



Literacy at Hartford Public High School

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Five Key Questions to Analyze a Media Message

#1: Who created this message?

Behind every media message is a person or group of people who created it. Newspaper articles are written by reporters and reviewed by editors; films and TV shows have producers, writers and directors; advertisements require creative teams with many talents. We may not notice the people “behind the curtain” but this question helps us recognize that media are not “natural” but “constructed” -- just like a house or a car.

- Who is the author?
- How many people did it take to create this message? What are their jobs?
- What are the “building blocks” of this kind of message?
- What kind of message is it (sitcom, action film, etc.?)

#2: What techniques are used to attract my attention?

In this question we explore the creative components – the sounds, words and visual images – that make up a media message. Like learning to read words, learning to “read” and interpret visual media opens up dimensions of understanding we never thought were possible.

- Where is the camera? What is the viewpoint?
- What are the sounds? Music? Words? Sound effects?
- What do you notice about the way the message is put together?
- What makes it look “real?”

#3: How might different people understand this message differently from me?

Whenever we experience a media message, we experience it through the life we’ve already had. Understanding how different people can interpret the same message expands our own interpretation and offers us the potential of new insights we never could have had on our own.

- How does this message fit in with YOUR experience of the world?
- How many other interpretations could there be? How could we hear about them?
- How can we explain the different responses people might have?
- What did you learn from other people’s responses?

#4: What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in – or omitted from – this message?

Because media are constructed by people, choices are made. And those choices are based on the values, attitudes and the subtle biases we all carry around with us. This question helps us understand what ideas are contained in the message so that we can decide whether to accept -- or reject -- them.

- What questions come to mind as you watch/read/listen?
- What ideas or values are being “sold?”
- What kinds of behaviors and consequences are being depicted?
- What seems to be the most important idea in the message?
- What do I think or feel about this?
- What might other people think and feel about this?
- What did I learn from hearing what other people say about it?

#5: Why is this message being sent?

When we receive a media message it’s important to be able to figure out why it was sent. Much of the media in the U.S. were established as money-making enterprises. There’s nothing wrong with that, but it helps to know if profit is the purpose. Other purposes could be to influence us with political, religious or philosophical ideas – or maybe just to express the human capacity to create.

- What’s being sold? What’s being told?
- What economic decisions may have influenced the construction or transmission of this message?
- Who is served by or benefits from this message? The public? Private interests?
- What does this tell me about how other people live and believe?
- Is anything or anyone left out?
- What ideas do you get from this movie? TV show? Song? Video game?

These questions can be used to analyze and discuss any type of media message: TV, video or film, advertising, newspapers or magazines, video games, the Internet, billboards, bumper stickers, and T-shirts.

Encourage your students to think critically about what they are presented with each day.