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Introduction to Media Literacy

Media literacy is a set of skills that anyone can learn. Just as *literacy* is the ability to read and write, *media literacy* refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media messages of all kinds.

These are essential skills in today's world. Today, many people get most of their information through complex combinations of text, images and sounds. We need to be able to navigate this complex media environment, to make sense of the media messages that bombard us every day, and to express ourselves using a variety of media tools and technologies.

Media literate youth and adults are better able to decipher the complex messages we receive from television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, billboards, signs, packaging, marketing materials, video games, recorded music, the Internet and other forms of media. They can understand how these media messages are constructed, and discover how they create *meaning* – usually in ways hidden beneath the surface. People who are media literate can also create their own media, becoming active participants in our media culture.

Media literacy skills can help children, youth and adults:

- Understand how media messages create meaning
- Identify who created a particular media message
- Recognize what the media maker wants us to believe or do
- Name the "tools of persuasion" used
- Recognize bias, spin, misinformation and lies
- Discover the part of the story that's not being told
- Evaluate media messages based on our own experiences, beliefs and values
- Create and distribute our own media messages
- Become advocates for change in our media system

Media literacy education helps to develop critical thinking and active participation in our media culture. The goal is to give youth and adults greater freedom by empowering them to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media.

In schools: Educational standards in many states -- in language arts, social studies, health and other subjects -- include the skills of accessing, analyzing and evaluating information found in media. These are media literacy skills, though the standards may not use that term. Teachers know that students like to examine and talk about their own media, and they've found that media literacy is an engaging way to explore a wide array of topics and issues.

In the community: Researchers and practitioners recognize that media literacy education is an important tool in addressing alcohol, tobacco and other drug use; obesity and eating disorders; bullying and violence; gender identity and sexuality; racism and other forms of discrimination and oppression; and life skills. Media literacy skills can empower people and communities usually shut out of the media system to tell their own stories, share their perspectives, and work for justice.

In public life: Media literacy helps us understand how media create cultures, and how the "media monopoly" - the handful of giant corporations that control most of our media - affects our politics and our society. Media literacy encourages and empowers youth and adults to change our media system, and to create new, more just and more accessible media networks.

Media Literacy Concepts

The study and practice of media literacy is based on a number of fundamental concepts about media messages, our media system, and the role of media literacy in bringing about change. Understanding these concepts is an essential first step in media literacy education.

We've organized Media Literacy Concepts into three levels: Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. Basic concepts focus on how media affect us. Intermediate concepts examine more closely how we create meaning from media messages. Advanced concepts examine the interaction of media and society, and the role of media literacy in bringing about change.

Basic Concepts

1. Media construct our culture. Our society and culture – even our perception of reality - is shaped by the information and images we receive via the media. A few generations ago, our culture's storytellers were people – family, friends, and others in our community. For many people today, the most powerful storytellers are television, movies, music, video games, and the Internet.

2. Media messages affect our thoughts, attitudes and actions. We don't like to admit it, but all of us are affected by advertising, news, movies, pop music, video games, and other forms of media. That's why media are such a powerful cultural force, and why the media industry is such big business.

3. Media use "the language of persuasion." All media messages try to persuade us to believe or do something. News, documentary films, and nonfiction books all claim to be telling the truth. Advertising tries to get us to buy products. Novels and TV dramas go to great lengths to appear realistic. To do this, they use specific techniques (like flattery, repetition, fear, and humor) we call "the language of persuasion."

4. Media construct fantasy worlds. While fantasy can be pleasurable and entertaining, it can also be harmful. Movies, TV shows, and music videos sometimes inspire people to do things that are unwise, anti-social, or even dangerous. At other times, media can inspire our imagination. Advertising constructs a fantasy world where all problems can be solved with a purchase. Media literacy helps people to recognize fantasy and constructively integrate it with reality.

5. No one tells the whole story. Every media maker has a point of view. Every good story highlights some information and leaves out the rest. Often, the effect of a media message comes not only from what is said, but from what part of the story is not told.

6. Media messages contain "texts" and "subtexts." The text is the actual words, pictures and/or sounds in a media message. The subtext is the hidden and underlying meaning of the message.

7. Media messages reflect the values and viewpoints of media makers. Everyone has a point of view. Our values and viewpoints influence our choice of words, sounds and images we use to communicate through media. This is true for all media makers, from a preschooler's crayon drawing to a media conglomerate's TV news broadcast.

8. Individuals construct their own meanings from media. Although media makers attempt to convey specific messages, people receive and interpret them differently, based on their own prior knowledge and experience, their values, and their beliefs. This means that people can create different subtexts from the same piece of media. All meanings and interpretations are valid and should be respected.

9. Media messages can be decoded. By “deconstructing” media, we can figure out who created the message, and why. We can identify the techniques of persuasion being used and recognize how media makers are trying to influence us. We notice what parts of the story are not being told, and how we can become better informed.

10. Media literate youth and adults are active consumers of media. Many forms of media – like television – seek to create passive, impulsive consumers. Media literacy helps people consume media with a critical eye, evaluating sources, intended purposes, persuasion techniques, and deeper meanings.

Intermediate Concepts

11. The human brain processes images differently than words. Images are processed in the “reptilian” part of the brain, where strong emotions and instincts are also located. Written and spoken language is processed in another part of the brain, the neocortex, where reason lies. This is why TV commercials are often more powerful than print ads.

12. We process time-based media differently than static media. The information and images in TV shows, movies, video games, and music often bypass the analytic brain and trigger emotions and memory in the unconscious and reactive parts of the brain. Only a small proportion surfaces in consciousness. When we read a newspaper, magazine, book or website, we have the opportunity to stop and think, re-read something, and integrate the information rationally.

13. Media are most powerful when they operate on an emotional level. Most fiction engages our hearts as well as our minds. Advertisements take this further, and seek to transfer feelings from an emotionally-charged symbol (family, sex, the flag) to a product.

14. Media messages can be manipulated to enhance emotional impact. Movies and TV shows use a variety of filmic techniques (like camera angles, framing, reaction shots, quick cuts, special effects, lighting tricks, music, and sound effects) to reinforce the messages in the script. Dramatic graphic design can do the same for magazine ads or websites.

15. Media effects are subtle. Few people believe everything they see and hear in the media. Few people rush out to the store immediately after seeing an ad. Playing a violent video game won't automatically turn you into a murderer. The effects of media are more subtle than this, but because we are so immersed in the media environment, the effects are still significant.

16. Media effects are complex. Media messages directly influence us as individuals, but they also affect our families and friends, our communities, and our society. So some media effects are indirect. We must consider both direct and indirect effects to understand media's true influence.

17. Media convey ideological and value messages. Ideology and values are usually conveyed in the subtext. Two examples include news reports (besides covering an issue or event, news reports often reinforce assumptions about power and authority) and advertisements (besides selling particular products, advertisements almost always promote the values of a consumer society).

18. We all create media. Maybe you don't have the skills and resources to make a blockbuster movie or publish a daily newspaper. But just about anyone can snap a photo, write a letter or sing a song. And new technology has allowed millions of people to make media--email, websites, videos, newsletters, and more -- easily and cheaply. Creating your own media messages is an important part of media literacy.

Advanced Concepts

19. Our media system reflects the power dynamics in our society. People and institutions with money, privilege, influence, and power can more easily create media messages and distribute them to large numbers of people. People without this access are often shut out of the media system.

20. Most media are controlled by commercial interests. In the United States, the marketplace largely determines what we see on television, what we hear on the radio, what we read in newspapers or magazines. As we use media, we should always be alert to the self-interest of corporate media makers. Are they concerned about your health? Do they care if you're smart or well-informed? Are they interested in creating active participants in our society and culture, or merely passive consumers of their products, services, and ideas?

21. Media monopolies reduce opportunities to participate in decision making. When a few huge media corporations control access to information, they have the power to make some information widely available and privilege those perspectives that serve their interests, while marginalizing or even censoring other information and perspectives. This affects our ability to make good decisions about our own lives, and reduces opportunities to participate in making decisions about our government and society.

22. Changing the media system is a justice issue. Our media system produces lots of negative, demeaning imagery, values and ideas. It renders many people invisible. It provides too little funding and too few outlets for people without money, privilege, influence, and power to tell their stories.

23. We can change our media system. More and more people are realizing how important it is to have a media system that is open to new people and new perspectives, that elevates human values over commercial values, and that serves human needs in the 21st century. All over the world, people are taking action to reform our media system and create new alternatives.

24. Media literate youth and adults are media activists. As we learn how to access, analyze and interpret media messages, and as we create our own media, we recognize the limitations and problems of our current media system. Media literacy is a great foundation for advocacy and activism for a better media system.

Text & Subtext

Text

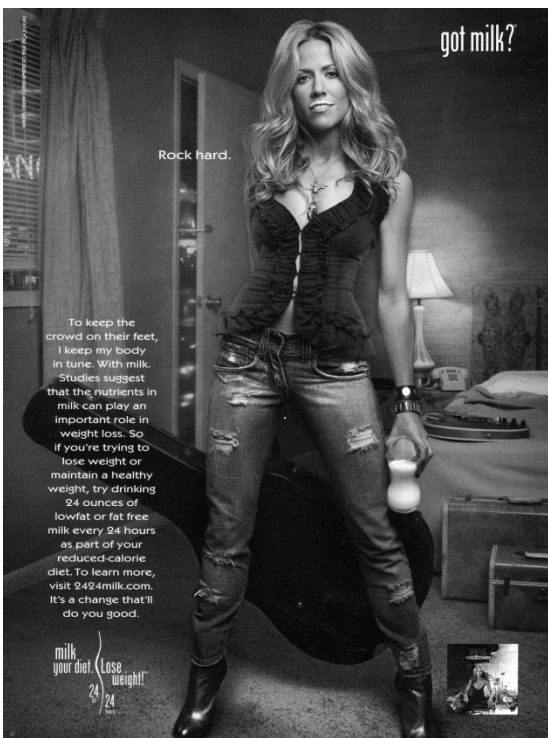
We often use the word “text” to mean “written words.” But in media literacy, “text” has a very different meaning. The text of any piece of media is what you actually see and/or hear. It can include written or spoken words, pictures, graphics, moving images, sounds, and the arrangement or sequence of all of these elements. Sometimes the text is called the “story” or “manifest text.” For most of us, the text of a piece of media is always the same.

Subtext

The “subtext” is your interpretation of a piece of media. It is sometimes called the “latent text.” The subtext is not actually heard or seen; it is the meaning we create from the text in our own minds. While media makers (especially advertisers) often create texts that suggest certain subtexts, each person creates their own subtext (interpretation) based on their previous experiences, knowledge, opinions, attitudes and values. Thus, the subtext of a piece of media will vary depending on the individual seeing/hearing it

Example

Magazine ad: “got milk?”



The text of this media message includes:

- An image of musician Sheryl Crow holding a guitar case and a glass of milk in a room with a lamp, bed, open door, etc. behind her.
- The logo “got milk?” and the words “Rock hard.”
- The short paragraph: “To keep the crowd on their feet, I keep my body in tune. With milk. Studies suggest that the nutrients in milk can play an important role in weight loss. So if you’re trying to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight, try drinking 24 ounces of lowfat or fat free milk every 24 hours as part of your reduced-calorie diet. To learn more, visit 2424milk.com. It’s a change that’ll do you good.”
- Another logo that reads “milk. your diet. Lose weight! 24 oz. 24 hours”
- A small image of Sheryl Crow’s album Wildflower.

Possible subtexts include:

- Sheryl Crow drinks milk.
- Sheryl Crow can only perform well by drinking milk.
- Sheryl Crow wants to sell her album.
- Milk renders great concerts.
- If you drink milk you will lose weight.
- Beautiful people drink milk.
- If you drink milk, you’ll be beautiful and famous, too.
- Sheryl Crow stays at cheap motels.
- Rock stars like ripped jeans

The Language of Persuasion

The goal of most media messages is to persuade the audience to believe or do something. Hollywood movies use expensive special effects to make us believe that what we're seeing is real. News stories use several techniques – such as direct quotation of identified sources – to make us believe that the story is accurate.

The media messages most concerned with persuading us are found in advertising, public relations and advocacy. Commercial advertising tries to persuade us to buy a product or service. Public relations (PR) "sells" us a positive image of a corporation, government or organization. Politicians and advocacy groups (groups that support a particular belief, point of view, policy, or action) try to persuade us to vote for or support them, using ads, speeches, newsletters, websites, and other means.

These "persuaders" use a variety of techniques to grab our attention, to establish credibility and trust, to stimulate desire for the product or policy, and to motivate us to act (buy, vote, give money, etc.)

We call these techniques the "language of persuasion." They're not new; Aristotle wrote about persuasion techniques more than 2000 years ago, and they've been used by speakers, writers, and media makers for even longer than that.

Learning the language of persuasion is an important media literacy skill. Once you know how media messages try to persuade you to believe or do something, you'll be better able to make your own decisions.

Advertising is the easiest starting point: most ads are relatively simple in structure, easily available, and in their original format. Media literacy beginners are encouraged to learn the language of persuasion by examining ads. Keep in mind that many media messages, such as television commercials, use several techniques simultaneously. Others selectively employ one or two.

Political rhetoric – whether used by politicians, government officials, lobbyists, or activists - is more difficult to analyze, not only because it involves more emotional issues, but also because it is more likely to be seen in bits and fragments, often filtered or edited by others. Identifying the persuasion techniques in public discourse is important because the consequences of that discourse are so significant – war and peace, justice and injustice, freedom and oppression, and the future of our planet. Learning the language of persuasion can help us sort out complex emotional arguments, define the key issues, and make up our own minds about the problems facing us.

NOTE: We've divided our list of persuasion techniques into three levels: Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. Basic techniques are easily identified in many media examples, and they are a good starting point for all learners. Identifying many intermediate techniques may require more critical distance, and they should usually be investigated after learners have mastered the basics. More abstraction and judgment may be required to identify the advanced techniques, and some learners may find them difficult to understand. However, even media literacy beginners may be able to spot some of the intermediate or advanced techniques, so feel free to examine any of the persuasion techniques with your group.

Basic Persuasion Techniques

1. Association. This persuasion technique tries to link a product, service, or idea with something already liked or desired by the target audience, such as fun, pleasure, beauty, security, intimacy, success, wealth, etc. The media message doesn't make explicit claims that you'll get these things; the association is implied. *Association* can be a very powerful technique. A good ad can create a strong emotional response and then associate that feeling with a brand (family = Coke, victory = Nike). This process is known as *emotional transfer*. Several of the persuasion techniques below, like *Beautiful people*, *Warm & fuzzy*, *Symbols* and *Nostalgia*, are specific types of association.

2. Bandwagon. Many ads show lots of people using the product, implying that "everyone is doing it" (or at least, "all the cool people are doing it"). No one likes to be left out or left behind, and these ads urge us to "jump on the bandwagon." Politicians use the same technique when they say, "The American people want..." How do they know?

3. Beautiful people. *Beautiful people* uses good-looking models (who may also be celebrities) to attract our attention. This technique is extremely common in ads, which may also imply (but never promise!) that we'll look like the models if we use the product.

4. Bribery. This technique tries to persuade us to buy a product by promising to give us something else, like a discount, a rebate, a coupon, or a "free gift." Sales, special offers, contests, and sweepstakes are all forms of *bribery*. Unfortunately, we don't really get something for free -- part of the sales price covers the cost of the bribe.

5. Celebrities. (A type of *Testimonial* – the opposite of *Plain folks*.) We tend to pay attention to famous people. That's why they're famous! Ads often use celebrities to grab our attention. By appearing in an ad, celebrities implicitly endorse a product; sometimes the endorsement is explicit. Many people know that companies pay celebrities a lot of money to appear in their ads (Nike's huge contracts with leading athletes, for example, are well known) but this type of testimonial still seems to be effective.

6. Experts. (A type of *Testimonial*.) We rely on experts to advise us about things that we don't know ourselves. Scientists, doctors, professors and other professionals often appear in ads and advocacy messages, lending their credibility to the product, service, or idea being sold. Sometimes, "plain folks" can also be experts, as when a mother endorses a brand of baby powder or a construction worker endorses a treatment for sore muscles.

7. Explicit claims. Something is "explicit" if it is directly, fully, and/or clearly expressed or demonstrated. For example, some ads state the price of a product, the main ingredients, where it was made, or the number of items in the package – these are *explicit claims*. So are specific, measurable promises about quality, effectiveness, or reliability, like "Works in only five minutes!" Explicit claims can be proven true or false through close examination or testing, and if they're false, the advertiser can get in trouble. It can be surprising to learn how few ads make explicit claims. Most of them try to persuade us in ways that cannot be proved or disproved.

8. Fear. This is the opposite of the *Association* technique. It uses something disliked or feared by the intended audience (like bad breath, failure, high taxes or terrorism) to promote a "solution." Ads use fear to sell us products that claim to prevent or fix the problem. Politicians and advocacy groups stoke our fears to get elected or to gain support.

9. Humor. Many ads use humor because it grabs our attention and it's a powerful persuasion technique. When we laugh, we feel good. Advertisers make us laugh and then show us their product or logo because they're trying to connect that good feeling to their product. They hope that when we see their product in a store, we'll subtly re-experience that good feeling and select their product. Advocacy messages (and news) rarely use humor because it can undermine their credibility; an exception is political satire.

10. Intensity. The language of ads is full of intensifiers, including *superlatives* (greatest, best, most, fastest, lowest prices), *comparatives* (more, better than, improved, increased, fewer calories), *hyperbole* (amazing, incredible, forever), *exaggeration*, and many other ways to hype the product.

11. Maybe. Unproven, exaggerated or outrageous claims are commonly preceded by "weasel words" such as may, might, can, could, some, many, often, virtually, as many as, or up to. Watch for these words if an offer seems too good to be true. Commonly, the *Intensity* and *Maybe* techniques are used together, making the whole thing meaningless.

12. Plain folks. (A type of *Testimonial* – the opposite of *Celebrities*.) This technique works because we may believe a "regular person" more than an intellectual or a highly-paid celebrity. It's often used to sell everyday products like laundry detergent because we can more easily see ourselves using the product, too. The *Plain folks* technique strengthens the down-home, "authentic" image of products like pickup trucks and politicians. Unfortunately, most of the "plain folks" in ads are actually paid actors carefully selected because they look like "regular people."

13. Repetition. Advertisers use repetition in two ways: Within an ad or advocacy message, words, sounds or images may be repeated to reinforce the main point. And the message itself (a TV commercial, a billboard, a website banner ad) may be displayed many times. Even unpleasant ads and political slogans work if they are repeated enough to pound their message into our minds.

14. Testimonials. Media messages often show people testifying about the value or quality of a product, or endorsing an idea. They can be *experts*, *celebrities*, or *plain folks*. We tend to believe them because they appear to be a neutral third party (a pop star, for example, not the lipstick maker, or a community member instead of the politician running for office.) This technique works best when it seems like the person "testifying" is doing so because they genuinely like the product or agree with the idea. Some testimonials may be less effective when we recognize that the person is getting paid to endorse the product.

15. Warm & fuzzy. This technique uses sentimental images (especially of families, kids and animals) to stimulate feelings of pleasure, comfort, and delight. It may also include the use of soothing music, pleasant voices, and evocative words like "cozy" or "cuddly." The *Warm & fuzzy* technique is another form of *Association*. It works well with some audiences, but not with others, who may find it too corny.

Intermediate Persuasion Techniques

16. The Big Lie. According to Adolf Hitler, one of the 20th century's most dangerous propagandists, people are more suspicious of a small lie than a big one. *The Big Lie* is more than exaggeration or hype; it's telling a complete falsehood with such confidence and charisma that people believe it. Recognizing *The Big Lie* requires "thinking outside the box" of conventional wisdom and asking the questions other people don't ask.

17. Charisma. Sometimes, persuaders can be effective simply by appearing firm, bold, strong, and confident. This is particularly true in political and advocacy messages. People often follow charismatic leaders even when they disagree with their positions on issues that affect them.

18. Euphemism. While the *Glittering generalities* and *Name-calling* techniques arouse audiences with vivid, emotionally suggestive words, *Euphemism* tries to pacify audiences in order to make an unpleasant reality more palatable. Bland or abstract terms are used instead of clearer, more graphic words. Thus, we hear about corporate "downsizing" instead of "layoffs," or "enhanced interrogation techniques" instead of "torture."

19. Extrapolation. Persuaders sometimes draw huge conclusions on the basis of a few small facts. *Extrapolation* works by ignoring complexity. It's most persuasive when it predicts something we hope can or will be true.

20. Flattery. Persuaders love to flatter us. Politicians and advertisers sometimes speak directly to us: "You know a good deal when you see one." "You expect quality." "You work hard for a living." "You deserve it." Sometimes ads flatter us by showing people doing stupid things, so that we'll feel smarter or superior. *Flattery* works because we like to be praised and we tend to believe people we like. (We're sure that someone as brilliant as you will easily understand this technique!)

21. Glittering generalities. This is the use of so-called "virtue words" such as civilization, democracy, freedom, patriotism, motherhood, fatherhood, science, health, beauty, and love. Persuaders use these words in the hope that we will approve and accept their statements without examining the evidence. They hope that few people will ask whether it's appropriate to invoke these concepts, while even fewer will ask what these concepts really mean.

22. Name-calling. This technique links a person or idea to a negative symbol (liar, creep, gossip, etc.). It's the opposite of *Glittering generalities*. Persuaders use *Name-calling* to make us reject the person or the idea on the basis of the negative symbol, instead of looking at the available evidence. A subtler version of this technique is to use adjectives with negative connotations (extreme, passive, lazy, pushy, etc.) Ask yourself: Leaving out the name-calling, what are the merits of the idea itself?

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23. New. We love new things and new ideas; because we tend to believe they're better than old things and old ideas. That's because the dominant culture in the United States (and many other countries) places great faith in technology and progress. But sometimes, new products and new ideas lead to new and more difficult problems.

24. Nostalgia. This is the opposite of the *New* technique. Many advertisers invoke a time when life was simpler and quality was supposedly better ("like Mom used to make"). Politicians promise to bring back the "good old days" and restore "tradition." But whose traditions are being restored? Who did they benefit, and who did they harm? This technique works because people tend to forget the bad parts of the past, and remember the good.

25. Rhetorical questions. These are questions designed to get us to agree with the speaker. They are set up so that the "correct" answer is obvious. ("Do you want to get out of debt?" "Do you want quick relief from headache pain?" and "Should we leave our nation vulnerable to terrorist attacks?" are all rhetorical questions.) *Rhetorical questions* are used to build trust and alignment before the sales pitch.

26. Scientific evidence. This is a particular application of the *Expert* technique. It uses the paraphernalia of science (charts, graphs, statistics, lab coats, etc.) to "prove" something. It often works because many people trust science and scientists. It's important to look closely at the "evidence," however, because it can be misleading.

27. Simple solution. Life is complicated. People are complex. Problems often have many causes, and they're not easy to solve. These realities create anxiety for many of us. Persuaders offer relief by ignoring complexity and proposing a *Simple solution*. Politicians claim one policy change (lower taxes, a new law, and a government program) will solve big social problems. Advertisers take this strategy even further, suggesting that a deodorant, a car, or a brand of beer will make you beautiful, popular and successful.

28. Slippery slope. This technique combines *Extrapolation* and *Fear*. Instead of predicting a positive future, it warns against a negative outcome. It argues against an idea by claiming it's just the first step down a "slippery slope" toward something the target audience opposes. ("If we let them ban smoking in restaurants because it's unhealthy, eventually they'll ban fast food, too." This argument ignores the merits of banning smoking in restaurants.) The *Slippery slope* technique is commonly used in political debate, because it's easy to claim that a small step will lead to a result most people won't like, even though small steps can lead in many directions.

29. Symbols. Symbols are words or images that bring to mind some larger concept, usually one with strong emotional content, such as home, family, nation, religion, gender, or lifestyle. Persuaders use the power and intensity of *symbols* to make their case. But symbols can have different meanings for different people. Hummer SUVs are status symbols for some people, while to others they are symbols of environmental irresponsibility.

Advanced Persuasion Techniques

- 30. Ad hominem.** Latin for "against the man," the *ad hominem* technique responds to an argument by attacking the opponent instead of addressing the argument itself. It's also called "attacking the messenger." It works on the belief that if there's something wrong or objectionable about the messenger, the message must also be wrong.
- 31. Analogy.** An analogy compares one situation with another. A good analogy, where the situations are reasonably similar, can aid decision-making. A weak analogy may not be persuasive, unless it uses emotionally-charged images that obscure the illogical or unfair comparison.
- 32. Card stacking.** No one can tell the whole story; we all tell part of the story. *Card stacking*, however, deliberately provides a false context to give a misleading impression. It "stacks the deck," selecting only favorable evidence to lead the audience to the desired conclusion.
- 33. Cause vs. Correlation.** While understanding true causes and true effects is important, persuaders can fool us by intentionally confusing correlation with cause. For example: Babies drink milk. Babies cry. Therefore, drinking milk makes babies cry.
- 34. Denial.** This technique is used to escape responsibility for something that is unpopular or controversial. It can be either direct or indirect. A politician who says, "I won't bring up my opponent's marital problems," has just brought up the issue without sounding mean.
- 35. Diversion.** This technique diverts our attention from a problem or issue by raising a separate issue, usually one where the persuader has a better chance of convincing us. *Diversion* is often used to hide the part of the story not being told. It is also known as a "red herring."
- 36. Group dynamics.** We are greatly influenced by what other people think and do. We can get carried away by the potent atmosphere of live audiences, rallies, or other gatherings. *Group dynamics* is a more intense version of the *Majority belief* and *Bandwagon* techniques.
- 37. Majority belief.** This technique is similar to the *Bandwagon* technique. It works on the assumption that if most people believe something, it must be true. That's why polls and survey results are so often used to back up an argument, even though pollsters will admit that responses vary widely depending on how one asks the question.
- 38. Scapegoating.** Extremely powerful and very common in political speech, *Scapegoating* blames a problem on one person, group, race, religion, etc. Some people, for example, claim that undocumented ("illegal") immigrants are the main cause of unemployment in the United States, even though unemployment is a complex problem with many causes. *Scapegoating* is a particularly dangerous form of the *Simple solution* technique.
- 39. Straw man.** This technique builds up an illogical or deliberately damaged idea and presents it as something that one's opponent supports or represents. Knocking down the "straw man" is easier than confronting the opponent directly.

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40. Timing. Sometimes a media message is persuasive not because of what it says, but because of when it's delivered. This can be as simple as placing ads for flowers and candy just before Valentine's Day, or delivering a political speech right after a major news event. Sophisticated ad campaigns commonly roll out carefully-timed phases to grab our attention, stimulate desire, and generate a response.

Deconstructing Media Messages

All media messages – TV shows, newspapers, movies, advertisements, etc. – are made or constructed by people. One of the most important media literacy skills is deconstruction – closely examining and “taking apart” media messages to understand how they work.

Deconstructing a media message can help us understand who created the message, and who is intended to receive it. It can reveal how the media maker put together the message using words, images, sounds, design, and other elements. It can expose the point of view of media makers, their values, and their biases. It can also uncover hidden meanings – intended or unintended.

There is no one “correct” way to deconstruct a media message – each of us interprets media differently, based on our own knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and values. Just be prepared to explain your interpretation.

Key concepts for deconstructing media

- **Source.** All media messages are created. The creator could be an individual writer, photographer or blogger. In the case of a Hollywood movie, the scriptwriter, director, producer, and movie studio all play a role in creating the message. Ads are usually put together by ad agencies, but the “creator” is really the client – the company or organization that's paying for the ad. The key point is: Whose message is this? Who has control over the content?
- **Audience.** Media messages are intended to reach audiences. Some – like primetime TV shows - are designed to reach millions of people. Others – like a letter or email – may be intended only for one person. Most media messages are designed to reach specific groups of people – defined by age, gender, class, interests, and other factors – called the “target audience.”
- **Text.** We often use the word “text” to mean “written words.” But in media literacy, “text” has a very different meaning. The text of any piece of media is what you actually see and/or hear. It can include written or spoken words, pictures, graphics, moving images, sounds, and the arrangement or sequence of all of these elements. Sometimes the text is called the “story” or “manifest text.” For most of us, the text of a piece of media is always the same.
- **Subtext.** The “subtext” is an individual interpretation of a media message. It is sometimes called the “latent text.” The subtext is not actually heard or seen; it is the meaning we create from the text in our own minds. While media makers often create texts that suggest certain subtexts, each person creates their own subtext (interpretation) based on their previous experiences, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and values. Thus, two people interpreting the same text can produce two very different subtexts.

- **Persuasion techniques.** Media messages use a number of techniques to try to persuade us to believe or do something. If we can spot the techniques being used, we're less likely to be persuaded, and more likely to think for ourselves. See the Language of Persuasion handout for a list of persuasion techniques and definitions.
- **Point of view.** No one tells the whole story. Everyone tells part of the story from their point of view. Deconstructing a media message can expose the values and biases of the media maker, and uncover powerful ideological and value messages.

Deconstruction Questions

You can use the following questions to quickly deconstruct any media message.

Use the basic deconstruction questions with beginners or younger learners, or when you only have a short amount of time. Use the intermediate or advanced deconstruction questions with other groups or when you have more time.

Basic deconstruction questions

1. Whose message is this? Who created or paid for it? Why?
2. Who is the "target audience"? What are the clues (words, images, sounds, etc.)?
3. What "tools of persuasion" are used?
4. What part of the story is not being told?

Intermediate deconstruction questions

1. Whose message is this? Who created or paid for it? Why?
2. Who is the "target audience"? What is their age, ethnicity, class, profession, interests, etc.? What words, images or sounds suggest this?
3. What is the "text" of the message? (What we actually see and/or hear: written or spoken words, photos, drawings, logos, design, music, sounds, etc.)
4. What is the "subtext" of the message? (What do you think is the hidden or unstated meaning?)
5. What "tools of persuasion" are used?
6. What positive messages are presented? What negative messages are presented?
7. What part of the story is not being told?

Advanced deconstruction questions

1. Whose message is this? Who created or paid for it? Why?
2. Who is the "target audience"? What is their age, ethnicity, class, profession, interests, etc.? What words, images or sounds suggest this?
3. What is the "text" of the message? (What we actually see and/or hear: written or spoken words, photos, drawings, logos, design, music, sounds, etc.)

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4. What is the “subtext” of the message? (What do you think is the hidden or unstated meaning?)
5. What kind of lifestyle is presented?
6. What values are expressed?
7. What “tools of persuasion” are used?
8. What positive messages are presented? What negative messages are presented?
9. What groups of people does this message empower? What groups does it disempower? How does this serve the media maker's interests?
10. What part of the story is not being told? How and where could you get more information about the untold stories?

Creating Counter Ads

You can “talk back” to deceptive or harmful media messages by creating *counter-ads*. These are parodies of advertisements, delivering more truthful or constructive messages using the same persuasion techniques as real ads. By creating counter-ads, you can apply media literacy skills to communicate positive messages, in a fun and engaging exercise.

The simplest way to create a counter-ad is to alter a real ad (magazine or newspaper ads work best) by changing the text or adding graphic elements; just write or draw over the original ad, or paste new materials onto it. A counter-ad can also be created by drawing a new image, copying the design and layout of a real ad. Collage techniques work well, too. You can also write scripts for radio or TV counter-ads, and read them to the class. Or take it a step further and record or videotape your counter-ad.

Here are a few tips on making effective counter-ads:

- **Analyze.** Look at several real ads and try to figure out why they’re effective. The best counter-ads use the same techniques to deliver a different message.
- **Power.** Your message has to break through the clutter of all the real ads that people see or hear. Think about what makes an ad memorable to you. What techniques does it use to grab your attention? Use them.
- **Persuade.** Use the same persuasion techniques found in real ads – like humor, repetition, or flattery -- to deliver your alternative message.
- **Pictures.** Visual images are incredibly powerful. People often forget what they read or hear, but remember what they see. The best counter-ads, like the best ads, tell their stories through pictures.
- **Rebellion.** Advertising targeted at young people often appeals to a sense of youthful rebellion. Effective counter-ads expose misleading and manipulative advertising methods and turn their rebellious spirit toward the corporate sponsors who use them.
- **“KISS” – Keep It Short & Simple.** Use only one idea for your main message. Focus everything on getting this message across.
- **Plan.** Try to think of everything – words, images, design -- before you begin production. Make a few sketches or rough drafts before you start crafting the final product.

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- **Practice.** If you're going to perform a radio or TV script (and especially if you're making an audio recording or video) your cast and crew will need to rehearse. Then, rehearse it again.
- **Teamwork.** Working in a team can lighten your workload and spark creativity. Brainstorm ideas as a group. Make sure all members share responsibility for the work.
- **Revise.** When you think you're finished, show your counter-ad to uninvolved people for feedback. Do they understand it? Do they think it's funny? Use their responses to revise your work for maximum impact.
- **Distribute.** Your ideas are meant to be seen! Make copies of your counter-ads and post them around your school. Get them published in your school newspaper. Show your videotape to other kids and adults. Your counter-ad can stimulate needed discussion and debate around media and health issues.
- **Have fun!** Making a counter-ad is a fun way to learn about media and health, to be creative, and to express your views. Enjoy it!

Looking Beyond the Frame

The ability to analyze and evaluate media messages is an essential first step in becoming media literate. Deconstructing individual media examples, identifying the persuasion techniques used, and applying the media literacy concepts discussed earlier in this section are important skills that can lead us to a deeper understanding of the media messages that bombard us every day.

But this is just the beginning. True media literacy requires “looking beyond the frame” of the media message – the individual TV commercial, news story or website, for example – to examine its *context*. This involves four interrelated concepts and skill sets:

1. Media messages reflect the social, political, economic, and technological environment of the media system in which they are created. They either reinforce that environment — by perpetuating stereotypes, for example -- or they challenge it. For example, big-budget Hollywood blockbusters are produced by media conglomerates seeking to maximize short-term profits. They often rely on familiar character types, storylines, and genres because old formulas create a safer investment. In contrast, films made by independent filmmakers -- particularly those with little access to money and power -- are often more original, covering subject matter and featuring characters we haven't seen before. Instead of appealing to the lowest common denominator, independent films often challenge audiences' assumptions and beliefs. Looking beyond the frame to consider the context of both kinds of films enriches one's understanding of our media culture. This involves *deconstructing our media system* to examine issues of media ownership, power and control, and to recognize how these issues influence media content.

2. Examining the relationship between media and society raises the issue of *media justice*. Our media system produces a lot of negative, demeaning imagery. It privileges some people and some perspectives, and ignores or silences others. It renders entire groups of people invisible. The dominant media system – consisting almost entirely of private corporations producing and distributing media for profit – provides too little funding and too few outlets for people without money, privilege and power to tell their stories. The media system is unjust, and it perpetuates and strengthens injustice throughout society. The media justice movement works to create a fairer and more just media system that serves everyone, particularly communities that have been historically under-represented and misrepresented in the mainstream media, including indigenous communities, people of color, the LGBTQI community, people with disabilities, working class people, and others.

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The media justice movement believes that communication is a human right and that media should belong to the people.

3. Just as *literacy* is the ability both to read and write, *media literacy* involves both understanding media messages and *creating* media. We all create media. We write notes and send email. We draw and doodle. Some of us play and compose music. Some take photos or make videos. Many people blog and use social-networking websites. High-tech or low-tech, our own media creations contribute to the media landscape. Learning how to express oneself in a variety of media is an important part of being media literate.

4. Media literate individuals are active participants in our media culture. While many people analyze and criticize media messages, and others focus on creating their own media, more and more people are also becoming media activists. They are changing the way they use media, challenging media messages and media institutions, supporting independent media, and working for media justice and media reform. Since media create so much of our culture, any social change will require significant change in our media environment, in media policies and practices, and in media institutions. Becoming an active agent for change in our media culture is a natural result of being media literate.

Media Literacy Project

The Media Literacy Project, founded in 1993, cultivates critical thinking and activism. We are committed to building a healthy world through media justice. As a nationally recognized leader in media literacy resources, trainings, and education, MLP delivers dynamic multimedia presentations at conferences, workshops and classrooms across the country. Our media literacy curricula and action guides are used in countless classrooms and communities and our training programs have empowered thousands of people to be advocates and activists for media justice.

Our organizing campaigns such as *Siembra la palabra digna*, and our role as an Anchor Organization for the Media Action Grassroots Network (MAG-Net) center communities of color, poor communities, rural communities, and immigrant communities in the creation of local, regional, and national media policy.