so

As you read, look for evidence that will help you distinguish factual claims from opinions and commonplace assertions.

Reading Skill: Recognize Author's Bias

Bias is the side of an issue that a writer favors. Writers reveal their bias through **loaded language**, strongly positive or negative words. As you read, record loaded language to identify the author's bias.

Loaded Language	Possible Author's Bias
"most wonderful of natural-born killers"	Benchley is impressed by sharks' survival instincts

Vocabulary in Context

Note: Words are listed in the order in which they appear in the article.

demonize (dē'mə-nīz') *v.* give evil, demonic qualities to
*Humans **demonize** an innocent creature out of fear.*

anecdotal (än'ĭk-dōt'l) *adj.* based on observations rather than scientific analysis
*The tourist gave **anecdotal** evidence instead of hard facts.*

consensus (kən-sĕn'səs) *n.* general agreement
*We finally reached a **consensus** after a loud debate.*

scrutiny (skrōōt'n-ē) *n.* close examination or study
*The evidence was subject to close **scrutiny**.*

visceral (vĭs'ər-əl) *adj.* instinctive
*Most scary movies are based on our **visceral** fears.*

prospective (prə-spĕk'tĭv) *adj.* likely to be or become
*The scientist interviewed two **prospective** assistants.*

inadvertence (ĭn'əd-vŭr'tns) *n.* a lack of attention; carelessness
*The **inadvertence** to detail caused errors in a test.*

travesty (trăv'ĭ-stĕ) *n.* a degraded or grotesque likeness
*The trial was a **travesty** because the jury was biased.*

Vocabulary Practice

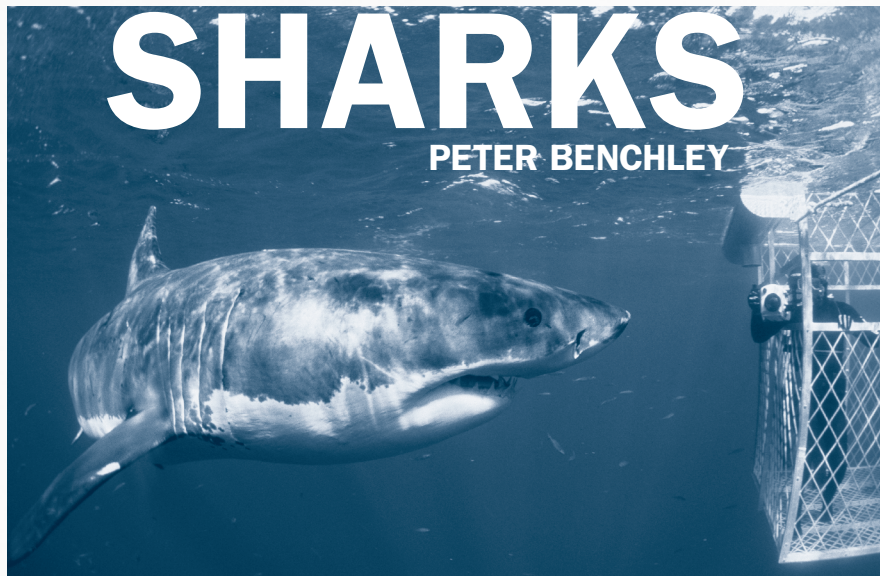
Review the vocabulary words and think about their meanings. Then discuss with a partner what you think Peter Benchley's view of great white sharks will be. Share your predictions with the class.

**SET A PURPOSE
FOR READING**

Read “Great White Sharks” to discover Peter Benchley’s opinion of sharks.

GREAT WHITE SHARKS

PETER BENCHLEY



BACKGROUND Peter Benchley is best known for his novel *Jaws*, which is a book about a hunt for a great white shark that kills members of a beach community. *Jaws* was a bestseller for 40 weeks and was made into a famous movie by Steven Spielberg. Benchley went on to discover that much of what he wrote about sharks was incorrect.

A EVIDENCE

Reread lines 1–8. A **commonplace assertion** is a statement that many people assume to be true but which is not necessarily so. Circle the commonplace assertion that Bentley cites. Underline the factual claim he makes to dispute it.

Considering the knowledge accumulated about great whites in the past 25 years, I couldn’t possibly write *Jaws* today—not in good conscience anyway. Back then, it was generally accepted that great whites were anthropophagous—they ate people by choice. Now we know that almost every attack on a human is an accident. The shark mistakes the human for its normal prey. **A**

Back then, we thought that once a great white
 10 scented blood, it launched a feeding frenzy that
 inevitably led to death. Now we know that nearly
 three-quarters of all bite victims survive, perhaps
 because the shark recognizes that it has made a mistake
 and doesn't return for a second bite.

Back then, we believed that great whites attacked
 boats. Now we know that their sensory systems detect
 movement, sound, and electrical fields, such as those
 caused by metal and motors, in water, and when they
 approach a boat, they're merely coming to investigate.
 20 Granted, investigation by a 3,000-pound animal can
 wreak havoc.¹

Finally, back then, it was OK to **demonize** an
 animal, especially a shark, because man had done
 so since the beginning of time, and, besides, sharks
 appeared to be infinite in number.

No longer. Today we know that these most
 wonderful of natural-born killers, these exquisite
 creatures of evolution, are not only *not* villains, they
 are victims in danger of—if not extinction quite yet—
 30 serious, perhaps even catastrophic, decline. Much of the
 evidence is **anecdotal**. Fishermen and naturalists are
 seeing fewer great whites, and in most places those they
 are seeing are younger and smaller. **B**

Scientists estimate that, worldwide, populations
 of some species of sharks have dropped by 80 percent.
 Though precise numbers of white sharks aren't

demonize (dē'mə-nīz') *v.* to give
 evil, demonic qualities to

anecdotal (ă'nĭk-dōt'l) *adj.* based
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**B RECOGNIZE AUTHOR'S
 BIAS**

Reread lines 26–33. Circle the
 examples of **loaded language**
 that you find here.

1. **wreak havoc:** bring about great destruction.

it also generated a fascination with and, over time, an affection for sharks that had not existed before. These days I receive more than a thousand letters a year from youngsters who were not alive when *Jaws* appeared, and all of them, without exception, want to know more about sharks in general and great whites in particular. **PAUSE & REFLECT**

- 70 Great white sharks are among the true apex predators in the ocean. The largest predatory fish in the world, they have few natural enemies. And so, in balanced nature, there are not very many great whites, and the number grows or shrinks depending on availability of food. They breed late in life and pup relatively few. Again, nobody knows exactly how many, but seven or eight seems to be a safe average. The youngsters appear alive, four or five feet long, weighing 50–60 pounds, fully armed and ready to rumble. Still, many don't
- 80 survive the first year because other sharks, including great whites, will eat them. **D**

Of all the infuriating unknowns about great white sharks, none is more controversial than size. How big can they grow to be? Fishermen from Nova Scotia to South Australia, from Cape Town to Cape Cod claim to have encountered 25-footers, 30-footers, even 36-footers. Usually the proof offered is that the beast was “bigger than the boat.” There have been reports

PAUSE & REFLECT

Based on the article so far, how has Benchley's attitude toward great white sharks changed since he wrote *Jaws*? How has his attitude remained the same?

D EVIDENCE

Reread lines 70–81. Underline the factual claims Benchley makes about the quantity of great white sharks. List three resources that you could use to verify these statements.

1.

2.

3.

scrutiny (skrōōt'n-ē) *n.* close examination or study

How might a reader subject a report on sharks to **scrutiny**?

E EVIDENCE

Informational text often includes opinions as well as factual claims. Reread lines 95–104. Circle the part of the statement that is an opinion. Underline the part that is a factual claim. Explain how you decided what to mark.

of a 23-footer in the waters off Malta and a 21-foot, 90 7,000-pounder off Cuba, but none has held up under **scrutiny**. The largest generally accepted catch—made by lasso, of all things—was a shark 19.5 feet long. The largest great white shark ever caught on rod and reel weighed 2,664 pounds.

According to British biologist Ian Fergusson, chairman of the Shark Trust, no great white shark longer than 19.5 feet has ever been validated, and in a widely circulated e-mail, he expressed irritation at “this stubborn reluctance by some elements of the media 100 to accept the facts and even more of a reluctance to accept that a 16-foot, 4500-pound white shark is big, very big, and should need no further exaggeration to impress even the most discerning of viewers when seen up close.” **E**

I can attest that underwater, cruising toward you out of the gloom with the serene confidence of the invincible, a 12-foot great white looks like a locomotive with malice in mind. . . .

At the moment science accepts about 400 species of 110 sharks, but the number changes as new species are discovered. Of all known species, only four attack human beings with any frequency: bull sharks, tiger sharks, oceanic whitetips, and great whites.

In Australia, between 1876 and 1999, 52 attacks by great whites were recorded, and of them 27 were fatal. In the Mediterranean Sea since 1900 there have been 23 reliably recorded encounters with great whites, including one in 1909 in which the remains of two adults and a child were found inside a single
 120 15-foot-long female shark caught off Augusta, Sicily.

The old adage is true: A swimmer has a better chance of being struck by lightning than killed by a shark. And around the world many, many more people die every year from bee stings, snakebites, falling off ladders, or drowning in bathtubs than from shark attack. None of which, to be sure, detracts from the ghastly, **visceral** horror of being eaten by a huge fish, but all of which should give some comfort to the recreational swimmer. . . .

130 More and more these days it is the naturalists and field operators, guides and dive masters who are contributing to the accumulation of practical knowledge about great whites. To cite just one example: Until recently scientists thought that the scars that mar nearly every mature shark were acquired either from prey that fought back or from ritual biting by **prospective** mates. Now there is eyewitness testimony of aggressive social interaction³ between sharks and also of spectacular threat displays that take
 140 the place of major—potentially fatal—encounters with other white sharks. **F**

3. **aggressive social interaction:** contact that is combative even though there is no actual intent to fight.

visceral (vĭs'ər-əl) *adj.* instinctive

prospective (prə-spĕk'tĭv) *adj.* likely to be or become

F **RECOGNIZE AUTHOR'S BIAS**

Reread lines 130–141. What does the word *spectacular* reveal about Benchley's attitude toward sharks' behavior? Add it to your chart.

Loaded Language



Possible Bias

inadvertence (ĭn'əd-vûr'tns) *n.* a lack of attention; carelessness

travesty (trăv'ĭ-stē) *n.* a degraded or grotesque likeness

Ⓒ RECOGNIZE AUTHOR'S BIAS

Circle the **loaded language** in lines 142–152 and add it to your chart. Why do you think Benchley uses loaded language here?

So we are learning—bit by bit, anecdote by anecdote—more and more about these magnificent predators. We must hope that we're learning enough to save them before, through ignorance and **inadvertence**, we destroy them.

Great white sharks have survived, virtually unchanged, for millions of years. They are as perfectly in tune with their environment as any living thing **150** on the planet. For them to be driven to extinction by man, a relative newcomer, would be more than an ecological tragedy; it would be a moral **travesty**. Ⓒ

Text Analysis: Evidence in Informational Text

In “Great White Sharks” Peter Benchley makes the case that many people have mistaken ideas about sharks. In the chart below, list the factual claims, opinions, and commonplace assertions that Benchley uses to support his point.

Types of Evidence	Examples
Factual Claims	
Opinions	
Commonplace Assertions	

Review your notes on “Great White Sharks” and your completed chart. Decide which type of evidence Benchley uses most, and explain whether you found it convincing. Use examples from the article to support your answer.

Reading Skill: Recognize Author's Bias

Loaded language is usually strongly positive or strongly negative. Identify each of the following lines as positive or negative, and explain what the phrase reveals about the author's bias.

Loaded Language	+ or -	Author's Bias
<i>it was OK to demonize an animal, especially a shark (lines 22-23)</i>		
<i>people are coming to respect and appreciate sharks for what they are: beautiful, graceful, efficient (lines 44-46)</i>		
<i>Of all the infuriating unknowns about great white sharks, none is more controversial than size. (lines 82-83)</i>		

Can you tell FACT from fiction?

Write a fictional paragraph about nature in which you include actual facts. Share your paragraph with the class.

Vocabulary Practice

Circle the pairs of words that are synonyms (words with the same meaning). Underline the pairs of words that are antonyms (words with opposite meanings).

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. consensus/disagreement | 5. travesty/distortion |
| 2. inadvertence/inattention | 6. scrutiny/observation |
| 3. visceral/analytical | 7. anecdotal/scientific |
| 4. demonize/praise | 8. prospective/unexpected |

Academic Vocabulary in Speaking

area

domain

hypothesis

objective

resolve

TURN AND TALK Shark attacks occur because humans enter the **domain** in which a shark lives. With a small group of classmates, discuss guidelines that would keep people safe while allowing sharks to thrive. Then write down your guidelines in the lines below. Use at least two Academic Vocabulary words in your discussion. Definitions of these words are on page 359.

Assessment Practice

DIRECTIONS Use “Great White Sharks” to answer questions 1–4.

- Which statement is a factual claim that you can support with evidence from the article?
 - There is evidence from fishermen that there are sharks as large as 36 feet long.
 - Great white sharks target and attack humans whenever possible.
 - Scientists estimate that populations of some species of sharks have dropped by 80 percent.
 - Many sharks do not survive their first year due to a lack of food.
- Based on the article, which statement is an opinion?
 - Only four species of sharks are known to attack humans with any frequency.
 - It would be an ecological tragedy if great white sharks became extinct.
 - There are about 400 known species of sharks in the world today.
 - The largest great white ever caught weighed 2,664 pounds.
- Which statement includes loaded language?
 - Great whites are exquisite creatures of evolution that are in danger of extinction.
 - Fisherman and naturalists are seeing fewer great white sharks than in the past.
 - Great white sharks have few natural enemies.
 - Many assumptions about the behavior of great white sharks have changed in the last 25 years.
- Which statement is a factual claim?
 - To a diver underwater a great white shark looks like a locomotive with malice in mind.
 - The practice of finning sharks developed as a way for fishermen to protect themselves.
 - Great white sharks attack boats because they perceive them as a threat.
 - Great white sharks are the largest predatory fish in the world.