

AP DIGEST

An Advanced Placement Program Student Resource

Learning in a Media Age

The Center for Media Literacy, one of the pioneering organizations behind the media education movement in the United States, identifies Five Key Questions for media literacy. These, in turn, flow from Five Core Concepts that have evolved from media literacy practitioners and scholars around the world.

Core Concept #1: All media messages are “constructed.”

Whether we are watching the nightly news or passing a billboard on the street, the media message we experience was written by someone (or probably several people), pictures were taken, and a creative designer put it all together. But this is more than a physical process. What happens is that whatever is “constructed” by just a few people then becomes “the way it is” for the rest of us. But as the audience, we do not get to see or hear the words, pictures, or arrangements that were rejected. We only see, hear, or read what was accepted. Helping people understand how the media are put together—and what was left out—as well as how the media shape what we know and understand about the world we live in is a critical first step in helping them navigate their lives through a global and technological society.

Key Question #1:

Who created this message?

Core Concept #2: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

Each form of communication—whether newspapers, TV game shows, or horror movies—has its own creative language: scary music heightens fear, camera close-ups convey intimacy, and big headlines signal significance. Understanding the grammar, syntax, and metaphor system of media language increases our appreciation and enjoyment of media experiences, as well as helping us to be less susceptible to manipulation. One of the best ways to understand how the media are put together is to do just that: make a video, create a web site, or develop an ad campaign about a community issue. The four major arts disciplines—music, dance, theatre, and the visual arts—can also provide a context through which one gains skills of analysis, interpretation, and appreciation, along with opportunities for self-expression and creative production.

Key Question #2:

What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

Core Concept #3: Different people experience the same media message differently.

Because of each individual’s age, upbringing, and education, no two people see the same movie or hear the same song on the radio. Even parents and children do not see the same TV show. This concept turns the tables on the idea of TV viewers as just passive “couch potatoes.” We may not be conscious of it, but each of us, even toddlers, is constantly trying to make sense of what we see, hear, or read. The more questions we can ask about what we are experiencing around us, the more alert we can be about accepting or rejecting messages. Research indicates that, over time, children of all ages can learn age-appropriate skills that give them a new perspective with which they can “read” their media culture.

Key Question #3:

How might different people understand this message differently from me?

Core Concept #4: Media have embedded values and points of view.

Media, because they are constructed, carry a subtext of who and what is important—at least to the person or persons creating the construction. Media are also storytellers (even commercials tell a quick and simple story) and stories require characters, settings, and a plot that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The choice of a character's age, gender, or race, mixed in with the lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors that are portrayed, the selection of a setting (urban, rural, affluent, poor, etc.), and the actions and reactions in the plot are just some of the ways that values become “embedded” in a TV show, a movie, or an ad. It is important to learn how to decode all kinds of media messages in order to discover the points of view that are embedded in them. Only then can we judge whether to accept or reject these messages as we negotiate our way each day through our mediated environment.

Key Question #4:

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

Core Concept #5: Most media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power.

Newspapers and magazines lay out their pages with ads first; the space remaining is devoted to news. Likewise, we all know that commercials are part and parcel of most TV watching. What many people do not know is that what is really being sold through television or other commercial media is not only the advertised products to the audience, but also the audience to the advertisers. The real purpose of the programs on television, whether news or entertainment, is to create an audience (and put them in a receptive mood) so that the network or local station can sell time to sponsors to advertise their products in commercials. Indeed, sponsors pay for the time based on the number of people the station predicts will be watching. The sponsors also target their advertising message to specific kinds of viewers: for example, women twenty to thirty-five years old who have the ability to spend money on the advertised products, or children two to seven years old who influence their parents' spending.

But the issue of message motivation has changed dramatically since the Internet became an international platform through which groups and organizations—even individuals—can attempt to persuade others to a particular point of view. As an exercise in power unprecedented in human history, the Internet provides numerous reasons for users of all ages to be able to interpret rhetorical devices, verify sources, and distinguish legitimate online sources from bogus or “hoax” web sites.

Key Question #5:

Why is this message being sent?