

Teacher Curriculum: Learn to Think Student Ad Competition



A. Introduction and Goals

The “Learn to think” campaign encourages students to look at the world in new ways. By using unexpected pictures and vignettes to illustrate actual course titles from St. Edward’s University, the advertisements force viewers and listeners to move away from literal thinking — the ability to do so has many applications in the humanities, social sciences and the arts.

The “Learn to think” campaign can be used as a springboard for a discussion of why literary devices matter and how they appear in our everyday life. It can be used as part of a wider study of marketing techniques, trends and ethical dilemmas. It can also lend itself to artistic assignments. By incorporating this contest into high school courses, teachers give students a chance to explore the role of advertising in the culture, as well as the potential to win a free year of college tuition.

B. Curriculum Connections and Suggested Resources

To get students thinking about ways to design their own contest entries, we have provided several activities to incorporate the “Learn to think” ads into the classroom. The activities described in this web site use terms from English courses, but they can also fit into classes about advertising, media literacy, sociology, psychology and art.

George Lakoff has written several books about how literary devices pervade our everyday life because they unconsciously structure our thinking about politics, people, art — just about everything. Excerpts from these books would make a good introduction to this lesson and provide a quick background for teachers. Titles include *More Than Cool Reason*; *Metaphors We Live By*; *Moral Politics*; and *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*.

The Media Education Foundation (www.mediaed.org) produces videos, study guides and handouts to encourage critical thinking about all aspects of media. Some videos focused on advertising include *Advertising and the End of the World*; *Slim Hopes*, *Deadly Persuasion*, and *Killing Us Softly 3* (all about alcohol and tobacco advertisements); and *Captive Audience* (about marketing inside schools).

Another resource is the Advertising Educational Foundation (www.aef.com), which helps teachers and other education professionals by providing academic resources such as must-read listings, class syllabi, case histories and other educational materials about the advertising industry. This includes an online video documentary, entitled *Behind the Scenes: The Advertising Process at Work*, which follows the development of three national advertising campaigns for Jell-O Gelatin®, Accuvue® Disposable Lenses and Coca-Cola® Classic and helps to demonstrate the wide variety of people and skills involved in the creative process.

C. Key Terms

- Intertextuality: the interrelationship of symbols and texts; full understanding of one “text,” in this case advertisement, is dependent on prior exposure to another
- Irony: words or phrases intended to evoke a connotation opposite from their literal meaning
- Metaphor: an implied comparison linking two usually unrelated things
- Metonym: a figure of speech that substitutes one word or phrase for another that is usually associated with it. Example: Wall Street = financial markets. “Wall Street took a nosedive today ...”
- Synecdoche: a figure of speech in which the whole is represented by naming one of its parts. Example: 300 head of cattle (the whole cow is represented by the head)

Activity 1: Recognizing literary devices in advertising

Objective:

For students to recognize literary devices in everyday advertisements.

Materials needed:

- Samples of print, TV or radio advertisements using literary devices
- Magazines and scissors

Optional:

- VCR and TV, videos of advertisements
- Tape player, audiotapes of advertisements

Materials for teachers:

You will need some samples of advertisements that use literary devices. Some examples of ads we’ve found include the following:

- **Metaphor:** General Electric appliance ads feature a “married couple” in which the bride and groom represent concepts associated with GE products. “Beauty marries genius,” etc. The people are metaphors for the virtues GE wants to associate with its appliances.
- **Synecdoche:** The infamous Wendy’s™ commercial with its “Where’s the Beef?” tagline is an example of synecdoche. The “beef” was the memorable stand-in for a juicy, meaty hamburger. Synecdoche is often used to overcome time constraints in advertising where the message needs to be seen — and understood — very quickly.

In the campaign for Converse® sneakers’ new “Peace” products, the introduction to the web site www.converse.com/peace represents the qualities that Converse wants buyers of its new footwear line to associate with the word “Imagine.” In this example, the globe and the headline are synecdoche for one world, global community and, of course, peace.

The oversize hamburger in one early “Learn to think” billboard represents more than a food item when coupled with the course title “American Dilemmas”; it alludes to the wider issues of fast food, obesity and consumption in American culture. (This point was made even clearer in one Austin location where the billboard happened to be placed next to an actual fast-food advertisement featuring an enormous sandwich.)

- **Intertextuality:** Sprite™ has run radio ads for several years that command the listener to “Obey your thirst” and select a soft drink based on personal preference rather than advertising. There is obviously irony at work because this command is, of course, itself contained in an ad. There is also intertextuality, as the humor in the ad is dependent on the listener’s prior exposure to other soft drink commercials that make grandiose claims about their products.

With intertextuality, the meaning the reader/viewer takes from the text at hand is non-literal because it is influenced by his/her exposure to other texts. The “Learn to think” ad for the course title, “Study Abroad” features a famous photograph of the moonwalk with an observant student added to the scene. This image does not exist in a vacuum; it isn’t just any picture of the moon, but rather one with great historical significance. When the photo is paired with the course title “Study Abroad,” the implication is not just of the distance traveled, but also of the significance of the experience and historical grounding one gains through study in other countries.

Step 1: Provide background information

Select the literary devices you would like your class to focus on (e.g., metaphor and metonymy). Present the class with examples of advertisements that use these devices to promote their product, including, if you wish, examples from the “Learn to think” campaign.

Step 2: Students find their own advertisements

With scissors and current magazines (or with video and audiotapes), students should find several examples of advertisements they recognize as employing these literary devices to make a point. They can work in pairs or small groups, clipping magazines in class, or they can be assigned to find advertisements on their own as homework.

Step 3: Students present their findings

Each student or small group should then present the collected advertisements to the class and explain how the ads use the literary devices. Do they find the advertisements persuasive? Does the group come to consensus on which are the most effective ads?

Activity 2: Designing advertisements using literary devices

Objective:

For students to put what they have learned from Activity 1 into practice in creating their own advertisements.

Materials needed:

- Pens, paper, scissors, magazines to cut, or
- Equipment in the graphic design lab, or
- Audiovisual equipment
(depending on the classroom setting)

Step 1: Have students form pairs or small groups and assign a literary device to each (or let them pick). Review the ads the class chose that are considered the best examples of the use of literary devices.

Step 2: Instruct each group to create an advertisement that employs their assigned literary device to sell the product. Depending on the level of the class, you may want to provide further guidelines about what product should be advertised. Based on the resources available and the nature of the class, this advertisement may take the form of a simple drawing or storyboard, a video, or a computer-designed piece of art.

Step 3: Have each group present its ad or ads to the rest of the class. Let the class discern how literary devices are being used and provide feedback about the ad's effectiveness.

Activity 3: Discussion of the role of advertising

Objective:

For students to synthesize their knowledge about how advertising works and think about its wider role in culture.

Materials needed:

List of questions

Optional:

Further examples of ads

Process:

With students arranged in one large circle or in small groups, propose any of the following questions to start their reflection on advertising's cultural role:

What does it take for a commercial or ad to be viewed as “political”? Does it have to use words? If so, how can the use of literary devices be effective? (Example: What does it mean that St. Edward's coupled a photo of a graffiti-covered wall with the title “Art Appreciation”? Is this making a “statement” or simply being clever? What would it have meant for St. Edward's University to use, for example, an image of a student in an art museum instead?)

Have students noticed political ideas or causes being used to sell products? (Examples: the Converse Peace sneakers; Benetton™ ads featuring photos of poverty in developing nations; various ads referencing “freedom,” “independence,” or “women's liberation”)

What metonyms and symbols are present in public and political communication? For example, what does an American flag decal affixed to a car window represent — and does it represent something different than a flag in another context? Do some of the hot-button issues in this year's election campaign actually represent much larger issues than the current questions being debated?

In our work with young students entering college, we have noticed that many are considering careers in advertising. What, if any, responsibility do students believe advertisers have to the wider community?

What do high school students think about the marketing of higher education? They are likely receiving publications, phone calls and, perhaps, other items from colleges during their junior and senior years. What are their reactions? Are there effective and less-effective marketing techniques they are experiencing in their own lives?