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The Language of Media Literacy: A Glossary of Terms

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As we increasingly use film and television to convey information to our students, it is critical that we all share a common vocabulary that allows for focused discussion. The following terms have been defined in a way that allows us to apply them to media literacy.

Audience: The group of consumers for whom the media text was constructed as well as anyone else who is exposed to the text.

Connotation: A description of value, meaning or ideology associated with a media text.

Construct or Construction: As a verb, the process by which a media text is shaped and given meaning. This process is subject to a variety of decisions and is designed to keep the audience interested in the text. As a noun, a fictional or documentary text that appears to be "natural" or a "reflection of reality" but is, in fact, shaped and given meaning through the process already described.

Critical: A reflective position on the meaning, biases or value messages of a text.

Critical Viewing is the ability to use critical thinking skills to view, question, analyze and understand issues presented overtly and covertly in movies, videos, television and other visual media.

Deconstruct: To take apart, analyze, or break down a media text into its component parts in order to understand how and why it was created.

Demographics: Recognizable characteristics of media consumers such as age, gender, education and income level.

Denotation: A description of a media text indicating its common sense, obvious meaning.

Docudrama: A filmed dramatization based on fact that combines documentary and fictional elements. In the production process, "based on" allows the creators of the text wide creative latitude. At its best, a docudrama can be a skillful representation of a real person or event.

Genre: A category of media texts characterized by a particular style, form or content.

Ideology: How we as individuals understand the world in which we live. This understanding involves an interaction between our individual psychology and the social structures that surround us. Mediating between these are the individual processes of communication, as well as the technological processes of the mass media.

Industry: The agencies and institutions involved with the production of media texts. The term is also used in a more narrow sense to describe the commercial production of media texts for the purpose of making a profit.

Jolts: Moments in a media text that are generated by a broad comedy, a violent act, movement within a frame, a loud noise, rapid editing, a profanity or a sexually explicit representation—all of which are calculated to engage an audience's excitement.

Mass Media: Media Education The process by which individuals learn the technical production skills associated with creating media texts. Traditionally, it has not included the intellectual processes of critical consumption or deconstruction; however, modern interpretations often include these processes.

Media Literacy: The process of understanding and using the mass media in an assertive and non-passive way. This includes an informed and critical understanding of the nature of the media, the techniques used by them and the impact of these techniques.

Medium: The singular form of "media." This term usually describes individual forms such as radio, television, film etc.

Media: The plural form of "medium." This term has come to mean all the industrial forms of mass communication combined.

Narrative: The telling of a plot or story. In a media text, narrative is the coherent sequencing of events across time and space.

Negotiate: The process by which members of the audience individually or collectively interpret, deconstruct and find meaning within a media text.

Oppositional: A critical position that is in opposition to the values and ideology intended by the creators of a media text.

Production: The industrial process of creating media texts as well as the people who are engaged in this process.

Production Values: Describes the quality of a media production—which is generally proportional to the money and technology expended on it.

Psychographics: A more sophisticated form of demographics that includes information about the psychological and sociological characteristics of media consumers, such as attitudes, values, emotional responses and ideological beliefs.

Representation: The process by which a constructed media text stands for, symbolizes, describes or represents people, places, events or ideas that are real and have an existence outside the text.

Technology: The machinery, tools and materials required to produce a media text. In media literacy terms, technology greatly impacts upon the construction and connotation of a text.

Text: The individual results of media production: a movie, a TV episode, a book, an issue of a magazine or newspaper, an advertisement, an album, a CD, etc.