

How to Conduct a 'Close Analysis' of a Media 'Text'

While getting “caught up” in a storytelling experience has been the essence of entertainment since our ancestors told tales around the fire, the relentless pace of entertainment media today requires that at least once in awhile, we should stop and look, really look, at how a media message is put together and the many interpretations that can derive from it. The method for this is called “close analysis.” To learn to conduct this basic media literacy exercise, try it first yourself; then introduce it to a group or class using tips at the end of this section.

Any media message can be used for a close analysis but commercials are often good choices because they are short and tightly packed with powerful words and images, music and sounds. Find a commercial to analyze by recording, not the programs but *just the commercials*, during an hour or two of TV watching. Play the tape and look for a commercial that seems to have a lot of layers—interesting visuals and sound track, memorable words or taglines, multiple messages that call out for exploration. Replay your selection several times as you go through the following steps:

1. Visuals.

After the first viewing, write down everything you can remember about the visuals—lighting, camera angles, how the pictures are edited together. Describe any people—what do they look like? what are they doing? wearing? What scenes or images do you remember clearly? Focus only on what is actually on the screen, not your interpretation of what you saw on the screen. (See the following sample exercise, *What Do You Notice?*) If necessary, play it again but with the sound off. Keep adding to your list of visuals.

2. Sounds.

Replay again with the picture off. Listen to the sound track. Write down all the words that are spoken. Who says them? What kind of music is used? Does it change in the course of the commercial? How? Are there other sounds? What is their purpose? Who is being spoken to—directly or indirectly? (That is, *who* is the audience addressed by the commercial?)

3. Apply Key Questions for Deconstruction

With the third viewing, begin to apply the *Five Key Questions* and the *Guiding Questions* that lead to them. Identify the author(s) and how the specific “construction” techniques you identified in steps 1 and 2 influence what the commercial is “saying”—values expressed and unexpressed; lifestyles endorsed or rejected; points of view proposed or assumed. Explore what’s left out of the message and how different people might react differently to it. What is the message “selling”? Is it the same as the product being advertised?

Continue to show the text over and over; it's like peeling back the layers of an onion.

4. Review Your Insights.

Summarize how the text is constructed and how various elements of the construction trigger our own unique response—which may be very different than how others interpret the text. Try this exercise with other kinds of messages— a story from a newscast, a key scene from a movie, a print advertisement, a website. Are different questions important for different kinds of messages?

Doing a close analysis with a class or group can be exhilarating, with insights coming fast and furiously. After the first showing, start the group exercise with the simple question: *"What did you notice?"* Different people will remember different things so accept all answers and keep asking, *"What else did you notice?"*

If the group is having a hard time, show the clip again and invite them to look for something that stands out for them. Continue the brainstorming until you have at least 15 or 20 answers to the question: *"What did you notice?"* Challenge any attempt to assign interpretation too early. Keep the group focused on identifying only what was actually on screen or heard on the soundtrack. The key to success with this exercise is for the teacher/leader to *keep asking questions*. Refrain from contributing too many answers yourself.

While no one has the time to subject every media message to this kind of analysis, it takes only two or three experiences with close analysis to give us the insight to "see" through other media messages as we encounter them. It's like having a new set of glasses that brings the whole media world into focus.

Teaching Tip:

When you find a text that is useful for a close analysis, put it on a videotape six or eight times with 5 seconds of black between. This makes it easier to show it several times without having to stop and rewind.