

Ads: Reading and Writing Them (7th grade English)

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Introduction

I began thinking about this unit when I saw the video “Advertising and the End of the World” on the website of the Media Education Foundation. Sut Jhally, the narrator of the film, talked about how advertising has taken the place of the stories that people used to receive from their parents, churches, elders—the stories that inform our values. I teach 7th grade English, and part of my curriculum has been to read the myths and legends of people from around the world. After viewing the video on advertising I decided that a unit on ads would fit right in to our study. If ads are as influential as they are said to be, I owe it to my students to help them read ads critically and to rise above the ad bombardment they live through daily.

Essential questions

(Questions that move the students towards the understandings I want them to get from the unit):

- How do ads affect the way I see the world, even the ones I don’t pay much attention to?
- What are the values that ads promote? How are they like my values?

(What questions do my students have?)

The big task

After learning the techniques of advertising, create your own ad for a product.

Smaller tasks

Keep a journal / ad scrapbook with examples and analysis of ads

Create found poem with ad texts

Day 1: Media survey (See appendix A)

Objective: to get the students to name the media that they use and to see media use patterns among themselves as a class.

1. Students take the survey.
2. Form groups of 3-4 to tally results of the group.
3. The groups share their numbers with the entire class
4. Create a class media use chart.

Day 2: What is an ad? What is its purpose?

Objective: to view some ads and create a class definition.

Simple logos (worn by celebrities, background of the ball game, clothing, etc.)

Billboards

Magazines

Television

Internet

1. Bring in some ads (Bring in copies of the magazines & other print media that the students identified in the survey along with other print media that is targeted at young teens.) Look at a few as a class. What is happening here? How would you describe it? What is its purpose? How is the ad achieving the purpose?
2. Create class definition of an ad through class brainstorm and discussion. (This will be displayed somewhere in the classroom and we will revisit it at the end of the study to see if it has changed.)

Day 3: Behind the Scenes

Objective: Learn about how advertisers do their job. Learn about some common propaganda techniques. Identify the techniques in ads we view. “Propaganda is nothing more than the exploitation of human foibles - the inherent flaws in the way you, I and other people make decisions.” <http://www.corporate-partnering.com/cpi-wp.htm>

A good site on propaganda from the Institute for Propaganda Analysis <http://www.propagandacritic.com/articles/index.html>

(See appendix C for other links on analyzing ads.)

1. Go through the 7 basic techniques of propaganda using an ad to illustrate each one.
2. Students work with a partner to find ads that illustrate the techniques they just learned.

Day 4: The People Behind the Ads Who is creating the ads? What do they want?

1. View clip from Merchants of Cool.
2. Students answer questions on video viewing guide (appendix D)

Day 5: Ads as Stories

Objective: To look at how an ad is like a work of fiction. Who are the characters, what is the setting, the conflict (you need this product because it will make you happy and you want happiness)? What does it tell us about how we live our lives or should live our lives? Do you agree or disagree? George Gerbner in an article called “Reclaiming Our Cultural Mythology” talks about how the corporations that control the media have taken over our storytelling.

For the first time in human history, children are hearing most of the stories, most of the time, not from their parents or school or churches or neighbors, but from a handful of global conglomerates that have something to sell. It is impossible to overestimate the radical effect that this has on the way our children grow up, the way we live, and the way we conduct our affairs.

<http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC38/Gerbner.htm>

1. Bring in more ads to analyze as stories

- Who is the “storyteller”?
- What techniques are the “storytellers” using to tell their “story”?
- Why are they telling this particular “story” (what is their motive)?
- Who is the “story” for (who is the target audience)? Why is the “story” being told to that audience?
- Is the story accurate, fair, and complete? If not, what information or perspectives are absent and why were they left out?

From Merchants of Cool website: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/cool/teach3.html>

2. Have students use the ads they collected for the previous assignment (labeling techniques). Fill out the ad analysis form (appendix E) for 3 of the ads.
3. Homework: Begin an advertisement log. For 3 days pay close attention to the ads that you come across during the day: the billboards you see on the way to and from school; the ads you see on TV; the ads you see in the magazines and newspapers you read; and any other place you see them. There will probably be too many to be able to record all of them, but record as many as you can or at least the ones that especially get your attention.

If you can, cut out some of the more interesting ads you come across in print and record some of the TV ads you view while watching a show you would normally watch.

Use the log template to keep track of your ad intake. (Appendix F)

Day 6: The Words (Part I)

Objective: To learn ways words are used to manipulate the ad viewer? Dialogue and Language. What do the characters say to one another and, in some cases, what are they saying to us? What devices do they use to gain our attention or affection and to persuade us? What rhetorical techniques, such as alliteration or metaphor or metonymy, are used? What kind of language is used? What use is made of phenomena such as humor, comparisons, associations, exaggeration, praise, and logic? (Berger)

1. View / Read a few ads as a class. Look at the words by themselves. What language techniques are being used? Bring in ads that illustrate several different techniques (listed in quote above).
2. Have students work in small groups to look at magazine & newspaper ads. a. Describe the techniques being used in the ad. b. Write down the adjectives and verbs. As a class we will later go on to look at the most widely used adjectives and verbs in advertising. c. As a whole class create a chart of most widely used adjectives and verbs in advertising.

Day 7: The Words (Part II)

Create found poems from the texts of advertisements.

Objective: This activity is meant to give the students a chance to play with the words of advertisements to create their own messages. A found poem is a poem created completely from phrases “found” in other texts. So the idea is that students take the words and phrases from the ads they have seen and put them together in new ways. Encourage the students to create found poems that express some of their personal values as a response to the values of the corporations who create the original ads.

1. Bring in some examples of found poems.
2. Create one as a class, using the texts from students’ ad logs
3. In pairs create at least one found poem with the texts you each recorded in your ad logs (or from the magazines & newspapers in the classroom).
4. Publish the poems on the classroom walls or in a class literary magazine.

Day 8: Create your own ad. (Culminating activity)

Think of a product or a service you enjoy. Imagine you are an advertiser and the company who owns this product or service has hired you to create a new ad for it. Your task is to create the ad using what you have learned about advertising in this unit. Think about making connections between the product and the next “cool” thing like we saw in the video “Merchants of Cool”. Also consider the language and propaganda techniques you might use to sell this product. You are going to create two different ads for the company to choose from. The two ads should use different images, texts, and propaganda techniques.

Before creating the ad, you should answer the following questions:

1. What product or service am I trying to sell?
2. Who is the target audience for the ad?
3. What propaganda technique will you use to sell this product?
4. What word play can you use with the text to make it more interesting?
5. What images will I use in the ad?

Evaluation

- Group Participation: 10%
- Assignments: 25%
- Advertising Journal: 25%
- Final Project (Creating an Ad): 40%

For an A:

- The two ads are original (not something that has been done already for the product).
- The texts of the ads demonstrate two different literary techniques talked about in class (humor, metaphor, etc.).
- The texts of the ads use two different propaganda techniques talked about in class.
- The ads are neatly done.

For a B:

- The two ads are original (not something that has been done already for the product).
- The texts of the ads demonstrate at least one literary technique talked about in class (humor, metaphor, etc.).
- The texts of the ads demonstrate two different propaganda techniques talked about in class.
- The ads are neatly done.

For a C:

- The two ads are original but may be similar to an ad already in existence for the product.
- The texts of the ads demonstrate at least one literary technique talked about in class (humor, metaphor, etc.).
- The texts of the ads demonstrate at least one of the propaganda techniques talked about in class.
- The ads are neatly done.

Appendix A

Media Survey (use the back if necessary)

1. What magazines / newspapers do you read? How often?
2. What TV shows do you watch? How often?
3. What radio station(s) do you listen to? How often?

4. Who are your favorite musical artists?

5. What video games do you play? Or What Internet sites do you visit? How often?

Appendix B

Media Use Chart

List the media used by the people in your group. Rank them from most used (in the first box) to least used.

Magazines / Musicians/ Internet Sites/ Newspapers TV Shows Radio Stations Movies Video Games

Appendix C

Resources on the Web for Analyzing Advertising

The semiotics of advertising (global capital) <http://it.stlawu.edu/~global/pagessemiotics/menuframesem.html>

on the purpose and definition of an ad: http://www.onlinewbc.gov/docs/market/mk_adv_overview.html

checklist for analyzing print advertising <http://www.med.sc.edu:1081/checklist.htm>

Questions to ask of an advertisement <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~rainy/105questionad.html>

Questioning Advertisements <http://www.discover.tased.edu.au/english/advert.htm>

A study of vocabulary used in advertising <http://www.med.sc.edu:1081/Most%20Common%20Adj%20Verbs.htm>

from the text Advertising and Popular Culture by Jib Fowles. <http://www.med.sc.edu:1081/decipher.htm>

A Primer on Analyzing Television Commercials <http://www.uiowa.edu/~commstud/adclass/berger.html>

Appendix D

Viewing Guide for Merchants of Cool

1. What are the cool hunters looking for? Why?
2. How do they look for it?
3. Do the advertisers care about the customers? How do you know?
4. What values are the advertisers promoting?
5. Do you agree or disagree with these values? Why?

Appendix E

Analyzing Ads as Stories

Characters: Who is this story about? (Describe the characters.) How is the viewer included?

Setting: Where does this story take place? When?

Conflict: What is the problem? (Usually the ad shows the viewers that they have a problem that can be solved by the product being advertised.)

Behind the Scenes Questions:

1. Who is the “storyteller”?
2. What techniques are the “storytellers” using to tell their “story”?
3. Why are they telling this particular “story” (what is their motive)?
4. Who is the “story” for (who is the target audience)? Why is the “story” being told to that audience?
5. Is the story accurate, fair, and complete? If not, what information or perspectives are absent and why were they left out?

Appendix F

Advertising Log

Storyteller Where you saw the ad Text Who is the ad for? Propaganda Techniques Is the ad fair / accurate?

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Storyteller Where you saw the ad Text Who is the ad for? Propaganda Techniques Is the ad fair / accurate?

Appendix G

Works Cited

Berger, Arthur Asa. A Primer on Analyzing Television Commercials. Excerpted from “The Manufacture of Desire: Alcohol Commercials and Society.” <http://www.uiowa.edu/~commstud/adclass/berger.html>

Gerbner, George. “Reclaiming Our Cultural Mythology.” Ecology of Justice (IC #38). Spring 1994, Page 40.