

# MEDIA LITERACY SMARTPHONE

FROM  
THE  
MEDIA  
EDUCATION  
LAB



# MEDIA LITERACY FOR CRITICAL THINKING

## How To Use the Smartphone

This smartphone image helps students visualize the practices of critical thinking about all forms of media. By using the media literacy smartphone, students learn to ask questions about what they read, see, watch and listen to.

In developing critical thinking skills in responding to media, students benefit from a simple and structured approach. This tool can be used to analyze web sites, books, advertising, news, TV shows, movies, video games, magazines and music.

One side of the smartphone displays the various "apps" for analyzing a media text and the other side displays the "five critical questions" of media literacy. The ML Smartphone was developed by Renee Hobbs. Use the activities in this lesson plan to advance your students' critical thinking skills.

## What Are Media?

Start with a definition for media. Have students share they already know about the word and then present or have them look up a dictionary definition:

media [uncountable, plural] the main ways that large numbers of people receive information and entertainment.  
-Oxford American Dictionary

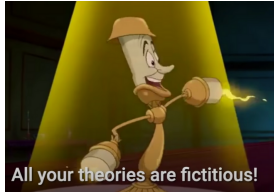
## QUESTIONS

- What other types of media are not listed on the Smartphone?
- What are the main ways you receive information and entertainment?
- What about your parents?
- Why do you think an Off button was included in the list?

# Five Critical Questions of Media Literacy

## Before the Session Begins

Select for display a media message that is highly visual as an artifact for analysis. It can be a 30-second commercial, a magazine ad, a newspaper article or editorial, a website, a cartoon, a movie trailer, or a photograph.

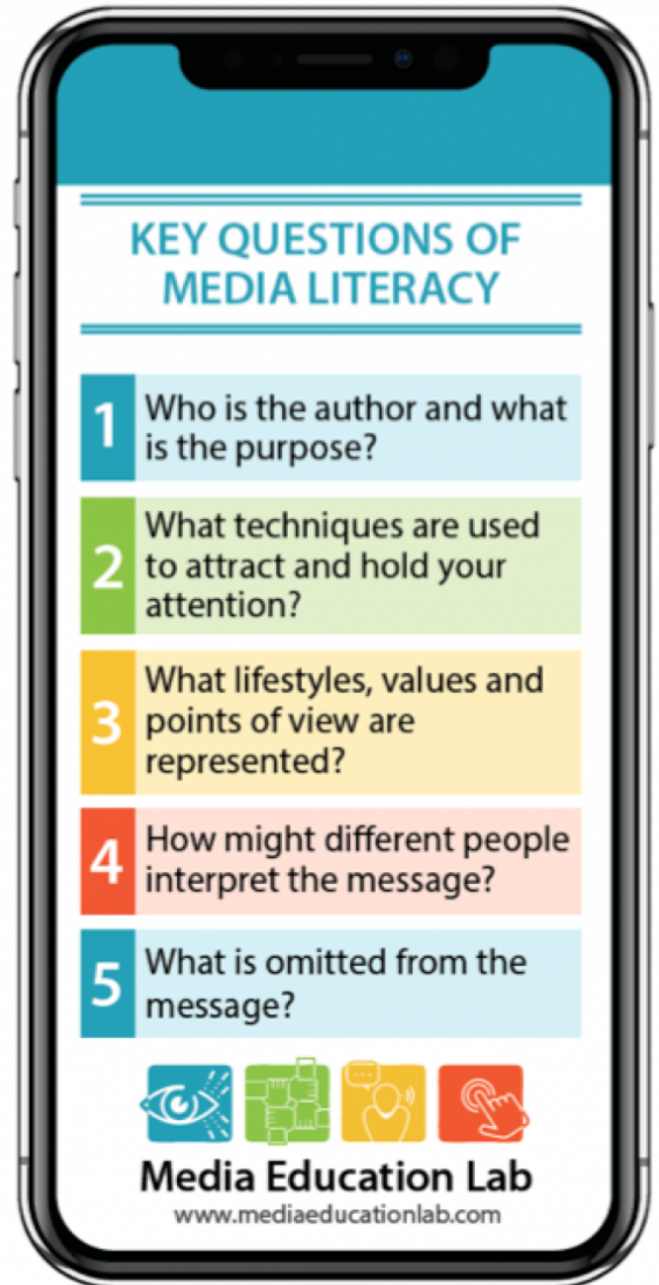


## Introduce the Questions

Have students review the Key Questions of Media Literacy on the ML Smartphone. Read, or have students read, each one aloud. After each one, ask: “Why might it be important to know that?” This will help you assess how students comprehend the relevance and value of the questions.

## Work in Small Groups to Discuss

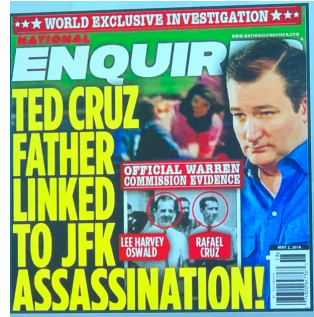
Split the class into small groups and assign a Key Question to each group. Because each group is only discussing one aspect of the analysis, they will attend to other groups' ideas and analysis with more interest. Give them only a short time to discuss. Ask each group to report key ideas from their discussion results.



# Five Critical Questions of Media Literacy

## 1. Who is the Author and What is the Purpose?

This question gets students to explore the constructed nature of media messages as well as the choices made by the creators of the message. Media messages have economic, historic, political, and aesthetic purposes. When exploring purpose, ask whether the message was meant to inform, educate, entertain, persuade, or sell something. Many messages have more than one purpose. When identifying the author, students will often name the company or brand. But did the company really “author” – create – this message? Or did they pay an advertising agency or media producer to create it for them? How many different people --with different skills-- might have been involved with creating the message? Today, both amateurs and media professionals make creative use of words, colors, images, and music to achieve a desired response.



## 2. What Techniques are Used to Attract and Hold your Attention?

Students will generate a variety of responses that indicate their awareness of how media messages use language, image, sound, and interactivity to compel attention. They may also recognize how the content may attract attention, or notice how the speed of the action and the editing might affect viewers. They might notice how people are clothed, or what they are doing, and how they are positioned in the frame. They may notice how facial expressions and colors affect their emotions. This provides an opportunity to discuss framing: - what's in and what's out of the frame of the message? Where is the camera positioned in relation to the people or objects depicted? When a person is shown in a close-up, it may affect how people pay attention.



## 3. What Lifestyles, Values, and Points of View are Represented?

Messages are aimed at specific audiences and created by people with specific backgrounds and experiences. For a very long time, media producers have been predominantly white, male, and middle class. What effect might that have on the view of the world their messages represent? In analyzing a media message, have students



# Five Critical Questions of Media Literacy

view a message targeted to their age group, then look for clues about how the message was intended to reach them. Who is depicted in the message and what is the lifestyle shown? What do the people who are depicted seem to value? It takes practice to recognize how values are embedded in all media messages. It can be helpful for students to examine messages that represent values from outside the school or community in which they live.

## 4. How Might Different People Interpret the Message?

We all have unique life experiences, information, attitudes, values, needs, and understanding of the world that we use when interpreting media. This question helps students understand how shared understandings of media messages occur. But it also helps students explore how meanings and interpretations vary. The concept of target audience is important here. For example, how would your grandmother react to that song? Would your parents have the same reaction as you to online videos that you watch? Would your younger brother or sister be scared by a horror movie you find funny? Might different ethnicities be offended by some representations in the media? Might girls feel differently than boys about how women are portrayed in advertising? How might media producers use these differences to influence their audiences? Understanding our different interpretations of media messages helps build empathy towards different points of view and an understanding of how personal experiences and biases influence the process of media production.

## 5. What is Omitted From the Message?

Thinking about what's missing in a media message can be as important as analyzing what's in it. In an action movie, car chases and crashes make for exciting viewing, but we rarely see what would happen next in real life - the people and property affected, the police and ambulance arrival on the scene, victims taken to the hospital emergency room, medical staff and family members affected. It can also be effective to look at a print advertisement in a magazine and ask what information about the product is missing. Why did the advertiser choose to use these words and images instead of adding that missing information? Students who can start to recognize what media messages are not telling us, are becoming critical thinkers and more informed and active citizens.



# MEDIA LITERACY

# SMARTPHONE

## Use The Smartphone Apps

Look at the top half of the card where the “apps” are listed. The apps represent additional tools for media message analysis and can be used in conjunction with the five questions or by themselves. As with the five questions, each app could be used in a session of its own.

### Reality Check

How close to reality is this message? How can it be fact-checked? Determining the truth or falsehoods in a media message is a critical skill in the 21st century. Introduce students to some media bias and fact-checking sites, then have them use them to analyze media messages.

### Private Gain or Public Good?

Have students analyze both ads and public service announcements and discuss. Was this message created to inform or persuade, or even entertain, as a means to create financial or social profit? Can a media message do both?

### Solutions Too Easy

Oversimplification is a technique used in many forms of media. Some TV shows present narrative problems and challenges that are resolved in a half-hour or hour time frame. Advertising also relies heavily on a problem-solution formula, and has only 30 to 60 seconds to convince you that this product is the solution to your problem. Exploring these media constraints allow students to realize that real problems usually take a lot more effort than those presented in the media.



## What's Left Out?

What you leave out is important. Spotting what's missing is the best way to detect the point of view of a media message.

## Values Check

Start by having a discussion about values and how they guide and influence our lives. Brainstorm a list of values. Then ask students to write down their own top five values in life. Have them share their values with another student and/or in small groups. What values did they have in common? What ones were unique to them? Some media messages present problematic values but use humor or other techniques to make them seem appealing. What are the values implicit in a particular media message? Understanding and naming our own core values may help students appreciate that some values are commonly found in media messages and others are rarely presented. But there are no value-free media messages.

## Read Between the Lines

With any media message it is important to see, listen, and read what is being said and what is not being said. Using all the tools of media literacy, students learn to “pay attention to that man behind the curtain” and become better consumers and producers of media messages, not just passive consumers.

## Stereotype Alert

Because they require less critical thinking, the use of stereotypes is a time-efficient way to simplify our complex world, which helps in the time-based world of media production. But the use of stereotypes in the media can also reinforce harmful stereotypes in real life, leading to more entrenched attitudes, biases, prejudices, societal and political divisions, and sometimes even violent action. Learning to understand and recognize stereotypes is an essential skill in any democracy and in increasingly diverse societies.

## Record/Save for Later

Some media messages come at us so fast, it can be difficult to process them fully, let alone analyze them critically. The Record/Save for Later app reminds us to keep in mind “what really matters” as we decide what's worth our valuable time and attention.

