



Text & Subtext

New Mexico Media Literacy Project

In order to begin to analyze a media artifact, we first have to experience it and make note of its parts. In short, we must begin by describing it. To describe well, we have to look at and experience it more than once. Beginning with a detailed description in which you don't try to force yourself into any interpretation is a great way to start. Then you can move on to looking between the lines for the messages behind the text.

Text

We often use the word *text* to mean “written words.” But in media literacy, *text* has a very different meaning. The text of any piece of media is what you actually see and/or hear. It can include written or spoken words, pictures, graphics, moving images, sounds, and the arrangement or sequence of all of these elements. Sometimes the text is called the “story” or “manifest text.” For most of us, the text of a piece of media is always the same.

However, too often in beginning analysis, we try to start out analyzing, but don't just look at or experience the thing we're analyzing. In order to begin analyzing media, you first have to experience it. Before you even begin to “read” it, just let yourself experience it. Then move on to analyze it by looking again and again:

- If it's an image, really look at it. Notice the places, people, things, text, colors, and fonts. Notice the size and shape of all of those. The usual and the unusual. Just let yourself experience it.
- If it's video, watch it and notice those things above, then just listen to it without watching. Reverse that and watch it with the sound off. What things do you notice or what things stand out?
- Find some basic facts: Who made it, why, when was made/released?

After your first experience, make notes as you look at your text from every angle. Share it with someone else and ask them what they see and notice. Do as detailed a description as you can. This will help you as you move through your analysis on to your interpretation.

Subtext

The “subtext” is your interpretation of a piece of media. It is sometimes called the “latent text.” The subtext is not actually heard or seen; it is the meaning we create from the text in our own minds. While media makers (especially advertisers) often create texts that suggest certain subtexts, each person creates their own subtext (interpretation) based on their previous experiences, knowledge, opinions, attitudes and values. Thus, the subtext of a piece of media will vary depending on the individual seeing/hearing it.

Look at your text and think about some of these questions:

- How does it make you feel?

- Are there any references or similarities with other texts—songs, movies, videos, etc?
- What feeling or attitude does it portray toward its topic and the people and objects in the space?
- Does it portray anything as good or bad without specifically saying that? What things are clues to that?
- What techniques from [The Language of Persuasion](#) handout can you see used in it?
- Overall, what is it saying between the lines? Don't look at the product it's selling, the person it's advocating, or the song that's being sung. Look at the bigger picture and the deeper message. What is it saying about the myths or stereotypes we hold, what we should value or not value, society, culture, specific groups, ideas, etc?

After you make notes on the text and subtext, then you can begin to make meaning. What does this text say about us and the world we live in? How does it fit in with or push back against others you see? What kind of pull or influence does it have? All of those questions and more are a good start to becoming media literate.

On the next page is an example of one way to start this by analyzing media images by looking at text and subtext.

Example



The text of this media message includes:

- Bright colors: red, purple, yellow, orange, green.
- The setting looks like a (cheap?) hotel room. There's a lamp, bed, open door, etc. behind her.
- Musician Sheryl Crow stands holding a guitar case in one hand and a glass of milk in the other. There's an electric guitar on the bed behind her.
- Her hands are down at her sides as if she's relaxed.
- The glass is hourglass shaped (small waist?)
- The logo "got milk?" is in the upper right hand corner.
- The words "Rock hard" are to the left at about shoulder height.
- She has a milk mustache and a pouty but tough look on her face.
- She's wearing a black leather bustier and "fashionably torn" jeans with black boots.
- The short paragraph says: "To keep the crowd on their feet, I keep my body in tune. With milk. Studies suggest that the nutrients in milk can play an important role in weight loss. So if you're trying to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight, try drinking 24 ounces of lowfat or fat free milk every 24 hours as part of your reduced-calorie diet. To learn more, visit 2424milk.com. It's a change that'll do you good."
- Another logo that reads "milk. your diet. / Lose weight!" and "24 oz. / 24 hours" is in the bottom left corner.
- A small image of Sheryl Crow's album *Wildflower* is in the bottom right corner.
- **Persuasion Techniques:** Celebrity, Beautiful People, Association (fame, beauty, success), Simple Solution, Experts/Scientific Evidence, Extrapolation, Testimonial
- Author: America's Milk Producers. Year: 2006 Campaign: "Milk Your Diet. Lose Weight."
- Original 1 page color magazine ad featuring American singer-songwriter and actress Sheryl Crow

Possible subtexts include:

- Sheryl Crow drinks milk.
- Sheryl Crow wants to sell her album.
- Sheryl Crow stays at cheap motels. (Plain folks?)
- Rock stars like ripped jeans.
- Milk renders great concerts.
- Drinking milk is cool.
- Beautiful people drink milk.
- If you drink milk you will lose weight.
- If you drink milk, you'll be beautiful and famous, too.
- A good body is an important part of being a rock star.
- You must lose weight to be beautiful and famous.
- We should want to be like Sheryl Crow is pictured in this image—it's desirable.

As you can see, some of the subtexts are pretty basic and simplistic and probably wouldn't work into a more advanced analysis. However, you can see in this list how the points start out more simplistic then work toward the deeper issues. Don't ignore the simple ones; they are part of the path to the deeper ideas.

As you begin to analyze, stop to describe both the text and subtext of the media you're looking at, and then make sure to think about whether or not those subtext messages are portrayed in other texts. If so, what does that say about that message overall, and how does that message affect us?