



Propaganda: Words + Images = ?

LESSON OBJECTIVE

Students will identify propaganda techniques, including drawing parallels between propaganda and advertising techniques. They will begin the lesson by analyzing three different examples of presidential actions that could be deemed as propaganda intended to influence the public's perceptions, opinions, and actions. Students will apply their knowledge of these techniques to creating their own campaigns.

Curriculum Connection

This lesson involves an analysis of words and images used in our daily lives — words and images specifically meant to affect audiences. This lesson has a strong tie to media literacy. By recognizing the potential power of words and images, students should pay closer attention to their own word choices. As a result, this lesson will complement lessons on non-fiction writing. Further, the lesson's emphasis on looking "behind the curtain" and trying to deconstruct the motives behind words and images serves an important role in any kind of literary analysis — particularly analysis of non-fiction works. Students will collect data and examine the techniques used to influence their thinking.

Literature Links

Suggested speeches:

- Alexander the Great's address to his troop captains before the Battle of Issus, 2nd century BC
- Napoleon's "Proclamation to the troops at Ratisbon," April, 1809
- Winston Churchill's "Fight on the Beaches" speech, June 4, 1940
- Adolf Hitler's declaration of war against the United States, December 11, 1941
- George W. Bush's "We shall not fail" speech, 2001

Battlestar Galactica Tie-In

The documentary poses the question: Are science fiction war films such as *Battlestar Galactica* modern versions of war propaganda? The documentary should provide students with a better understanding of propaganda, including film

techniques that are effective in creating certain emotional responses from audiences.

Media Literacy Matters

This lesson provides an excellent opportunity for students to discover and understand the power of words and images — to recognize that we are constantly bombarded with messages meant to influence our opinions and actions. At minimum, that awareness should help students develop better methods for filtering information. Plus, by actually analyzing and implementing techniques, students can become even more literate in understanding how images and words, in many forms, can influence us.

Standards Addressed

This lesson corresponds with the following standards established by the National Council of Teachers of English:

- Standard 3:* Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts.
- Standard 4:* Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Standard 5:* Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- Standard 6:* Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions, media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

SCIENCE FICTION WAR FILMS: MODERN VERSIONS OF WAR PROPAGANDA?

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Standard 12: Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes.

Desired Outcomes

By completing this lesson, students will:

- Recognize propaganda techniques
- Identify similarities and differences between propaganda and advertising
- Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of various forms of media for affecting audiences
- Develop a stronger ability to identify the motives behind choices for certain wording and imagery

Reproducible

The reproducible “Pick Out the Propaganda” provides a short description of actions by three different U.S. Presidents, all of which could be considered propaganda. All of the examples relate to war in some way.

■ Background

Review the reproducible to make sure that you know enough about the incidents cited to introduce them to students. (The reproducible should give enough context for your students to determine whether or not the examples are cases of propaganda.) Also, it is important to look closely at the *Battlestar Galactica* classroom poster, since it is referred to in the lesson.

Preview the documentary, paying particular attention to its presentation of how images and words can combine to affect audiences.

■ Important Term

Propaganda: A systematic attempt to influence people’s thinking and behavior

■ Class Time

This lesson can be completed in 2-3 short class periods, or you could extend this into a weeklong project.

■ Materials Needed

- *Battlestar Galactica: Propaganda and War* documentary
- Poster board/markers/construction paper if students need art materials for their campaigns
- “Pick Out the Propaganda” reproducible

Lesson Steps:

Preliminary Step

Before your students enter the classroom, put one of the following teaser lines on the overhead or board:

“The function of science fiction is not always to predict the future, but sometimes to prevent it.”

— Frank Herbert, author of the *Dune* chronicles

Us vs. Them — Are they the “them” we say they are?

Note: These teasers do not need to be addressed explicitly to begin the lesson; simply have them on the board for students to ponder. You can introduce students to the teaser lines at any appropriate point during the lesson. The lines should take on added meaning for students as the lesson progresses.

1. Using “Pick Out the Propaganda” as a handout or on the overhead, explore the three presidential actions that could constitute examples of propaganda. The reproducible includes a basic definition of propaganda as a foundation for the discussion. The discussion should also include the classroom poster for *Battlestar Galactica* that serves as a deconstructed war propaganda poster. By the end of the discussion, students should have a better sense of what propaganda is, including knowing that it can come in many forms, such as posters and photo-ops.
2. Introduce and show the documentary, and pose the question: Can popular films have underlying propaganda purposes?
3. After watching the documentary, introduce the idea of the ethical dilemma of war. Since war is a true ethical dilemma (meaning it is a “right versus right” choice rather than a “right versus wrong” choice), guide your students in a discussion of this dilemma to help them recognize that because of war’s complexities, war propaganda often oversimplifies issues and plays off base emotions, such as fear. At some point, be sure to ask students whether people opposed to war also use propaganda to promote their causes.
4. Return to the “Pick Out the Propaganda” reproducible,

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and ask students to reevaluate their opinions on whether or not any of the examples constitute propaganda. Also, students should analyze the examples for their similarities and differences in technique. For example, President George W. Bush's example seems to emphasize powerful imagery in his setting and his attire. President Clinton's example seems to revolve around an action meant to display power. President George H.W. Bush's example seems designed to affect audiences through powerful words.

5. Divide students into groups to explore additional propaganda techniques beyond the three examples in the handout. Pose the question: What are common examples of techniques designed to influence an audience? Students should recognize that advertisements are filled with techniques to affect audiences. In groups, have students list various techniques used in advertising to affect audiences and influence thoughts. In their lists, students should also note in which medium or media the techniques are used. For example, some may be limited to print advertising, while some techniques might apply to print, television, the Internet, and radio. Some might even be films.
6. Reconvene as a class for groups to share their lists of techniques. Make sure that students include examples. As part of the discussion, explore similarities in techniques for advertising and political propaganda. For example, how are images central to both? How are phrases effective? How do they play on base emotions? Like advertising, are there examples of propaganda and propaganda techniques that promote positive behaviors and thoughts? Be sure to also discuss the differences between advertising techniques and other types of propaganda. What is the purpose and intended outcome of advertising versus, say, war propaganda?
7. Create new groups or divide students into their original groups to conceive of a propaganda campaign. This is a place in the lesson for you to determine what is best for your students to do. In some cases it may be beneficial to have students focus their campaigns on universally-accepted goals, such as literacy promotion, recycling, or exercise. When possible, it is a good idea to focus the campaigns on propaganda that is more like war propaganda. For example, the war on terrorism, gun control/gun rights, and the death penalty are all complex issues with many differing opinions and approaches — issues with great potential for propaganda to support a cause.
8. Students should present their ideas. Their presentations

should include a description of their campaign (perhaps including visual aids for examples), a description of how the campaign would be promoted (e.g., via the Internet, posters, etc.), and a description of the campaign's goal(s).

Academic Extensions & Modifications

- Time permitting, have students actually create their campaigns.
- Have students conceive of campaigns and techniques that will be used in the future. For example, how might propaganda in a war on terrorism appear in 2010? 2020?
- Incorporate speeches into the lesson as a way for students to analyze additional techniques. Students should pay attention to repetition of phrases, scare tactics, humor, and other techniques that are effective in influencing audiences.
- In the section of the lesson in which students analyze the various forms of media that allow people to promote propaganda, take time to focus specifically on the Internet. It is an opportunity to explore how the Internet provides and spreads information, and to note that this information is not always reliable.
- If you worry that your students may struggle to understand the connection between propaganda and advertising, you can have students focus exclusively on propaganda or exclusively on advertising.

Additional Resources

Propaganda Critic

This is an excellent site to learn just about anything you would want to know about propaganda, especially historical war propaganda.

<http://www.propagandacritic.com>

World War II Propaganda Poster Collection

This site contains many examples of war propaganda posters from World War II, some of which appear in the *Cable in the Classroom* documentary on *Battlestar Galactica*.

<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/govpub/collections/wwii-posters/>

Center for Media Literacy

This is THE web site for educators interested in integrating more media literacy into their classrooms.

<http://www.medialit.org/>

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Writing Prompts/Additional Discussion Questions

- ▼ The documentary poses the question: Is *Battlestar Galactica* an example of war propaganda? Do you think it is?
- ▼ World War II produced many examples of war propaganda — some warned people to keep their mouths shut, while others encouraged people to be thrifty. Of the two basic approaches to propaganda (scaring vs. encouraging), which approach do you think has a greater effect on audiences?
- ▼ Adolf Hitler once said: “The great masses of the people ... will more easily fall victims to a big lie than to a small one.” What do you think he meant?
- ▼ Propaganda and advertising share many techniques because they share the goal of having an impact on their audiences. Do you think there is a distinction between propaganda and advertising? If so, how much of a distinction?
- ▼ The Internet has dramatically altered the transferring of information — for example, it is much easier and faster than it has ever been before to post and access information. Do you think that ease and speed also applies to “misinformation”? What kind of impact do you think misinformation can have?



PICK OUT THE PROPAGANDA...

Propaganda is defined as “information that is spread for the purpose of promoting some cause.” What follows are three examples of U.S. Presidents doing and saying things that might qualify as propaganda. Decide if you think each President’s actions were primarily motivated by a desire to affect audiences in a way that helped the President and his causes.

In May 2003, President Bush landed on an aircraft carrier to the applause of the many sailors aboard the ship. Dressed in a flight suit, the President then delivered a nationally-televised address declaring victory in Iraq.

Keep in mind that:

- The aircraft carrier was close enough to San Diego, CA, that the President could have flown in on a helicopter — a much cheaper and less risky maneuver.
- The aircraft carrier was positioned so the television cameras would not show the San Diego skyline in the background.
- The aircraft carrier stayed at sea approximately 20 hours longer than necessary — a delay that allowed the President to be filmed as the sun set.

In August 1998, President Clinton ordered cruise missile attacks on Sudan and Afghanistan. The President said the purpose of the bombing was to destroy a chemical weapons facility in Sudan and some terrorist camps in Afghanistan.

Keep in mind that:

- ▼ Days before ordering the launching of the missiles, President Clinton admitted to having an inappropriate relationship with a White House intern.
- ▼ At the time of the bombing, polls reported that the President’s popularity was at or near an all-time low.
- ▼ Investigations after the bombing revealed that the building that was destroyed in Sudan was not producing chemical weapons.

In the fall of 1990 after Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait, President George H.W. Bush told many audiences stories of Iraqi soldiers storming into Kuwaiti hospitals and taking hundreds of premature babies out of incubators and leaving them on the floor to die.

Keep in mind that:

- The story was based on only the eyewitness testimony of a 15-year-old girl, and announced during a press conference arranged by a public relations firm who was paid millions of dollars by the Kuwaiti government.
- The President began using the story prominently in speeches in the days leading up to a vote in Congress to give the President authority to go to war with Iraq. The vote’s outcome was in doubt, but it did end up passing.
- The story was easily disproved once people began to investigate its authenticity. The investigation also revealed that the 15-year-old girl was not a nurse but the daughter of the U.S. ambassador of Kuwait.