Lesson Plan:
Questioning Images

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1

What is the role of images in communication?

2

How do I critically analyze images?

3

How might people interpret the same message differently?

Overview

Images can influence the way we understand people, issues, and events. Developing a habit of questioning images can help us to become more informed citizens.

In this lesson, students use a visual framework to analyze images from a variety of sources. By working through the series of questions, students will strengthen their ability to apply critical thinking skills to images in order to interpret them.

Learning Goals

We are learning to:

- analyze images and explain how they produce meaning;
- identify and assess the source of an image;
- understand how text and captions influence meaning; and,
- infer how different audiences may interpret and use images.

Tips for Teachers

- Please use the activities and combine them in a way that is appropriate for your class.
- Questioning Images is a flexible framework. The process may vary depending on image type and context. A teacher guide is included.
- If you are analyzing an image from social media, you can also use this as an opportunity to model online verification skills for students, such as reverse image searches and evaluating sources using Google and Wikipedia. These topics are covered in-depth in the CTRL-F Verification Skills program. The videos "Skill: Just Add Wikipedia with Mike Caulfield" and "Skill: Search the History of an Image" are available at ctrl-f.ca/en/resources and on the CTRL-F YouTube channel.

Starter

1. Present a selection of photos (either from the Questioning Images slide deck or images of your own) to the class. Ask students to analyze them using the following key questions:

    - What does the image show? (Simple descriptions of what is being depicted.)
    - How does it make you feel?
    - How would you describe the meaning of the image?
    - Do you think others could interpret the message differently? If so, what other meanings can you think of?

    Invite students to share their responses orally, either through a whole-class discussion or in pairs. You may wish to record their ideas on chart paper.

Activities

1. Review the importance of images in society and during election campaigns.

    - A picture can inspire an emotion or action, or influence the way we understand people, issues and events.
    - Online, pictures can get re-used, re-posted, turned into memes and can appear in different places with different text, so what they represent can change dramatically.
    - Political parties spend many hours planning photo ops to make sure the right image of their leader is presented to voters.
    - Additional resource: "How politicians avoid a photo-op fail: Unpacking the staged campaign event," *CBC News*, Sept. 11, 2019 (7-minute video)

2. Distribute copies of Questioning Images framework. Introduce the framework as a resource for critically analyzing images, highlighting the importance of building good visual media literacy habits.

3. Use a Think-Aloud strategy to model how to use the framework to analyze images (a sample image is provided in the slide deck and a sample script is in the slide notes).

4. Divide the class into small groups, giving each one an image to work through using the Questioning Images framework. Ask students to record their notes on the worksheet. You can give each group a different image to analyze or use the same image to support a whole-class discussion. Allow students 5 minutes to work through each of the four framework segments (20 minutes total).

    Please refer to the Teacher Guide for tips and guiding questions.

5. Ask each group to share their image with the class and explain their key insights and conclusions.

Consolidation

Have a closing discussion about images as a source of information, or ask students to write a reflection in their learning journal.

- What can we learn about images by questioning them?
- Why is it important to question the images that we see?

Assessment Activity

Provide each student with an example image (or let students to find their own). Ask students to work their image through the framework and fill out the worksheet on their own.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

Images are powerful. A picture can inspire an emotion or influence the way we understand people, issues, and events. Many expressions describe the impact of visual information — "a picture is worth a thousand words" or "seeing is believing."

Unlike text, images are immediate and don't take much time or effort to make sense of. It's the power of images to appeal to our emotions that makes it essential to ask questions about them.

Photos can be immensely influential in election campaigns, and images may help voters form their opinions on political candidates or issues. For this reason, campaign teams spend many hours planning photo ops for their candidate or deciding how to use images to frame political issues and influence public opinion. In the age of social media, constructing the right image is even more important because politicians are able to reach voters directly, without relying as much on traditional media outlets.

This emotional power of images becomes particularly important when it comes to their role in spreading **misinformation** and d**isinformation**. Misinformation is false or misleading information that is not intended to cause harm, where disinformation is created to deliberately confuse people about what is true.

A common type of disinformation form is **false context** — when a real image is paired with a false or misleading claim to incorrectly influence an audience's understanding of what they are looking at.

But even when images are not being used maliciously, valuable information can be found by analyzing them. There is no such thing as a purely neutral image because each choice behind its creation and presentation has an impact on how an audience will interpret it.

Even a journalistic photograph intended to inform people about a news event will involve a series of choices that affect how audiences understand it. The choice of subject, angle, light and distance will all create a particular mood or message.

Editorial decisions will limit meaning further — an editor will select one image from a range of possible photos to publish, adding a headline and a caption to help audiences make sense of what they are seeing in a particular way.

Similarly, your flattering and unflattering selfies are both of you, but you make a choice about which to post, and your captions help viewers understand how to interpret the photo.

We can use image analysis skills to investigate any type of image, in any context. A news photo published by a media outlet has a clear context. Context can be harder to identify with images online. Pictures will get re-used, re-posted, turned into memes, and appear in different places with different text, so what they represent can change dramatically. A journalistic image meant to inform could be used to communicate something completely different used somewhere else.