

Case Study #1  
Fishing Vessel Safety

You are a recent college graduate and a young journalist. You have moved to Gloucester, Massachusetts, to take a job with a small daily paper there. Gloucester is a tough fishing port, 27 miles northeast of Boston. Your job is not easy. You have been working there six months, and you are very discouraged. You are thinking of quitting, maybe even leaving the journalism field altogether. Your boss, a gruff old man, the owner and the publisher of the paper, is very demanding. In addition to covering routine events such as town council and school board meetings, you are expected to help sell advertising and occasionally to write editorials. None of the other reporters finished college, and they resent your presence. Occasionally you hear them talking about you behind your back about "that smart aleck college kid" or "that know-it-all punk." They have not been particularly helpful or friendly.

One night you are working late, drinking coffee, trying to finish a story about a municipal bond issue. You are the last reporter left in the building. The publisher emerges from his office and stops by your desk. He says, "I've got something I would like you to work on." He pulls up a chair, and lights his pipe. You try to hide your annoyance at getting more work. You feel that you should have gone home earlier. He drops off an official Coast Guard report on the disappearance of the F/V *Andrea Gail*. He notices your weary appearance. He says, "Listen, kid, I know things have been tough here for you the last six months, but I like your work. I think you have a future in this business. You write with remarkable clarity and consistency." You are startled. These are the first kind words you have heard in six months.

The publisher continues, "Everybody in this town knows about the *Andrea Gail*. Everybody has read the book and seen the movie. But now, some ten years later, nothing has changed. Many of the boats are still unsafe, and our fishermen take too many chances. These tragedies are just going to happen again and again." He goes on to explain the background of the problem and his views. In 1838, Congress responded to a rash of explosions on steamboats. The technology of the steam engine was relatively new, and its application to marine transportation, though economically successful, wasn't always safe when left solely to the steamboat industry. To protect passengers from this risk, Congress enacted a federal steamboat inspection law calling for the enforcement of vessel safety standards. Federal inspectors whose job was to prevent maritime disasters and the resulting loss of life enforced this law and a host of statutes that followed. Ultimately, they were very successful. Coast Guard inspectors became investigators. The inspector/investigator role expanded to include crew licensing and vessel documentation.

Your boss continues with a sigh, "The Coast Guard has broad authority to inspect commercial vessels. They inspect bulk carriers and container vessels all the time. They also inspect all kinds of passenger vessels--ferries, passenger liners, and excursion boats. But fishing vessels are uninspected, even though they are at the top of the list for the number of lives lost." He explains to you his dream. He would like to have fishing vessels inspected rigorously, especially for stability. He would like these inspections to go well beyond mere checklists of required equipment. He would like to have better training for fishing crews so that they would know what to do in an emergency.

He takes a long draw on his pipe as he goes on, "But this plan of mine will never work. The commercial fishermen of our area are the last American cowboys. They are brave and courageous risk-takers. They are absolutely fearless, and they strongly resent government interference. They hate the Coast Guard, and they see inspectors as nit-picking bureaucrats, who only care about their paperwork and have no feeling for the economic hardships of fishermen."

"What I want you to do is to study the problem and to write an editorial. I won't tell you what slant to take. I myself am strongly torn. On the one hand, as an old man who has seen too much death, I would like to see better Coast Guard inspections because I am convinced that it would save lives. I feel sure that, in their hearts, the wives and girlfriends of the fishermen would agree with me. On the other hand, as a conservative Republican, I sympathize with fishermen who are strongly independent and don't want anyone to tell them what to do. When I went to college, I remember reading John Stuart Mill's essay "On Liberty." He said, "The individual is not accountable to society for his actions, in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself." Yet, if we argue that the government has no business in fishing vessel inspections, people will continue to die. But then if we argue that fishing vessels should be inspected, we will have readers canceling their subscriptions and we will lose money."

"I want you to write a strong editorial. Take both points of view into account. Then make a decision and take a stand. Deal with the opposing point of view, and then end on your own side. No matter which side we take, we will lose friends and make enemies. Don't worry, whatever you decide, I will back you up. Just make sure you come up with the right answer and write well. Goodnight."

You are that young journalist. Write the editorial, following the advice of the publisher. Your editorial should be at least 500 words in length, at least one page but not more than two. It should be written (like this case study) in Times New Roman 12-point type with one-inch margins on all sides.