

2b

Basic Visual Language II: How to Analyze a Visual Text

Through cooperative observation, analysis and discussion, students learn to recognize how the basic building blocks of visual language – *lighting*, *camera angle* and *composition* – are used in real-life media texts. As they compare and contrast different magazine covers featuring the same person, they begin to notice how visual techniques convey both obvious and subtle meanings. In this process, they discover many more visual techniques, such as body language, symbolism, color, etc., that influence feelings as well as ideas. For a practical application, students use their growing repertoire of visual techniques to construct two very different photographic images of the same person.

Objectives: Students will be able to...

1. Identify techniques used to communicate visually.
2. Compare and contrast different visual techniques found in mass media.
3. Apply their understanding by creating photographs that use a variety of visual literacy techniques.

Correlation With McRel National Standards:

Language Arts Standards and Benchmarks

- Grades K-2: (S9/B4)
- Grades 3-5: (S9/B6)
- Grades 6-8: (S9/B9)
- Grades 9-12: (S9/B9), (S10/B3)

Materials/Preparation:

1. Download the two full-size magazine covers featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger (*Muscle&Fitness* and *Esquire*) from the CML website: www.medialit.org/pdf/CML_DeconstructionMags.pdf
Also download the image of the two covers side by side. It is recommended you use a video projector to project the images for the class to discuss, as directed below.
2. An important aspect of this lesson depends on teachers guiding students to distinguish what they actually *see* from what they *think* and *feel* about what they see. Guiding students to be descriptive rather than judgmental is a challenging but valuable skill for media literacy teachers to acquire. Before working with students, do the exercise yourself, or better yet, with one or several colleagues, to become aware of the difference between what is actually on the magazine covers and how we feel about the person portrayed on the covers.
3. If possible, also read the section on “How to Conduct a Close Analysis of a Media Text” in *MediaLit Kit™ / Part I: Literacy for the 21st Century*. (www.medialit.org)
4. Camera (any type will work but a simple digital camera is best)

Teaching Strategies:

- Show the cover of *Muscle & Fitness* magazine with Arnold Schwarzenegger as a body builder and action movie character. Ask students to set aside any ideas they have about Mr. Schwarzenegger as a personality and focus strictly on what they can describe from the cover. List on the board the various answers students give to these questions:

- ? What do you think about this person based strictly *on the cover of this magazine*?
 - ? What adjectives describe how he looks to you?
- Then show the cover of *Esquire* magazine with Mr. Schwarzenegger as a businessman and political candidate. Again, setting aside what we know about him as a personality, list the adjectives students produce while answering the same question:
 - ? What do you think about this man based *strictly on the cover of this magazine*?
 - ? What adjectives describe how he looks to you?
- After listing an abundance of adjectives from both covers, discuss why such different adjectives were given to describe the same person. Show the covers together and invite students to explain what is different between the covers that might contribute to creating different feelings.
- First, have students look just at the two *photographs* of Mr. Schwarzenegger. If they need help, you can group their responses into categories and take them one at a time: what is different about body language? Eye contact? Facial expression? Clothing? Make up? Background? Camera angle? Lighting? etc.
 - ↯ This is an opportunity for older students to separate *connotation* from *denotation* as they explore the emotions they feel *connoted* in the message and then deconstruct the photographs and graphic elements they see *denoted*.
 - ↲ For young children, ask them to distinguish between what they *think* about the person in the picture from what they actually *see* in the picture.
- Next, ask students to comment on the overall *cover design* including title, headlines (font, color, size) and all the other graphic elements that are different between the two covers.
 - ? How do these elements reinforce the feelings about the subject that they identified at the beginning of the exercise?
- As a culminating activity, have students create different photographs of their peers using the same techniques that they identified in the Schwarzenegger covers. Have them photograph the same person to look positive in one picture and negative in the other.



Assessment Tip: The Importance of Reflection

The quality of the photographs the students create can be authentic assessment of their comprehension and application of the ideas. However, good photographs could possibly be more a reflection of their skills with the camera than their understanding. To better assess for understanding, also have students write a reflection explaining how and why they used specific construction techniques to convey different feelings.