



Lesson Plan: Media Literacy

Overview

This series of lessons was designed to meet the needs of gifted children for extension beyond the standard curriculum with the greatest ease of use for the educator. The lessons may be given to the students for individual self-guided work, or they may be taught in a classroom or a home-school setting. This particular lesson plan is primarily effective in a classroom setting. Assessment strategies and rubrics are included. The lessons were developed by Lisa Van Gemert, M.Ed.T., the Mensa Foundation's Gifted Children Specialist.

Introduction

Advertisers spend billions of dollars every year targeting kids. By learning the techniques marketers use to try to get them to buy products, youth can become more informed consumers of products and information in general. Information can be manipulated to guide thinking about issues. Many of these strategies are strong rhetoric techniques, making this lesson an accessible segue to logical reasoning and argument.

Learning Objectives

After completing the lessons in this unit, students will be able to:

- Interpret advertising critically
- Identify persuasive techniques
- Employ intellectual defenses against persuasive techniques
- Create a mock advertisement employing at least three persuasive techniques
- Investigate advertising in a local newspaper
- Recognize and analyze product placement in film
- Research national marketing trends in advertising
- Create an advocacy position on advertising

Preparing to Teach This Curriculum Unit

- Collect junk mail for one month prior to the unit (alternately, gather junk mail from friends, neighbors, and relatives)
- Print this lesson plan
- Have one daily newspaper and internet access available

Note: Items marked with an asterisk (*) have a rubric or other assessment tool associated with them at the end of the unit. Not all activities have a rubric. Some questions are reflective and/or informal.

Common Core State Standards Addressed

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4](#) Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7](#) Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.¹
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.8](#) Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Lesson 1: Learning about thinking and selling

Do you know the word “manipulation?” It is from the Latin for “hand” (*manus*) and “to fill” (*plere*), and it used to refer to handling objects well. Nearly 200 years ago, it started meaning handling people well, too. So, manipulation can mean getting people to do or think what you want them to.

One thing that advertisers want is for you to buy stuff! Sometimes people aren’t selling actual products; they are selling ideas or ways of thinking. If you understand the techniques they use to do this, you can recognize them and avoid being manipulated.

For example, to most people, the picture at right is simply a hand. If you know American Sign Language, though, you know that this hand is forming the letter “o.” It is saying something, even if you don’t understand it.



We are going to learn some of the ways information is manipulated in the media.

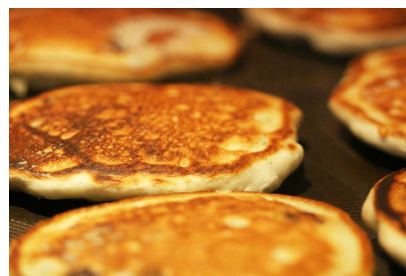
FACT: First, let’s start with facts. You know facts, right? Those are things that can be proved to be true. Facts can be **observations** or **definitions**. An observation is something that we see.



For example, I can see a stoplight turn red. Therefore, I know it is a true thing that the light turned red. A definition is an explanation of what something means. Both observations and definitions can be manipulated. For example, photographs can be altered, so you may see a picture and think it proves something when it really doesn’t.

Facts can be taken out of context to seem more or less important than they are. Definitions can leave out important parts. The important thing to know is that just because something is a fact, or is put forward as a fact, doesn’t mean it’s the whole story.

OPINION: An opinion is a personal belief. Opinion can be **supported** or **unsupported**. Supported opinions are opinions that have reasons attached to them for why the person feels the way he or she does. For example, if your dad says, “I want pancakes for dinner because it’s the only food we have in the house and I don’t want to go to the store,” that’s a supported opinion. If your dad says, “I want pancakes for dinner” without the explanation as to why, that is an unsupported opinion.





Let's practice!*

Read each statement at right and decide if it is a fact that is an observation (FO), a fact that is a definition (FD), an opinion that is supported (OS), or an opinion that is unsupported (OU). The first two are done for you as examples.

1. A student is someone who is studying something.	FD
2. Pink is a nicer color than chartreuse.	OU
3. After the storm there was a bright double rainbow.	
4. Summer is fun because you get to go on vacation.	
5. Books that have sequels are fun to read.	
6. The robber ran out of the bank.	
7. The dog barked at the mailman.	
8. Naked mole rats are rodents found in East Africa.	
9. Spaghetti is fun to eat because you can twist the noodles on your fork.	
10. The boys all wore swimming suits and fur coats.	

Now, let's get a little tricky. We can change a fact to an opinion by adding some opinion words to it. For

example, if I say, "It's hot in the summer in Texas," that is a fact. If I say, "It is uncomfortably hot in the summer in Texas," I have made it an opinion. Maybe I'm uncomfortable, but you just love it when it's 100 degrees! The word "uncomfortably" is an opinion word.

FACT: The kids were playing in the street.

OPINION: The mean kids were playing in the street.

FACT: The whale moved through the ocean.

OPINION:

FACT: The dancers competed in the competition.

OPINION:

For the statements at left, change the facts to an opinion by adding opinion words. The first one is done for you as an example.

Now, write one fact and one opinion of your own.

1. Write a fact using the word earthquake.

2. Write an opinion using the word obtuse.

CAUSE AND EFFECT: Cause and effect, like facts and opinions, seem a lot easier before you start thinking about them. It's obvious that some things cause other things, isn't it? The sun came up and the land dried out. Simple. The baseball team was in town, so people went to the game. The tricky part is that sometimes it only looks like one thing caused another, but the truth is somewhere else entirely.

Let's take this one step at a time. For the events (causes) below, list a possible effect:

Cause: The dog barked loudly in the middle of the night.

Possible effect: _____

Cause: The lightening struck the tree.

Possible effect: _____

Easy, right? Okay, now think about how something can have more than one effect, both positive and negative. For example, if there is a flood, fishermen may lose business, but the engineers who build dams may get more business. For the events (causes) below, list two possible effects, one positive and one negative:

Cause: A tsunami hit the island.

Possible effect: _____

Negative effect: _____

Cause: The price of milk increased.

Possible effect: _____

Negative effect: _____



FALSE CAUSE: You're already seeing how cause and effect can be more complicated than they at first appear. Let's go one step further. Sometimes we have what is called a "false cause." Shall we learn some Latin again? How about this: *Post hoc ergo propter hoc*. This means, "after this, therefore because of this." This means that sometimes we think that just because one thing follows another, the first thing caused the second thing to happen when really it didn't. This is false cause.

Here's an example: Napoleon was very short. He became a great emperor. Therefore, Napoleon was a great emperor because he was very short.

This may seem silly to you, but it is one of the key ways that information is used to manipulate the way people think about things.

Let's practice.

Look at the following statements. List other possibilities for each event.

1. It was dark when the accident occurred; therefore the dark caused the accident.

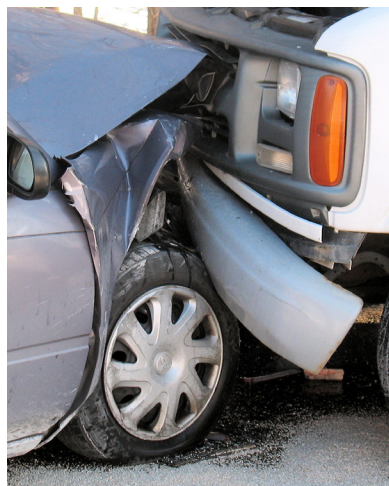
Other possibilities: _____

2. She ate the chicken right before she died, so it must have been poisoned.

Other possibilities: _____



SINGLE CAUSE FALLACY: A variation of false cause is **single cause fallacy**. Single cause fallacy (fallacy means "falsehood") is when something is made to seem as if it is the sole cause of some event, when in reality there were many (or at least more than one) causes. For example, the accident report after a car crash may list the cause as one driver's speeding, when in reality the other driver wasn't paying attention and could have avoided the accident if he had been.



If you listen closely, you will hear many very complicated issues blamed on only one thing, when in reality there are many reasons why something is happening.

CAUSATION/CORRELATION: You will frequently see examples of **causation** being confused with **correlation**, especially when you read or hear about health studies.

Causation means something actually caused something else to happen: the man smoked and it gave him lung cancer.

Correlation means that something happened along with something else, but didn't necessarily cause it: the people exercised, and they lost weight. The exercise *may* have caused the weight loss, but were the people also eating less?



Causation is extremely difficult to prove, and if you look closely, you will often find that the researchers themselves will use the word "correlate" when what you heard on television or read in the newspaper was "cause."

Let's practice. Think of a possible correlation for the following "causes."

1. Headline: STUDYING MORE THAN TWO HOURS IMPROVES PERFORMANCE 20 PERCENT!!! What the study showed: The students who studied more than two hours the night prior to the exam performed 20% better than those who didn't. Possible correlations:

2. Headline: DRINKING THREE CANS OF SODA A DAY CAUSES CANCER!!! What the study showed: People who drank three cans of soda a day had higher incidences of cancer than those who drank two cans or fewer. Possible correlations:

FALSE DILEMMA: A dilemma is a choice between two bad choices. Choosing between chocolate cake and cheesecake for dessert is not a dilemma because both choices are appealing (unless you're allergic to chocolate, in which case you should just give me yours). In a **false dilemma**, a problem is made to seem as if has only one alternatives, both of which are problematic, when in actuality, there are more choices available. You can frequently recognize false dilemma by "if" statements. For example, "If we don't do x, then y will absolutely happen." False dilemmas can be dangerous because they keep people from looking for compromise.



CIRCULAR REASONING: This is a fun one to use on your siblings. In **circular reasoning**, you use your argument to prove your argument. For example, "She is smart because she studies so much, and she studies so much because she is smart." All the person is really doing is restating his or her position. Usually it is more subtle than the example here, but you get the idea. If you say to your sister, "I should have my own room because I'm older and older sisters get their own rooms," that's circular reasoning.



All of the things we have learned about so far depend upon our desire to explain things that are sometimes not explainable.

Now, imagine that you want a raise in your allowance. I mean, you want it really badly. Try to think of how you could use a false dilemma and circular reasoning to try to convince your parents to up your allowance.

False dilemma: _____

Circular reasoning: _____

APPEAL TO PITY: Sympathy is when you feel badly for someone else's misfortune or when you share that person's feelings. Advertisers sometimes play on this sympathy in a technique called **appeal to pity** that tries to get people to buy something because they feel sympathy. For example, a company may say, "if you buy our shirt, we will give some of the profit to help starving kids in Africa." That may be true, but the reasons for buying a shirt have nothing to do with world hunger. The advertiser is linking two unrelated things in order to get you to buy something.

Sometimes politicians use appeal to pity to try to win votes. They do this by being seen at places or with people who evoke pity or sympathy. For example, they may fly to the scene of a disaster or be seen hugging a widow.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with these techniques; they don't mean that a company or a candidate is dishonest. But it is important to know and be able to recognize them when you see them so that you can avoid being manipulated.



BANDWAGON: Another advertising technique is called **bandwagon**. In this technique, the advertiser tries to get you to buy something because “everyone else” is buying it. They try to convince you that if you do not have this product, you will be left out forever.

The implication is that if you were really cool or really smart, you would have already bought this thing, but there is still time! You can go buy it right now!

This type of appeal is like circular reasoning; it says that you should buy something because everyone else is buying it, and everyone else is buying it because you are going to buy it.

TESTIMONIAL: Nine out of ten people who complete this lesson become less manipulated by advertising and the media. Therefore, everyone should complete this lesson plan!

That is an example of a testimonial. Sometimes a testimonial is from just one person, especially a celebrity of some kind. The implication is that you can become as fabulous as the movie star or athlete if only you buy this one product that he/she uses. Sometimes advertisers use “real” people to provide testimonials. They are trying to appeal to the “common man” and imply that if their products work so well for someone just like you, they will also work for you.

Dude, I can't believe you don't have these sunglasses yet.



REPETITION: Repetition is when you repeat the name of the product multiple times in the ad. Remember that the product can be a person! Sometimes the repetition is in the form of a picture. For example, there might be four pictures of the product in the ad, or even symbols of the product. Radio is a good place to find examples of repetition. Sometimes repetition involves repeating the same ad over and over in the same place (the same television or radio station, the same newspaper, or the same magazine).



Look at this advertisement from the 1890s for Coca-Cola. How much repetition do you see? Look closely! Do you see any other of the techniques you’ve learned about?

One thing you might notice is that the words “Coca-Cola” are written the same way then that they are now. The font has stayed the same and is a form of repetition, as is the distinctive red color.

Coca-Cola®



PURR WORDS/SNARL WORDS/WEASEL WORDS: The last technique we will explore is the use of different types of words in advertising and media. **Purr words** are words that make people feel happy just to hear them. **Snarl words** are words that have the opposite (negative) effect.



Oftentimes the word choice is even more important than the argument itself. Purr words would include words like, "home," "national security," "trust," and "freedom fighter."

Snarl words would include words like, "terrorist," "liar," "greed," and "foreign." The way a person or group is labeled (with a purr or snarl word) often depends upon who is doing the labeling.

Weasel words are ambiguous words that are used to "weasel" out of something. These are words like, "probably," "may," "often," and "somewhat." These words enable advertisers to make claims without really promising anything.



Think about these last five techniques (appeal to pity, bandwagon, testimonial, and repetition, and purr/snarl/weasel words). Imagine that you are an advertising agency and you have three new clients. Choose one of the five techniques for each of the following products and design an ad using that technique. The product and its target market are listed for you. At the bottom of the ad, label the technique you used. For the last ad, use at least two techniques.*

Product Number 1: Pair of jeans (target market: teenagers)

Technique:



Product Number 2: Canned soup (target market: adults)

Technique:

Product Number 3: Bicycle (target market: children ages 10-12)

Technique:

Putting it All Together*

You have learned some of the ways information is manipulated in the media. Choose **seven** of the possible choices below and give full, thoughtful, lovely responses. Your sources may include any or all of the following: television, newspapers, internet, radio, magazines, or movies. You may use advertisements. You must list your source, being as specific as possible. Don't just say, "television." Say, "News, Channel 5, 9 p.m., 6 January 2013."

Choices:

1. List two **facts** and whether they are observations or definitions.

A. _____ B. _____

2. List two **opinions** and whether they are supported or unsupported.

A. _____ B. _____

3. Find a **cause and effect** relationship: _____

4. Find a **false cause** or a **single-cause fallacy**: _____

5. Find a **false dilemma**: _____

6. Find an example of **circular reasoning**: _____

7. Find an example of **repetition**: _____

8. Find an **appeal to pity**: _____

9. Find a **bandwagon appeal**: _____

10. Find a **testimonial**: _____

11. Find a **purr word**, **snarl word**, or **weasel word**: _____

Lesson 2: Analyzing junk mail

Third class mail, sometimes called advertising mail, bulk mail, or junk mail, has become more common than first class mail (letters, etc.). The post office makes billions of dollars a year on junk mail, and every day people receive credit card offers, advertisements, catalogs, and requests for donations. Although bulk mail often contains the same techniques you have already learned, some tactics are particular to advertising mail.

Collect advertising mail from your home (or a friend, neighbor, or family member) for one month. Use the table below to keep track of the tactics used by the mailers. Use tally marks. Remember that each piece of mail may have more than one tactic used. Two spaces are there for you to identify tactics not listed.

- How many pieces of bulk mail were received in one month? _____
- How many of the pieces were catalogs? _____, which is _____% of the total
- How many were addressed to "occupant" or "resident"? _____, which is _____% of the total

Tactic	Tally	Tactic	Tally
No return address (or address, but no company name)		Junk mail that looks like it's from a government agency	
Looks like it has a check in it		Offer of a free gift	
Includes something free (address labels, etc.)		Promise to save the recipient lots of money	
Claims to have a prize for you		Letter inside has been "personalized" with the recipient's name	
Bulk mail made to look like express or priority mail		Snarl words ("urgent," "final notice," etc.)	
Purr words		Credit card offers	
Other:		Other:	

It's your turn! You have been asked by a marketing firm to design an envelope that uses the four most common tactics of mail advertisers. Using the data you gathered and recorded on the table above and the outline of the envelope below, create the design. You may use color.



Lesson 3: Research and analysis

Now you are ready to make the leap from student to scholar through the completion of a research project on advertising.

A. First, using a daily newspaper (not the Sunday edition), calculate how much of the paper is advertising and how much is news. To do this, mentally divide each page into quadrants (four pieces). For each quadrant that is mostly advertising, put a tally mark on the advertising side of the graph below. For each quadrant that is mostly news, put a tally mark on the news side. So you should have four tally marks in all for each page. Analyze at least three sections of the paper (not classified ads).

Advertising	News
Total:	Total:
Percentage:	Percentage:

B. Product placement is when you see products in places that wouldn't normally have ads (like movies). They don't stop the movie to show an ad for something, but you will see the character wearing a certain watch, driving a certain car, or drinking a certain soda. Watch a movie and count how many product placements you see.

Next, go to ow.ly/ojBKj. Find the movie you watched and see if you caught all the product placements. Did you?

How many did you miss? _____

Next, browse by year and see what products were most commonly placed in 2001.

What are the top five?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

What were the five most commonly placed in 2009?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



Why do you think it changed? _____

Thinking about what you know, what do you think the most commonly placed product will be next year?

According to branchchannel.com, Apple Computer had product placement in 19 films in 2009. The were: *17 Again*, *Brüno*, *Couples Retreat*, *Funny People*, *G-Force*, *Hannah Montana The Movie*, *He's Just Not That into You*, *Knowing*, *Madea Goes to Jail*, *Marley & Me*, *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*, *Obsessed*, *Race to Witch Mountain*, *Taken*, *The Proposal*, *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*, *This Is It*, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, and *Watchmen*.

What can you tell about the demographic that Apple is trying to appeal to just by looking at this list of movies? How old is the target market? Are they men or women? What else? _____

C. The next part of the project is more in-depth. Just as you looked at the amount of advertising in your local paper, now you will look at the content of advertising in a certain area.

Go to ow.ly/ojBX0. Click on "browse" on the left.

You will see that there are five main content areas: beauty & hygiene, radio, television, transportation, and World War II. Look through some of the ads available to get a feel for what is there. Spend some time with this, and let your mind think about how you are seeing examples of the techniques you've learned.

Choose two areas to compare (for example, soaps from the 1930s and soaps from the 1950s). You may want to follow a single product's changing advertising. The site has more than 250 ads for Palmolive soap! Using the skills you have gained in this lesson, analyze the ads and form a theory about how the ads changed. For example, your theory may look like this: "Between the 1930s and the 1950s, advertisers increased bandwagon and celebrity appeals and decreased the use of repetition."

You may discover the use of techniques that we did not study. That's fine! You may use those, too. Once you have your theory, write a short paper* (about two pages) explaining how you arrived at your theory. Copy and paste ads from the site to support your argument (the site says it's okay to do this). The last paragraph of your paper should be your opinion about whether or not you think the ad shifting was effective or not. If not, what would you have recommended instead?





D. For your final effort, read through a couple of the following items. Choose one issue you feel strongly about and write a letter expressing your opinion to your newspaper or to your senator or congressman* (if you are in America – if not, find your political representative at your country's government website). Keep in mind that they prefer email (cheaper, safer and easier to sort). To find your senator's or congressman's address (both for email and snail mail), go to ow.ly/ojC7N.

Possible Issue Choices:

- ABCs at the FTC: Marketing and Advertising to Children: ow.ly/ojGwE
- Government Regulation and Industry Self-Regulation: ow.ly/ojGAm
- Marketing of Violent Entertainment to Children (Letter from Ralph Nadar to FTC): ow.ly/ojGD9
- Marketing to Kids Online Isn't Child's Play: ow.ly/ojGFC
- Psychologists Challenge Ethics of Marketing to Children: ow.ly/ojGJg
- Violent Media is Good for Kids: ow.ly/ojGMi

Congratulations!

You are now one of the most media-savvy kids around!

Assessment

FACT AND OPINION

1. A student is someone who is studying something.	FD
2. Pink is a nicer color than chartreuse.	OU
3. After the storm there was a bright double rainbow.	FO
4. Summer is fun because you get to go on vacation.	OS
5. Books that have sequels are fun to read.	OU
6. The robber ran out of the bank.	FO
7. The dog barked at the mailman.	FO
8. Naked mole rats are rodents found in East Africa.	FD
9. Spaghetti is fun to eat because you can twist the noodles on your fork.	OS
10. The boys all wore swimming suits and fur coats.	FO

PRODUCT ADVERTISEMENTS

Product #1

To what extent does the ad address the target audience? /10

To what extent does the ad effectively use the identified technique? /10

Product #2

To what extent does the ad address the target audience? /10

To what extent does the ad effectively use the identified technique? /10

Product #3

To what extent does the ad address the target audience? /10

To what extent does the ad effectively use the identified techniques? /20

Overall appearance and creativity /30

Total: /100

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Examples are properly identified (3 pts. each) /21

Examples are properly labeled (3 pts. each) /21

Responses are full and complete (5 pts. each) /35

Total: /77

JUNK MAIL ANALYSIS

Tally is complete	/25
Example envelope contains at least four tactics (8 pts. each)	/32
Tactics reflect the most common as indicated on tally chart	/8
Envelope is visually appealing (neatness, legibility, layout)	/15
Total:	/80

ADVERTISING ANALYSIS PAPER

Addresses two areas of comparison	/10
Contains a central theory or argument	/15
Supports the theory/argument with examples	/20
Effective use of reasoning	/20
Last paragraph of paper addresses the effectiveness of the advertising	/10
Effective use of language	/10
Effective use of conventions (syntax, grammar, spelling, length)	/15
Total:	/100

LETTER TO CONGRESSIONAL REPRESENTATIVE

Letter reflects clear understanding of issue discussed	/45
Letter expresses an advocacy position	/35
Letter employs effective presentation (syntax, format, conventions)	/20
Total:	/100