

Media Literacy

Getting Started: Activity Ideas for Language Arts, Social Studies, Math, Science and Health

Studies show that media education is most effective when it includes:

both media analysis and production
teacher-created combinations of activities, rather than off-the-shelf curricula
coordinated efforts across all subject areas

Working with other teachers at your school, see which of these activity ideas you might adapt and incorporate into your classes. If you have others you'd like to add, please send them with the subject heading "Media Literacy" to teachersource@pbs.org.

Health:

Examine **how problems are solved** in the media, using examples from TV, movies, advertising and other formats. How were concerns resolved (e.g., through buying a product, using violence, being dishonest, taking drugs)? What are some other ways that the problems in question could have been worked out? In what time frame were they resolved (e.g., by the end of a 30-minute episode)? How does this compare with how long it takes to resolve similar problems in real life? Ask students to rewrite the media examples provided to reflect realistic time frames and positive strategies for solving problems.

Using the methodology of the Kaiser Family Foundation study, "[Sex on TV 4](#)" as a guide, ask students to identify the type and frequency of **sexual content in their favorite TV shows**, and to note whether or not that content includes any references to safer sex issues, such as waiting to have sex, using protection or the consequences of sex. How does student analysis compare to the Sex on TV 4 report? Discuss economic motivations for the increase in the amount of sexual content in TV shows in recent years. To what extent do students think sexual content on TV influences sexual behavior? What are the potential health, social, political and economic outcomes of increased sexual content on TV? Have students summarize ideas in a "Sex on TV" handout that they can distribute to friends and family.

How are **families** portrayed in TV programs and advertising? Does it differ for families of different races? Pick a particular medium and conduct some research (e.g., African-American families on television). Share your results with the class, and contact local media organizations to let them know what you've discovered.

Are certain products like **alcohol or tobacco** targeted to specific ethnic or gender groups? Develop a hypothesis and create an exhibit illustrating your claim. Is this true in other countries, too? Find a partner school through [E-Pals](#) or [Global Schoolhouse](#) and compare results.

Is there **gender bias in advertising that targets children**? Have students take a look at examples of children's advertising from magazines, television or other media. Discuss the settings (e.g., home, away from home) in which girl models are shown versus boy models. Also, what types of activities and behaviors are boy models engaged in versus girls? What are the advertising samples trying to teach about the roles of boys and girls in the world? Then ask students to create their own advertisements for children and explain their thinking behind the gender portrayals in their ads.

How are **women's bodies** portrayed in print ads? Review popular magazines and/or the [About Face](#) Web site's collection of both positive and negative images of women in the media. (Note: Be sure to preview the galleries before using them in the classroom.) How might students develop their own public service campaign about this issue?

What techniques do **pharmaceutical ads** use to popularize their products? Compare the slogans, actors, settings and plots of advertisements for different medicines.

Teach students how to make healthy food choices by studying **food labels**. Ask students to bring in the packaging for a food item in a particular category, such as cereal. Then, have students work in pairs or groups to examine the **food labeling** for each product based on

information available at the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#) Web site. What basic information must be provided in food labels? What nutrient content or health claims are made by the sample products? What is the FDA rule related to those claims? Ask students to determine which product samples are healthy food choices based on food label information. What might happen if the U.S. government didn't regulate food labeling?

Language Arts:

Ask students to name ways that they **use media to document and store memories** and experiences from their lives. Possible answers could include photographs, letters, journals and home video. Encourage students to bring in examples. What strengths and weaknesses does each medium have when used to document an event? Which presents the most accurate picture of the experience being documented? Have students apply what they've learned by documenting an upcoming school event.

Some movies, television series or programs are based on a book or other literary work. Choose an example and have students **compare the printed form with the media production**. How are they alike and different? Which do students prefer and why? How do media variables influence characters, plot, themes and the setting?

Ask students to count the ads they see or hear for a whole day. This might include billboards, flyers left on car windshields and logos on clothes. As students share results, ask them to **define what's advertising and what's not**: a label on a sweater? A name on a mailbox at a private residence? Together, create a definition for "advertisement."

Evaluate Web sites —a great training ground for media literacy. Who sponsors the site? How long has the site been around and do you know how often it is updated? Do links work? Are sources provided for quotations, research results, etc.? What type of bias might the publisher have about the site's topic? How does it compare with similar sites? Write site reviews and develop evaluation rubrics. Check out Madison Metropolitan School District's [Library of Student-Recommended Sites](#) for some sample site reviews from middle school students.

Ask students to work in groups to **evaluate the credibility of information sources**. Each group should gather at least three information samples (i.e., brochure, news report, etc.) about the same topic. Who is providing the information in each case? What do you know about this information source? Does this person or organization seem to have anything to gain based on the information provided?

Increase student awareness of **advertising at your school** (e.g., book covers, posters, student clothing with prominent logos) by having students collect examples or take digital pictures of commercial messages they see in classrooms, hallways, the cafeteria, sports fields or other places at school. Engage students in an analysis of the ads. What do they sell and why? How do the advertisers use colors, music, editing, etc. to appeal to you? Is advertising appropriate at school? Then, have students organize their examples and analysis in an online slide show or poster display.

Math:

Use media to develop categorization skills. Based on students' interests and grade levels, provide a number of media examples, such as advertised products, news stories, etc. Ask students to develop categories for these items and then explain their rationale for grouping things together in a particular way.

Help students discover how the same set of **data can be represented differently in order to emphasize a particular message**. Use a political poll or a research study for a data source and instruct students to manipulate scale and otherwise alter the visual message of tables and graphs of the report's data in order to favor a certain point of view. Discuss the potential consequences of presenting data with a particular bias.

Study percentages and fractions by investigating the **ratio of advertisement to news** in newspapers and Web sites, or commercials to content in television broadcasts. Students might also look at the type of ads connected to particular sections of the newspaper or Web site, or to particular TV programs, creating spreadsheets or graphs to demonstrate their findings.

Tap real-world advertising statistics for number operations practice. Using the [AdAge FactPack report](#), pull advertising numbers that you think would be of greatest

interest to your students and pose questions that require students to apply addition, subtraction, multiplication or division skills. For example, how much more did advertisers spend for a 30-second commercial during the Super Bowl in 2005 versus 2004? Reinforce problem-solving skills by investigating **sylogisms and hypothetical reasoning** through advertising. Can students find examples of different types of reasoning in print, radio or television advertising? Can they create their own examples of ads using these techniques? How do these methods relate to solving "textbook math" problems?

Science:

Invite students to **conduct experiments to see if advertised claims made by various products are true**. For example, do certain cleaning products work better than others? Students should document their experiments on video or with a photo storyboard and share their findings.

Use media examples that include **unrealistic claims or portrayals** and ask students to apply scientific laws to explain why something could or could not happen the way it is shown. Examples might come from stunts in an action sequence, scenes showing unusual physical abilities, "miraculous" rescues, special effects applications, etc.

Investigate how **new medical treatments or research results** are covered in the popular press. Who's giving the fullest coverage? Does one medium do a better job than another? What basic scientific knowledge or vocabulary would someone need to understand the content? Does the reporter provide suggestions if viewers want to know where to go for more information?

Explore **how scientists are portrayed** in popular movies and television shows. Taking an historical approach, students might look at the image of the "mad scientist" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What alternative portrayals of scientists do students see today (e.g., crime scene investigators)? Students might create an online exhibition, or use [E-Pals](#) or [Global Schoolhouse](#) to work with students in another country to compare results.

Connect language arts and earth science by studying how **natural disasters** are covered in the news. After an introduction to "connotation" and "denotation," examine the word choice in natural disaster news stories. Ask students to pick out words with particularly strong connotations, and discuss. How accurate is the coverage? Why do the authors choose specific words? Introduce the idea of anthropomorphism: to what extent does news coverage of natural disasters anthropomorphize nature?

Discuss **how media assists in the study of science**. For example, are some concepts best explained using video? Explore this idea by asking students to create a media product (e.g., Web site, audio recording, animation, video, brochure) that teaches a specific science topic. How did the student's chosen medium limit or empower the presentation of material?

Social Studies:

Facilitate a discussion of the relationship between **media and terrorism**. What use do terrorists make of various media? How do terrorists manipulate the news media into communicating their messages and furthering their causes? In recent years, how have terrorists used self-produced Web sites and video to achieve their objectives? How dependent are terrorists on media messages about their activities? Prepare for this discussion by defining the word, "terrorism." How is terrorism different from any other combat? Then, have student groups analyze the media coverage of a selected terrorist act based on the questions listed here and then share their findings with the class.

Examine the television advertising strategies of the 2004 presidential election. Using data from the [Online NewsHour's Ad War report](#) and the [Nielsen Monitor-Plus and The University of Wisconsin Advertising Project](#) (PDF file), discuss why candidates choose not to air campaign spots in certain markets. Would students have made the same spending decisions? What outcomes do students think resulted from such campaign advertising? Have students create a computer slide presentation that includes key points, statistics for each candidate and sample advertisements.

As an introduction or a culmination to a traditional unit of study, ask students to **create short videos or multimedia presentations** about a particular geographic region, event or era. Include discussion and reflection about the production process: how did students

select images? What did they leave out? Classes which are especially interested in this type of activity might want to check out [National History Day](#) information.

Ask students to keep a record of their families' **media consumption** for one week (computers, TV, radio, etc.) Compare the amount of time spent using different media.

Compare media consumption in the U.S. to other countries. (Try [E-Pals](#) or [Global Schoolhouse](#) to find partner classes in other countries.) Students might also **explore how foreigners perceive American media**, including film, TV, and music.

Focus on one current event and ask students to compare how the issue is presented in a number of articles, TV broadcasts, etc. Don't forget online news sources like [CNN](#), [MSNBC](#), and [The Online NewsHour](#).