



Railways

Read the following passage in which the author argues in support of the privatisation of the British railway system and then ask yourself the questions that follow:

We can now be proud of the fact that the UK has one of the finest railway systems in the world. All of the main indicators support this view. It is a cheap form of transport. The modern carriages mean that it is also very comfortable. Punctuality is improving all the time. It is an increasingly popular form of transport. One billion train journeys are made in the UK every year and it is estimated that this will double by 2035. But above all it is the safest form of land transport. So, it seems, the critics have been proved wrong: the free competitive market system has shown itself to be superior to government control.

- 1 Are there hidden qualifications behind the claims that are being made?
- 2 Is there a lack of uniformity between different sets of statistics used for comparison?
- 3 Does the writer confuse absolute and comparative figures?

Answers

1: Hidden qualifications

This is probably the most common error, perhaps because it is so hard to pin down. The more we get away with it, the more likely it is that we will keep on repeating it. The first step is to get used to asking that most nagging of all questions, 'Yes, but what do you mean by X?' In this passage the author is defending the privatised railway system on the grounds that 'It is a cheap form of transport.'

Question 1: What do you mean by cheap? What does this take into account and what does it exclude?

Obviously the writer includes the cost of a rail ticket, which in his judgement is cheap. But are there other costs that he has not included? One obvious candidate is the cost to the taxpayer of running the railways. In 1994, its last year of operation, British Rail cost the taxpayer £950 million, compared with the £5 billion that private rail operators were costing them in 2008. For much of this time inflation was fairly moderate, but even if it were rampant it would be difficult to account for this level of increase.

It seems likely that the loss of the benefits of economies of scale accounts for some of this. With more operators running stretches of the rail network the fragmentation has led to increased costs, making the railways more expensive to run.

Question 2: Is this a comparative judgement? If so, compared to what?

2.1 To other railways?

The writer might be arguing that British railways may be expensive, but not as expensive as other railways abroad, or not as expensive as other forms of transport, like cars or air travel.

However, examine the figures on the internet and you will see that public rail networks in Europe produce far cheaper services. In 2007 the standard single from London to Newcastle was £112 for a distance of 288 miles. In contrast, a *return* between Barcelona and Madrid, a journey of 387 miles, cost just £52. Similarly, a *return* between Rome and Milan, a distance of 392 miles, cost just £41.56.



So it can hardly be claimed that the British privatised railway system is cheaper, in terms of ticket prices, than other European networks that are publicly run. Of course, what we don't know is the level of support these get from taxpayers, but given the considerable economies of scale involved in European rail networks, it is a reasonable guess that costs per mile will be much lower.

2.2 *To other forms of transport?*

Perhaps, then, the writer merely meant that rail travel was cheaper than other forms of transport. So, again, we need to examine this claim, particularly in relation to travel by air and by car. While air travel has always been more expensive than rail transport, with the new budget airlines and cheap fares the gap between the two has narrowed, so that now on many routes it is roughly the same, if not cheaper.

As for the car, even with the rising cost of fuel it is still cheaper than going by rail. Say the price of petrol is £1.35 per litre; this would make a gallon around £6.14. If a car has an economy rate of, say, 30 miles to a gallon, it would mean that a rail journey from London to Newcastle, even at 2007 prices, would still be more expensive than travelling by car, which would cost around £59. Even when you make allowances for depreciation and running costs, the margin between the two is still considerable.

Indeed, the picture is no different even after you have radically changed the figures in favour of rail travel. If you estimate the price of petrol as high as £1.50 and consumption as low as 20 miles per gallon, it would still be cheaper by car. And, of course, this doesn't factor in the costs at either end in the form of bus and taxi fares to take you to your final destination, which you don't incur if you go by car.

Overall it appears that rail travel in Britain can no longer claim to be cheaper than its alternatives. Since 1997, while the cost of rail fares has increased, the cost of road travel and airfares has fallen. In real terms the cost of train travel has increased by 13 percent, whereas over the same period the cost of road travel has fallen by 14 percent and the average price of a one-way flight from Britain has fallen by 35 percent.

You can generate all of this criticism from just asking obvious questions about the nature of the claim: what it means and what it includes and excludes. Of course, you will need to gather some information, but you don't have to become an expert and none of this involves any specialist expertise.

2: Lack of uniformity

The writer then goes on to argue that 'Punctuality is improving all the time.' Although this may be the case, many commuters would argue that some train operators have a particularly poor record and have shown very little improvement.

The problem is that to evaluate the writer's claim we need to see the figures that support it. While there is a lot of anecdotal evidence of commuters who see no improvement at all, if not a significant deterioration on some lines, the statistics may in fact show marginal improvements. There is an obvious disparity between the two. So we have to uncover the lack of uniformity between the figures referred to by the train operators and those that are used by the commuters.



On one line, for example, there was a growing chorus of commuter complaints at the ever-worsening record of punctuality. Nonetheless, the operator was still able to demonstrate that they had met their targets, so they were in no danger of being fined or, worse still, losing their licence. However, when the figures were examined they showed that the operator's results had been improved by being aggregated with the separate fast train service, which had shown improvements in punctuality. As this travelled through the different regions, each region's operator was able to aggregate the results with their own and lift their performance to show improved punctuality.

Frequently the lack of uniformity between the figures used in this way to make a case, allows people to use them to their advantage, while obscuring the actual situation. So we have to ask, 'Are these figures reliable if taken at face value? What assumptions do they take for granted? Are there significant differences between the sets of figures available?'

Similarly, although not a question of uniformity between the statistics employed, the argument that, 'The modern carriages mean that it is also very comfortable', illustrates the same point. Again, we need to know what is meant by 'comfortable' and how is it measured?

If it means that the modern carriages are more comfortable than those that operated 50 years ago and this is measured in terms of the padded seats and leg space, then the argument seems well supported by good evidence. Even so, the supporters of a publicly operated railway could argue that the same improvements introduced since privatisation would have been introduced anyway if the railways had been left under public ownership.

But ask yourself, again, 'What do we mean by 'comfort' in this context?' If we were passengers, would we be talking about something different from the writer of this argument? Is it just a question of leg space and padded seats, important though these are? For example, if you were a commuter in overcrowded carriages each morning, unable ever to get a seat, you would no doubt argue that overcrowding is the key factor that makes your journey uncomfortable. Indeed, as long as the overcrowding persists you would never get to enjoy any of the comforts that the writer might have in mind.

3: Absolute and comparative figures

The third problem, you would think, is the most obvious and, therefore, the easiest to avoid. But still, it's surprising how often we read reports in which simple totals are given to indicate trends over a certain period.

In the argument about the privatised railways the writer argues that, 'It is an increasingly popular form of transport' and 'One billion train journeys are made in the UK every year and it is estimated that this will double by 2035.' To evaluate this we need to know if this is a relative, or an absolute, figure. We need answers to a number of questions:

Question 1: How fast has it been growing in previous years?

'One billion train journeys ... every year' is an absolute figure, which doesn't tell us if it is falling or increasing and, if it is increasing, whether it is increasing at a faster or slower rate. If the number of train journeys made this year has grown more slowly than in previous years, then it is becoming relatively less popular.

Question 2: How fast has it been growing in relation to the growth in population?



If it has been growing less than the growth in population, then we can infer that there has been a relative fall in its popularity. A more reliable indicator is the number of train journeys per 100,000 people.

Question 3: The same applies to our next question: how fast has it been growing in relation to the growth in disposable income?

If it has been growing less than the growth in disposable income, then we could infer that as people have become wealthier they have turned to other forms of transport. But to make this claim, we need the answer to yet another question:

Question 4: How fast has it been growing in relation to other forms of transport?

To answer this question, as we've just seen, the most reliable figure is the number of journeys per 100,000 people, broken down into different forms of transport. Although this is important, it is still not enough: we need to ask one further question:

Question 5: What factors are influencing the increasing or decreasing popularity of different forms of transport?

If these figures were to show that rail journeys were increasing relative to other forms of transport, this still might not indicate the increasing popularity of railways, but rather the increasing unpopularity of other forms of transport. For example, the Department of Transport has predicted that the period 2008 to 2033 will see the following increases in forms of travel:

Flights 178%

Car journeys 43%

Train journeys 150%

These figures, of course, suggest a number of different interpretations. The relative unpopularity of car journeys might reflect the increasing difficulties of making car journeys on overcrowded roads. The growth in popularity of flights in contrast to cars and trains might suggest the growing affluence of a population that can afford to take more journeys abroad and more holidays each year.

But whatever the right interpretation, it reveals just how inadequate it is to quote absolute figures to support the claim that rail travel is becoming more popular.