



12

Basic Ways to Integrate  
Media Literacy and Critical  
Thinking into Any Curriculum

(3rd Ed.)

by Cyndy Scheibe and Faith Rogow



Project Look Sharp is a media literacy initiative of the Division of Interdisciplinary & International Studies at Ithaca College, working in collaboration with local school districts, New York State BOCES, the National Association for Media Literacy Education (formerly AMLA), and other national media literacy organizations.

Project Look Sharp  
Ithaca College  
1119 Williams Hall  
Ithaca, NY 14850-7290  
Phone: (607) 274-3471  
Fax: (607) 274-1925  
E-mail: [looksharp@ithaca.edu](mailto:looksharp@ithaca.edu)  
Website: [www.ithaca.edu/looksharp](http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp)

©Ithaca College, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2008  
All rights reserved.

Permission is granted to copy these materials within fair use guidelines, provided credit is given to Project Look Sharp and Ithaca College

## About the Authors

**Cyndy Scheibe, Ph.D.**, is an associate professor of psychology at Ithaca College, where she has taught courses in developmental psychology and television research for more than 20 years. As the founder and executive director of Project Look Sharp, she has been working with K-12 teachers and teacher education faculty on media literacy issues since 1995. She is also director of the Center for Research on the Effects of Television, which she founded with John Condry at Cornell University in 1983. Her publications include “A Deeper Sense of Literacy: Integrating Media Literacy into K-12 Education” (*American Behavioral Scientist*, 2004) and “Piaget and Power Rangers: What Developmental Psychology Can Tell Us about Media Effects” (in Mazzarella, S. (Ed.), *20 Questions about Children and Media*, 2007).

**Faith Rogow, Ph.D.**, started Insighters Educational Consulting in 1996 to help people learn from media and one another. In 20 years as a media educator, she has trained thousands of teachers, students, child-care providers, and parents to understand and harness the power of media, and has authored extensive teacher and discussion guides, trainer manuals, web materials, and media literacy materials for a variety of children’s programs and independent films. She is an advisor to Project Look Sharp and was founding president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education (formerly the Alliance for a Media Literate America).

Layout and Redesign by Casey Lewis

© Ithaca College, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2008 All rights reserved. Permission is granted to copy these materials within fair use guidelines, provided credit is given to the authors, Project Look Sharp, and Ithaca College.

# 12 Basic Ways to Integrate Media Literacy and Critical Thinking into Any Curriculum

## INTRODUCTION

This booklet is designed for teachers and support staff at all grade levels who are interested in using media literacy in their classroom curricula. The approaches are based on the concept of weaving media literacy training into the curriculum whenever and wherever possible throughout the school year. Routine integration is much more effective than simply treating media literacy as a special, isolated topic and may better meet the needs of teachers who are already at capacity with the demands of a full curriculum.

The 12 Basic Ways are based on the National Association for Media Literacy Education's (NAMLE) *Core Principles of Media Literacy Education* (available at [www.AMLAinfo.org](http://www.AMLAinfo.org)) and we recommend using that document along with this booklet as you plan lessons. In addition, you will find that Project Look Sharp defines media very broadly, to include books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, movies, videos, billboards, recorded music, video games, and everything available via the Internet.

## MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

In the U.S., media literacy education began in the 1970s with an emphasis on protection (from the so-called "bad" media content); most media literacy materials and initiatives were aimed at parents. Since then, there has been a shift toward an emphasis on media literacy as empowerment (stressing critical thinking and production skills); more materials are now aimed at schools and teachers. The empowerment model emphasizes the political, social, and economic implications of media messages and stresses the importance of using media effectively and wisely.

We see the purpose of media literacy education today as it is currently defined by NAMLE:

**“to help students develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today’s world.”**



# 1

## **Practice general observation, critical thinking, analysis, perspective-taking, and communication skills by**

- teaching students to routinely ask the kinds of questions that will help them think critically about information presented in media (including the information from their textbooks or the popular media they use at home); see the end of this booklet for sample questions.
- making your own decision-making process transparent by explaining how you assess credibility of sources and why you choose the media that you use in class.
- pointing out ways in which media messages might be interpreted differently by people from different backgrounds or groups.
- beginning discussions of media “texts” or documents (not only print, but also image- or sound-based “texts”) by asking students what they notice.
- allowing students to go beyond the curricular issue at hand to identify and comment on incidental aspects of a media message (e.g., the characteristics of the people presenting the material, the techniques used to attract attention, and the ways in which advertising and product messages intrude into other types of media content).
- fostering communication skills and creativity by encouraging the production of media messages about a topic.
- being flexible in assignments, allowing students to choose which media formats are the most effective way for them to communicate the required information or complete the required task.



## **Stimulate interest in a new topic by**

- asking students to do a media search for information about a topic.
- showing an exciting video clip, playing a popular song, or reading a short poem or story (fiction or nonfiction) about the topic.
- having students work in small groups to read, analyze, and discuss a controversial magazine, newspaper, or online article about the topic.
- using a short video, magazine illustration, blog entry, or brief article to stimulate discussion, encouraging students to express what they already know or their opinion about a topic.
- showing students how to search for information about the topic on the Internet and compare results from different search engines.

### **WHEN BEGINNING NEW UNITS:**

Develop an information plan in consultation with the students, including the types of media and other information sources the class will be using, and the strengths and weaknesses of each.



# 3

## **Identify how students' prior ideas about a topic have been influenced by media messages by**

- Giving examples from popular media (e.g., films, advertising, music) to illustrate what students might already know or believe about a topic, and discussing the accuracy of that knowledge.
- Drawing links between the way a topic is typically treated academically and how it might appear in popular media (e.g., “poetry” in song lyrics or advertising jingles; mathematical graphs or charts used in political polls or news reports).
- Clarifying the way that specific terminology related to the topic might be used differently in an academic sense than it might be in the popular culture (e.g., a chemist’s use of the term “organic” in contrast to a food label sporting the word).

Encourage students to pay attention to print, audio and visual elements in media sources, noting information that can be learned, and impressions created from the images and sounds.



# 4

## Use media as a standard pedagogical tool by

- designing assignments that require students to use more than one type of media source.
- providing information about the topic through a variety of media sources (books, newspaper/magazine articles, instructional videos, websites), comparing the usefulness of different media, and address conflicting information that may come from different sources.
- using diverse media, especially in cases where image-based media can convey information more richly and effectively than would be possible with a standard classroom discussion, demonstration, or traditional print text (e.g., a demonstration of mathematics concepts involving motion or dimension, an example of how news media presented an historical event or speech, an electronic “field trip” to an otherwise inaccessible place).
- encouraging students to follow (and write about) current events, including tracking a single story across diverse media sources.
- making use of popular or unusual media examples to deepen students’ understanding of a topic (e.g., restaurant menus to explore stereotypes, use of adjectives, economic issues, or health claims).
- encouraging students to share information in class that they have gotten from various media sources (inside or outside of class), letting them know that at any time, you or a classmate might ask them to identify their sources and explain why they found those sources to be credible.
- asking students to design their written work as if it was a chapter in their text book, using headings, sub-headings, illustrations, sidebars, charts, etc., and helping them think about which information is important enough to highlight and why.

# 5

## Identifying sources for erroneous beliefs about a topic by

- analyzing media content that misrepresents a topic or presents false or misleading information about a topic.
- showing students examples of misleading ways in which data are presented in media (e.g., citing statistics selectively to exclude contradictory evidence, presenting graphs without appropriately identified x or y axes, using percentages or implying comparison without identifying the whole that the example is measured against, asking leading survey questions).
- pointing out language constructs (e.g., passive voice) or words that are often used to mislead or misrepresent (e.g., “new and improved” or “all natural”).
- identifying inaccurate or stereotyped beliefs held by students about a topic that may have come from either overt or implied media messages (e.g., toys in pink boxes are only for girls, smoking is cool because movie heroes smoke, or Muslims are dangerous).
- encouraging students to create their own false or misleading media messages (e.g., PSAs, print advertisements, news reports, ad spoofs) and then have them present the message and “debunk” it for the other students in the class.

Always encourage students to get information from more than one source and to compare information gathered from different sources. (Are there discrepancies across sources? Which sources are most credible for specific types of information?)



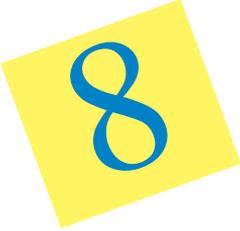
## **Develop an awareness of issues of credibility and perspective by**

- teaching students how to recognize the sources of a media message, (e.g., creator, speaker, funder, distributor, etc. ), their purpose or goal, and how that might influence production choices (e.g., what is included or omitted, selection of images, music, or language).
- asking questions routinely and consistently of ALL media (including media conveying a perspective you support).
- helping students learn to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction.
- identifying ways to decide which sources are credible about this topic within different types of media (e.g., popular magazines vs. academic journals, wikis vs. traditional encyclopedias).
- explaining the factors used to determine why students might weigh different kinds of media differently (e.g., if the information is based on research or other evidence versus personal opinion).
- having students produce media messages about a topic, taking into account ways in which perspective is introduced through the words and tone they use , the sources on which they rely, what they selected to present or leave out, etc. [As a guide, see Project Look Sharp’s “Key Questions for Production”].
- exploring how media messages reflect the identity of the creator or presenter of the message and how the same message might come across differently if it was presented or created by someone of a different background, age, race, gender, etc.
- encouraging students to ask who benefits from or is disadvantaged by a media message.



## **Compare the ways different media present information about a topic by**

- contrasting ways in which information about a topic might be presented in a documentary film, a TV news report, a newspaper article, blog, or an instructional video (what is emphasized, what is left out, what techniques are used to present the information, etc.).
- comparing the amount of time/space devoted to a topic in different media from the same time period and discuss why the difference occurs.
- analyzing different conclusions that might be drawn by people exposed to information presented in one medium versus another.
- discussing the strengths and weaknesses of different media to communicate a particular message and to reach particular target audiences.
- having students produce reports about a topic using different forms of media, or manipulating the same information and visuals to convey different messages (e.g., create a news story that makes the same event seem either fun or boring).



# 8

## **Analyze the effect that specific media have had on a particular issue or topic across different cultures and/or historically by**

- discussing the role that the media have played (if any) in the history of a topic or in the framing of current debates.
- helping students assess the accuracy of reporting on a current event or debate (e.g., U.S. coverage of global warming or a military conflict compared to coverage in other countries).
- discussing how people of earlier generations might have learned about a selected topic, what sources of information were available to them compared with sources available to us now, and what difference that would make in people's lives.
- exploring the level of knowledge about a topic in different cultures and how that knowledge is influenced by the media available.
- identifying media forms that are dominant or available in other cultures that may be seldom used in the United States, and vice versa.
- asking students to include information about available media and media ownership in reports about other countries or cultures.



# 9

## **Build and practice specific curricular skills by**

- using print media (books, newspapers, magazines, texting, web pages) to practice reading and comprehension skills, and to help students identify various types of and purposes for writing.
- substituting excerpts from existing media for standard story problems or practice examples (e.g., to correct grammar or spelling, check calculations, or identify adjectives or adverbs).
- using media production to practice skills (e.g., speaking, grammar, research, writing, math (e.g., calculating timing or proportions of media messages)).
- preparing examples for practice skills that include media literacy information (e.g., compare the lengths of news stories about different topics, collect statistical data by surveying family or classmates about their media use or preferences).
- fostering computer skills by encouraging students to search for information on the Internet, develop multimedia projects, and use computers to present information about a topic.
- using media (e.g., websites, cable access, radio) to provide students with a broader audience for their work. Apply high standards for student work that is presented via media, giving opportunities for revision or rehearsal.

# 10

## **Facilitate use of a range of media formats to express students' opinions and illustrate their understanding of the world by**

- encouraging students to analyze media messages on issues of particular interest to them (e.g., messages about sex and gender or popularity, messages promoting harmful behaviors, race and age distortions in the “media world” compared with the real world, messages about how media effect them, and/or advertising targeted to people their age).
- encouraging students to express their feelings and knowledge by designing and producing media (e.g., a video game, newspaper, Web page, etc.) about the topic for other students to view.
- encouraging thoughtful critiques of various media productions.
- promoting discussion of different points of view about popular media articles and productions.
- discussing with students who their intended audience is and who might actually have access to the media they create.

### **WHEN USING VIDEO TO TEACH:**

- Show short segments rather than entire films or programs.
- Leave the lights on to facilitate active viewing and discussion.
- Before viewing, let the students know what they should be looking and listening for.
- During viewing, pause periodically to point out or ask questions about important information.

# 11

## Use media as an assessment tool by

- presenting a media “text” at the end of a unit (e.g., an ad, newspaper op ed, web site faq, film clip) that contains false information about the topic and see if students can identify what is correct and what is incorrect in the message.
- having students summarize their knowledge about a topic in a final report that employs media formats beyond the standard written report (e.g., computer-illustrated reports, audio or video productions, photographic illustrations).
- encouraging students to work in groups to illustrate their understanding of a topic by creating mock media productions (e.g., newspapers, advertisements, news reports, live or videotaped skits).
- assessing observation and memory skills by asking students to look for specific things when they view videos or read print material, and then asking them about those things afterward.

### INTEGRATE MEDIA LITERACY QUESTIONS INTO “K-W-L”:

After asking, “What do you know?”

Ask, “*Where did you get your information or ideas? (What are your sources?)*”

After asking, “What do you want to learn?”

Ask, “*Where are you likely to find credible sources that could answer your questions?*”

After asking, “What did you learn?”

Ask, “*Which sources were the most helpful?*”

# 12

## Connect students to the community and work toward positive change by

- finding collaborative possibilities for projects with community institutions (e.g., museums, libraries, galleries) that involve students analyzing or creating media messages.
- having students contact community service agencies related to a curriculum area and offer their production assistance for agency projects (e.g., photography, video, design and layout, or computer skills).
- encouraging older students to teach production techniques or media literacy principles to younger students.
- using media forums (e.g., local community access TV, newspapers, social networking sites or listservs) to solicit input or share research about a topic.
- helping students see the power of media by encouraging them to use media to give people in their community a voice (e.g., record and share oral histories, interviews, local events, etc.).

### AS YOU DEVELOP LESSONS, ASK YOURSELF IF YOU CAN ANSWER “YES” TO THE FOLLOWING:

- Am I giving students the skills they need to determine what they think the message(s) might be rather than trying to tell them what I think the message is.
- Have I let students know that I am open to accepting any well-substantiated interpretations (rather than conveying the message that my interpretation is the only correct view)?
- At the end of this lesson are students likely to be more analytical than cynical?

# ABOUT PROJECT LOOK SHARP



**PROJECT LOOK SHARP** is a media literacy initiative of the Division of Interdisciplinary and International Studies at Ithaca College, working in collaboration with local school districts, New York state BOCES, the Alliance for a Media Literate America, and other national media literacy organizations.

The project is designed to promote and support the integration of media literacy and critical thinking into curricula at all grade levels and across instructional areas, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of media literacy education in the schools. This curriculum-driven initiative works directly with teachers and support staff to reach students and aims to foster a spirit of collaboration among educators using media literacy. Project Look Sharp provides curriculum materials, strategies, and advice for media literacy instruction, and acts as a liaison between educators and the media literacy field at large.

The primary goals of Project Look Sharp are:

- To promote and support media literacy education at the community, state, and national levels
- To provide teachers with ongoing pre-service and in-service training and mentoring in media education
- To work with teachers to create new or revised teaching materials and pedagogical strategies that incorporate media literacy and enhance classroom practice
- To develop and publish curriculum materials that infuse media literacy into core content
- To evaluate the effectiveness of media literacy as a pedagogical approach to education
- To develop a model for including media literacy in the school curriculum at all grade levels and across all instructional areas, and to show how media literacy can help teachers address new and existing learning standards.

# About Media Literacy

**Media Literacy** is typically defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of forms. It is similar to **information literacy** and involves many components of **technology literacy** as well.

The term “media” generally refers to **mass media** messages communicated through visuals, language, and/or sound that are produced for a remote mass audience using some form of technology. These include traditional print-based media (e.g., books, newspapers, magazines, direct mail); audiovisual media (e.g., computer games, the Internet, blogs, wikis). Media also include recorded music, billboards and other signs, most games, package labels, and advertising in all of its forms. In the classroom, the media are likely to include textbooks, posters, and maps.

Like traditional literacy, media literacy involves critical thinking, analytical skills, and the ability to express oneself in different ways. Being *media literate* also entails using media wisely and effectively, including being able to judge the credibility of information from different sources. In the same way that traditional literacy includes writing as well as reading skills, media literacy also emphasizes producing effective communication through a variety of different media forms.

The process of effective media analysis is based on the following concepts:

1. All media messages are “constructed.”
2. Each medium has different characteristics, strengths, and a unique “language” of construction.
3. Media messages contain embedded values and points of view.
4. All media messages contain embedded values and points of view.
5. People use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.
6. Media and media messages can influence beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, and the democratic process.

## Integrating Media Literacy Into The Classroom

In order for students to develop the analytical and technical skills needed to be fully literate in a contemporary sense, media analysis and media production should be continuously reinforced from kindergarten through high school (and beyond) in many different subject areas. The purpose of media literacy education is to help individuals of all ages develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression that they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today's world. Project Look Sharp endorses the *Core Principles for Media Literacy Education in the United States*, developed by the National Association for Media Literacy Education (formerly AMLA) in 2007, which state that media literacy education:

- requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create
- expands the concepts of literacy (i.e., reading and writing) to include all forms of media
- builds and reinforces skills for learners of all ages, and like print literacy, those skills necessitate integrated, interactive and repeated practice
- develops informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society
- recognizes that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization
- affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.

Media literacy can be readily integrated into existing curricula on a wide range of topics and can be a valuable tool for exploring approaches to education that are interdisciplinary and that recognize different learning styles. Media literacy is particularly powerful in encouraging participatory citizenship and the appreciation of multiple perspectives.

# **Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages**

When engaging in critical analysis of any media message, it's useful to ask some, or all, of the following **key questions for media analysis**:

## **About Authorship, Purpose and Economics**

- Who made this?
- Who was this made, and who paid for it?
- Who was this made for (and how do you know)?

## **About Techniques and Content**

- What messages are conveyed? What techniques are used to communicate each message, and why?
- What ideas, values, information, and/or points of view are overt? Implied?
- What is left out of this message that might be important to know?

## **About the Context and Credibility**

- When was this made? Where or how was it shared with the public?
- Is this fact, opinion, or something else?
- How credible is this? What are the sources of information, ideas, or assertions?

## **About the Audience and Impact**

- How might different people interpret this differently?
- Who might benefit from this? Who might be harmed by it?
- What is *my* interpretation of this, and what do I learn about *myself* from my reaction or interpretation?
- What kinds of actions might I take in response to this?

These questions are particularly useful when introducing the concept of media literacy to a group or class of students, or when first using a new media resource in the classroom.



For free downloadable copies of the *12 Ways* booklet, go to:

[www.ithaca.edu/looksharp](http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp)

## **Professional Development Services**

Project Look Sharp offers a variety of services for individual teachers and school districts, teacher education students and faculty, and other professionals working with K-12 school systems. These services include the following:

### **Summer Media Literacy Institute**

Each year Project Look Sharp conducts an intensive media literacy institute for teachers, support staff, college faculty, and other professionals working with students in an educational setting. Participants receive training in the theory and practice of media literacy, learn applications for digital technology, and work individually with a Look Sharp “coach” to develop a media literacy integration project during the following year.

### **Workshops and Speakers**

Project Look Sharp personnel are available for large or small group presentations and workshops on a variety of media literacy topics. These range from a general introductory presentation on the use of media literacy in the classroom to topical workshops (e.g., Youth Culture and New Technologies), and trainings for current Project Look Sharp kits.

### **Website and Publications**

Project Look Sharp publishes curriculum kits and other media literacy materials for national and international distribution, each using media literacy as a pedagogical approach for teaching core content in social studies, science, and other curriculum areas. Most kits and materials, including the booklet *12 Basic Ways to Integrate Media Literacy and Critical Thinking into Any Curriculum*, 3rd edition (Scheibe & Rogow, 2008) are available, free, on the website. To inquire about purchasing print copies of current curriculum kits or lessons along with the DVD's or CD's of kit media materials, or to watch for upcoming kits and lessons, visit our website at: [www.projectlooksharp.org](http://www.projectlooksharp.org).