



Looking Past Connections to Find the Bigger Story

Curriculum Unit 14.01.02
by Moira Cotlier-Cassell

Introduction

I had grand ideas. I had planned to have my freshmen at Hill Regional Career High School skim newspapers and then engage in a rich discussion of the day's news and editorials. While I knew the activity might present some challenges, I thought those would be limited to the news format rather than content. After all, by a show of hands, my freshmen informally revealed that they had little-to-no exposure to daily or weekly newspapers. However, by a similar showing, most students revealed they received most of their news—or "information"—from television and various entertainment and celebrity gossip websites. So, as my students perused the *New Haven Register* and *The New York Times*, it was not much of a surprise to me when they found it difficult to navigate the editorial landscape of print journalism and distinguish between the credibility of front page news versus the persuasiveness of the Op-Ed section. What *did* surprise and even upset me, however, was that some students did not grasp the difference between a news article and a lengthy, text-heavy advertisement. I found myself backing up a few paces and giving the class a mini-lesson on distinguishing between advertising and reporting. I am still not convinced all of my students yet grasp that difference or, more importantly, why they need to be able to identify one from the other.

As for that rich discussion of the day's news and editorials? It never happened.

This unit will teach students how to slow the pace of observation and note details of what they see in visual images. By teaching students how to slow down and question what it is they are actually viewing, we can help them consider how the details they notice tell a larger story—the bigger picture. When students develop skills of critical observation, they will then be able to see more clearly the intended meaning behind images as well as the intended meaning or message behind images paired with text—in particular, advertisements. What's more, students can extend this skill to being able to more capably discern fact from opinion in editorial text in newspapers, magazines and online news forums. This unit will allow students to learn how to pair rhetorical devices with images to create persuasive advertisements for consumer products (real or imagined) or causes (again, real or imagined). By learning how to observe and interpret images, students will also learn how to use images and text to persuade audiences and convey their own messages and ideas.

Rationale

I was spoiled, having grown up in a noisy household full of well-read, well-educated, and strongly opinionated Irish Catholics who valued democracy and honest reporting almost as much as they valued JFK. Many of my relatives and ancestors were schoolteachers and newspaper reporters, and I was taught from a young age to question everything I read (except, maybe, when it came to papal literature). Unsurprisingly, in high school I was fascinated to learn more about war-related propaganda, and in college I was thrilled to take a class and eventually do an independent study on propaganda and disinformation.

What had the most impact on me in these studies, however, was viewing images designed to persuade and convince me of certain "truths." The images, from Maoist posters to American WWII-era anti-Japanese comics and political cartoons, were the front line in the war on winning the minds of a country's citizens. This education helped me feel more empowered and less gullible in my young adulthood. It taught me to slow the pace of my observations and objectively note more details in visual images, which in turn leads me to question an image's purpose.

No one likes to feel gullible, especially millennial teenagers who have broad and instantaneous access to information at the swipe of their fingertips. But in this age of blogs, online consumer reviews, Wikipedia and social media posturing, the line between fact and opinion (or even half-truth) is blurrier than ever before. Today's students struggle to discern what they need to know from what someone wants them to think. This struggle leaves them at risk of being poorly informed citizens and consumers. In order for us to adequately prepare our students to become active and informed contributors to society, we must arm them with the skills to determine the quality and intention behind the written and visual messages they are bombarded with in our media-driven society.

This need for students to become active and informed citizens is not lost on educators and policy-makers. The Common Core has a pointed emphasis on learning to read for information. The standards require, among other things, that students "delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning." ¹ This is an important standard for students to meet, although it can sometimes get lost amidst the apparent emphasis of the curriculum of the New Haven Public School District on analysis of craft, structure, inference, and evidence. While such analysis is essential, it is not of much help to students who struggle to distinguish "relevant and sufficient" information from "false statements and fallacious reasoning."

I have witnessed this struggle first hand in my own classes, particularly in my freshmen sections. In effort to expose my students to more informational reading, I brought in a handful of daily and weekly newspapers for them to peruse. Students were assigned to skim the papers and choose an article of interest to them. Then they were to summarize the article in their own words and identify the article's purpose according to Kelly Gallagher's identification of six purposes for real-world writing: 1. Express and Reflect; 2. Inform and Explain; 3. Evaluate and Judge; 4. Inquire and Explore; 5. Analyze and Interpret; 6. Take a Stand/Propose a Solution. ² Students struggled to distinguish among news, advertising and opinion, and therefore they found it very difficult to categorize the articles according to Gallagher's six purposes.

Yet it is imperative that students understand the purpose of the information put before them. To that end, it is essential that students learn to step outside themselves, their experiences, and their opinions in order to

objectively evaluate and analyze the information—visual or otherwise—before them. Years of teaching that was oriented toward preparing students for the Connecticut Mastery Tests have encouraged students to make connections to text. Students are so eager to jump to the connections they have with a story, poem or image that they often fail to see what it is actually saying. Just as we can teach students to do close readings of poetry and literature, we should teach them how to close read images and, ultimately, informational text.

In my experience, one reason students struggle with close reading or image viewing is because they are not slowing down enough to a) *observe* what they are seeing or reading, then b) *question* what they are seeing or reading. Many students are willing to take persuasive writing and images at face-value, and historically there has not been much in the curriculum to teach them otherwise. What's more, there has been no one to model that process for them either in the classroom or at home. While some students come from families that critically view and evaluate the messages that media send them, many more students do not have this lesson being taught (or reinforced) at home.

Assumptions and Theories

Today's students are comfortable, maybe too much so, with images packaged as truth. They have been raised in an advertising- and Hollywood-centric society that promotes appearances and trends over substance. They are the Selfie generation: adolescents practiced at taking photo after photo of themselves until they are confident they have just the right one to share on social media. In this way, they are their own propagandists and public-relations managers.

From digitally enhanced cinematography to air-brushed photographs of models and celebrities in magazines, students are constantly, if subliminally, told that how "perfect" or "new" something (or someone) looks is ultimately all that matters in life. The author Edward Bernays noted as much in 1928, when the movie industry was still in its infancy: "The American motion picture is the greatest unconscious carrier of propaganda in the world today... The motion picture can standardize the ideas and habits of a nation." ³ In short, the motion picture industry can greatly influence American culture. Movies are also used to sell products. Students often fail to grasp that these images are intended to shape the way consumers think and behave. Whether it be a well-placed Coca-Cola can in a movie scene or a high-end luxury vehicle driven by a television character, none of these product placements happens by accident. As well-known linguist Noam Chomsky says, it's quite calculated: "The people in the public relations industry aren't there for the fun of it. They're doing work... they have a conception of what democracy ought to be: the population...ought to be sitting alone in front of the TV and having drilled into their heads the message, which says the only value in life is to have more commodities or live like that rich middle class family you're watching and to have nice values like harmony and Americanism. ...So that's the ideal." ⁴ It is an ideal to which today's children and teenagers are increasingly vulnerable.

Public-relations companies and advertisers sell this ideal through images, and if students aren't critically viewing those images, then they are particularly vulnerable to the messages that they send. If we can teach students to critically view images, then we can teach them to begin thinking for themselves in a capitalist-driven society. But before we can teach them to evaluate and analyze political or commercial advertising, we must first teach them simply how to look and see what is before them.

We can begin this by teaching them the skills needed to observe images. An image is a powerful thing to study and analyze, to break down and look at long enough so that we begin to feel uncomfortable. We should *look*, which is nothing more than habit, long enough for us to see, which is discipline. And we must teach our students to do the same so that they can apply this skill to observe the world around them. Once students begin to pay attention to the images before them, the result can be profound. As photographer Dorothea Lange said, "[To] come back...having observed something that you didn't know was there, [or] ...having seen something that you have seen many, many times and never realized... [is] a great discovery." ⁵

In fact, by analyzing photos like those taken by Dorothea Lange during the Great Depression, in addition to paintings, we can teach students how to step back and objectively view not only imaginative works of art but also works of photojournalism. Students can observe the subjects of the photographs, the background detail, and then they can move on to ask themselves if it matters if they know what the photos are actually about? This raises a question: is it important for students to know the story behind an image—a photo, a painting, drawing, comic—in order to interpret its meaning or understand it? Indeed, what makes an image powerful? Is it the image itself, or is it the knowledge that the audience brings to it? And if the audience brings knowledge to it, can it objectively observe the image?

In the case of one photo, the public's knowledge of the story behind it significantly fanned the flames of anti-war sentiment during the Vietnam conflict. As Susan Sontag noted, "Photographs like the one that made the front page of most newspapers in the world in 1972—a naked South Vietnamese child just sprayed by American napalm, running down a highway toward the camera, her arms open, screaming with pain—probably did more to increase the public revulsion against the [Vietnam] war than a hundred hours of televised barbarities." ⁶ To use a tired but ironic cliché, the subject of the photo became a poster child for the anti-Vietnam War campaign.

How much we know about an image can enhance or detract from its impact. For example, many of Dorothea Lange's photographs during the Great Depression had captions with them that she had taken time to document after conversations with her subjects; however, those captions are often omitted from the publication of the photos. It can be argued that a photograph should stand on its own without a caption to summarize its story. Yet Lange biographer Ann Whiston Sprin argues that sometimes the accompanying story can make an image more poignant than it would be without a caption: "The verbal and the visual *are* distinctively different ways of thinking and knowing, but in those rare instances when one individual practices both arts, that whole should be celebrated, not suppressed. To divide the visual from the verbal, for Lange's work, is to miss the whole that it represents." ⁷ To that end, it can be powerful to introduce images to students without the accompanying background until they have made their own analysis of what they see, **but it is still important to eventually provide students with any text or captions that may accompany an image.**

By teaching students how to first observe images and aim to see them objectively, as opposed to seeing only what connections we make to them or what projections we place upon them based upon our background knowledge, we are teaching students to slow down and assess information as it presented to them. In doing this, we can set up a framework for students to do the same with informational text, whether it be captions to photographs or entire articles and editorials. With the use of advertisements, photography, and photojournalism, we can help students cultivate skills that will help them determine the purpose behind a visual message, and to develop and articulate critical thinking against the tide of media that swirls around them.

Timing of the Unit

Each of the four lessons in the unit will take approximately one-half to one full week to complete, depending on the length of the class period. My students attend 86-minute block format classes on alternating "A" and "B" days. I therefore see some sections three days a week and others two days a week, depending on the rotation of the letter days. These lessons were designed with block formatting in mind, with each lesson intended for one class period. Classes that meet for shorter periods may need about two days to accomplish one lesson. However, even for block classes, the pacing of the unit may be adjusted according to students' needs.

Intended Audience for this Unit

This unit was written with ninth graders in mind, although it can be modified as needed for English Language Arts students from grade seven through grade twelve. The unit and assessment are flexible enough to help teachers differentiate for various student learning preferences, English Language Learners, and special education students.

The reading levels for my ninth-grade students range from post-secondary to first grade. While more complex assignments and assessments may be designed for advanced students, the lessons and assessments here are accessible to all students and may be exceptionally engaging for struggling learners because they are image-centered.

Objectives

When my students complete this unit, they will have developed skills to objectively view visual images, including advertisements and photojournalism, and discern what meanings or messages are conveyed within those images. Additionally, they will have learned how rhetorical devices are used when text is paired with images to persuade consumers, voters or any particular audience. Students will also have learned how to create their own personal advertisement for either a consumer product or cause, using rhetorical devices, text, and images to persuade audiences for their own purposes.

Students will closely examine and evaluate visual images—including paintings, photographs and photojournalism pieces—to make inferences about them, and they will compare and contrast inferences made about visual images to their "intended meaning" when those images are paired with text in advertisements or photojournalism pieces. Students will examine the use of rhetorical devices in advertisements and identify their intended audience and purpose, and they will implement rhetorical devices in the creation of their own advertisements for an intended purpose and audience. Students will also discern fact from opinion through close readings of advertising and extend that skill to close readings of text.

Strategies

This unit incorporates a variety of strategies to engage a wide range of learning preferences. Individual, group and share/pair activities are all used throughout the lessons to promote and maintain engagement, and they can be modified as needed. Students will also use the same group of images for different purposes throughout the unit, which helps the students understand the many approaches they can take when observing and analyzing visual images.

The introductory lesson will teach students about how to objectively observe the details of visual images. Of emphasis is the need for students to slow down while they are observing a visual piece and really note what they are seeing versus what they think the image is about. Once students have practiced observing visual images, they can then begin to make inferences about the images' meanings. The teacher will use paintings and example of photojournalism for this lesson. Students will be required to observe what they see without making inferences about the images. Once students have completed this part of the assignment, they will pair in groups of two or more to discuss the details they have observed from these two images. After a few minutes, students will share out with the rest of the class.

The teacher will then lead the students in a discussion about how viewing these images for details—"the facts" of the images—was different from how they usually approach looking at visual images. For example, the teacher might ask, "Was it challenging to observe details in the images and not make inferences about their meanings? Why/why not? Give an example from one of the images." Another question might be, "Are you more or less confident about the images' meanings now that you've observed and noted the details? Why?" Using a similar modeling/pair/share lesson structure, students will then be guided to make inferences about images' meanings.

The second lesson builds on the students' skills of observation and compares and contrasts those observations with the conventional meaning of the images. Using the same images as in the first lesson but including the text that originally accompanied those image, students will compare the caption to their initial understanding of the photo's or painting's meaning. While this will be done as a whole-class activity, students will again follow the pair/share model. Students will be asked to compare how the details they observed influenced their inferences either for better or for worse. Ideally, students' observations and notes will lead them toward a better understanding of the images' meanings.

The third lesson introduces students to rhetorical devices to target and persuade audiences via advertising. Students will be asked to observe the details found in print and video advertisements. Ignoring text and/or voice-overs, students will be required to observe the advertisements and list the details found in their visual images. While it can be challenging to do this with familiar advertisements, it is often fun for students to look at familiar print or television ads with fresh eyes and analyze them. It is also useful to use a mix of ads, including current and older ads, ads for causes such as the ASPCA or political campaigns, and ads for commercial products. Foreign ads, wordless ads, and text-only ads can all be used to enhance or differentiate the lesson. Once again, this lesson can be accomplished by first doing it as a whole class exercise followed by a pair/share activity.

Once students are given a chance to analyze the visual details of familiar and unfamiliar advertising, they should be instructed, in a similar fashion, to observe and analyze the text (including voice-overs) of print and television ads. This will give students an opportunity to discuss how the visual images enhance the meaning of

the advertisers' messages—and vice versa. Once again, this helps students more objectively understand the intended meaning behind the images they are viewing.

In the final of the four lessons, students will learn about rhetorical devices and a logical fallacy (logos, ethos, pathos and argumentum ad populum) and how they are used in advertising. Depending on the students, this lesson may be a mini-lesson or may be as long as a full class. The teacher will define the terms, possibly using a short PowerPoint file to illustrate examples. Then, using the same advertisements as used in the previous lesson, the teacher will lead students in a whole-class analysis of the rhetorical devices used in the ads. The teacher may want to consider using the whole-class model for at least two of the ads, since this can sometimes be a tricky task, and then release the students to pair/share on the rest. It should be noted that the teacher should also incorporate a small lesson on the use of sound as a device to create pathos in commercial advertising.

Once the rhetorical devices have been analyzed, the teacher will have the students return to the same ads and consider two things for each: purpose and audience. The teacher may also use the Question Formation Technique in which the students create a list of their own questions about the advertisements and then research the answers to some of those questions. As a follow-up assignment, students can observe a handful of print and television ads for homework and bring in the ads and/or their findings to share with the class.

By now, students will have developed enough skills to be able to identify rhetorical devices in advertising so that they will be able to create their own ad for their choice of commercial product or cause, either real or imagined. If the teacher chooses to assign such a project, this assessment gives the students the choice of subject as well as medium. Students can choose to create print (hard copy or electronic) or video ads that full of—or devoid of—text. Those who want to make a television commercial can use still images via free web-based programs such as Animoto, or they can create actual commercials using technology on their Smartphones or cameras. Students can present their ads, which may be as short as 15 seconds or as long as a few minutes, to the entire class. As an additional assessment, students can be required to evaluate the rhetorical devices of their peers' ads for a quiz grade. This will also keep the students on-task and engaged during their peers' presentations.

To round out the unit, the teacher will extend these skills to evaluating and analyzing opinion pieces in magazines and newspapers. First, the teacher provides students with a popular internet meme on a controversial issue. Students will have a chance, as a whole class, to examine the image and text and determine the audience of the meme, its meaning, and the rhetorical devices used to convey it. Since many memes can be considered more modern versions of classic political cartoons (students are used to seeing them on social media websites), the teacher can include a selection of political cartoons to show how opinion and message can be conveyed using images and rhetorical devices in print journalism.

Extending student skills further to text-only analysis of rhetorical devices, the teacher can provide students with letters to the editor, editorial columns, and other opinion pieces from various print journalism sources. Students will then analyze these editorial selections for audience and purpose via evaluation of their rhetorical devices. This activity not only applies the students' new skills to text analysis, but it also teaches them to distinguish factual reporting in print journalism from opinion, a task students often struggle with, especially in the lower secondary grades. The teacher can assess this skill in a number of ways, from asking students to compare a news article on a topic to an editorial or letter to the editor on the same issue. Or students can write a letter to the editor on an issue about which they have read in the news.

Ultimately, this unit provides several opportunities and a multitude of media to assess and engage students in

the learning of rhetorical devices in advertising and editorial opinion—and it helps them distinguish fact from opinion in journalism and advertising.

Classroom Activities

All of the activities suggested below can be used in isolation or as part of a larger lesson or unit.

For Lesson Plan One

The teacher will project Dorothea Lange's iconic *Migrant Mother* photo on the board, via Smartboard or similar technology. (An alternative to projecting the image would be to make photocopies of the image and pass them out to the students.) Students will observe details in the photo. The teacher will instruct students not to make assumptions about what is happening in the photo and lead a whole-class discussion about the details observed in the photo.

Students will be given two more images to observe in pair-share format: Norman Rockwell's painting *The Four Freedoms* (using a copy of the painting without the four freedoms stated on each panel) and a photo of the Tank Man protestor from Tienamen Square. The teacher will lead the students in a discussion about how objectively viewing the images differs from how students usually look at images. Students will make inferences about the meaning of the three images.

Guiding Questions

What was challenging about observing details in the images rather than making inferences about their meanings? Why?

How are you more or less confident about the images' meanings now that you've observed and noted the details? Why?

Assessment

In-class work done by students.

For Lesson Plan Two

The teacher will show students the caption Dorothea Lange wrote to accompany the photo used in the previous lesson. Students will compare the caption to their initial understanding of the photo's meaning. The teacher will lead a whole-class discuss on the comparison.

Students will follow the pair/share model and compare the captions of *Four Freedoms* and the Tank Man photo with their original assumptions. Then they will compare how the details they observed influenced their inferences.

The teacher will ask students to observe the details found in images of print and video advertisements (teacher's choice) as a whole-class activity. Students will follow the pair/share model to observe details found in additional print and video advertisements. Students will then compare the visual details of the

advertisements to the text or voice-overs.

Guiding Questions

How do your observations about the images support the intended meaning behind them?

How does analyzing the details of the image develop your independent think about it?

Assessment

In-class work done by students. Additionally, students will be required to bring in print ads or links to television ads (via YouTube or other Internet sources) along with a log of observation about the visual details in the ads.

For Lesson Three

Teacher gives a mini-lesson (less than 15 minutes) on rhetorical devices and logical fallacy (logos, ethos, pathos and argumentum ad populum) and how they are used in advertising. The teacher will include a small lesson on the use of sound as a "pathos" device in commercial advertising. Teacher uses the same advertisements as used in the previous lesson for whole-class analysis of the rhetorical devices used in the ads. The teacher will use the same ads and to have students consider two things for each: purpose and audience. The same will be done with ads that the students have not yet analyzed in class.

Guiding Questions

Why did the advertiser create this particular ad in this particular way?

Who does the advertiser hope will pay attention to this ad and why?

How does the ad help you understand the advertiser's intentions?

Assessment

In-class work. Students should analyze rhetorical devices in a handful of print and television ads for homework and bring in the ads and/or their findings to share with the class.

For Lesson Four

Summary

This lesson extends the students' skills of observation and evaluation of rhetorical devices to their analysis of print journalism. This lesson also teaches them to distinguish news "facts" from opinion in print journalism.

Methods

The teacher will project or hand out a popular internet meme on a controversial issue. Students will examine the image and text and determine the audience of the meme, the meme's meaning and the rhetorical devices used to convey it.

The teacher will project one more "conventional" political cartoon for similar evaluation and analysis. The teacher will provide students with letters to the editor, editorial columns or other opinion pieces from various print journalism sources. Students will then analyze these editorial selections for audience and purpose via evaluation of their rhetorical devices.

Guiding Questions

How does the image help you understand the meaning of the meme or cartoon—or vice versa?

What word choices help you determine which rhetorical devices are being used in the text?

Assessment

Students can compare a news article on a topic to an editorial or letter to the editor on the same issue. Or students can write a letter to the editor on an issue about which they read in the news.

Annotated Sources

Allen, Janet. *Yellow Brick Roads; Shared and Guided Paths to Independent Reading*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000. Research-based methods to help teachers establish comprehensive literacy instruction in the classroom.

Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda*. Brooklyn, NY: Ig Publishing, 2005. Originally published in 1928. A look at how government and corporations use propaganda to influence people.

Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. This edition contains reproductions of the 54 plates that Blake originally etched and colored to accompany his poems.

Burke, Jim. *Reading Reminders*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000. This book includes 100 techniques for teaching reading across the curriculum.

Burke, Jim. *What's the Big Idea? Question-Driven Units to Motivate Reading, Writing and Thinking*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2010. Burke shows teachers how to design lessons based on essential questions to increase student engagement and comprehension.

Chomsky, Noam. *Media Control*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1991. Essays on the prevalence and impact of propaganda in society.

Foster, Thomas C. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. New York: Harper-Collins, 2003. A practical approach to enhance reading skills and viewing story telling in all of its forms as a quest.

Gallagher, Kelly. *Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing Through Modeling & Mentor Texts*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2011. Gallagher offers strategies to help students identify and write writing with "real world" purposes.

Laneyrie-Dagen, Nadeije. *How to Read Paintings*. Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers, Ltd. 2002. Techniques and strategies for evaluating paintings.

Schlechty, Philip C. *Engaging Students: The Next Level of Working on the Work* . San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011. A framework for rethinking lesson plans as lesson design and considering students as "customers."

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography* . New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977. Essays on the photography's impact on culture and society.

Sprin, Anne Whiston. *Daring to Look* . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. A collection of photos and texts from Dorothea Lange's fieldwork during the 1939.

Appendix A: Implementing New Haven Public Schools Curriculum Objectives

Analyze the cultural context of a story or informational text to better understand the relationship between the reason and purpose for the text and the writer's choices.

Conduct research to gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources to support their point of view in their own informational writing.

Appendix B: Implementing Common Core State Standards

This unit satisfies the Reading for Information standards 9-10.1, 2, 5, 6, and 9. However, it deals most directly with standard 1 since students will cite evidence to support analysis of what text and images convey explicitly as well as inferentially. The unit also deals with standard 9 since students will determine an author's point of view or purpose and analyze how the author uses rhetoric to advance that viewpoint or purpose.

Notes

1. Common Core State Standards, , <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/R/>
2. Kelly Gallagher, *Write Like This*, 1, 10.
3. Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*, 11, 166.
4. Noam Chomsky, *Media Control*, 4, 27.
5. Anne Whiston Sprin, *Daring to Look*, Prologue, 4.
6. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1,18.

7. Anne Whiston Sprin, Daring to Look, 1, 13.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>