

MEDIA LITERACY TOOLBOX Media Literacy Concepts & Skills

How to Deconstruct a Media Message

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.

Deconstructing a Media Message

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

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.)
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? Is it glamorized? How?
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?