Critical Media Literacy Guides

Critical media literacy means critical inquiry. Much of the work of critical media literacy is to ask questions of the media texts that we make use of and study. Critical media literacy focuses on both the content of the media (e.g., what we watch, read, or listen to) and, possibly more important, on the power behind the construction of the content (e.g., the ownership, production, and distribution of media texts). Critical media literacy pays close attention to the interrogation of power: What media are the object of our study and how did they come to be?

Making Use of the Critical Media Literacy Guides

The following guides will provide some foundational questions for a variety of media, including social media, websites, news & newspapers, movies, television, images, advertisements, and AI writing tools. The questions focus both on the forward-facing content as well as the behind-the-scenes of each medium. The questions address both representation of the power of construction and of distribution. The questions are intentionally broad - they will best be used to begin the process of analysis. The questions are designed with popular culture texts in mind and can be used with historic and contemporary media, and for a variety of local, national, independent, and corporate media. The questions are not focused on a particular text or content, so they are adaptable and can be used as a guide for multiple media, over time.

Table of Contents

1. Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing Social Media

Questions About the Social Media Platform

- Who owns the social media platform? What objectives and aims does the platform owner have?
- How does the social media company make money (e.g., Ads? Data collection?)?
- What do the privacy policies say? What are the terms of service and how much agency does the user have in their own participation and privacy? Are the privacy policy and terms of service easy to understand and read? Why do you think this is?
- What are the opportunities (text, audio, video, pics) and limitations (word count, file size, video length) of a particular social media site and how does this contribute to how the site is utilized and how information is viewed/shared?
- How does the design of the social media platform influence your actions? For example, what features can your thumbs easily reach when using the social media platform on a handheld device like an iPhone? Why is this so?
- Who is the target audience of this social media site? How do you know this?
- Who produces the social media content? How do you know this?
- How are stories told on this platform? Whose story is told? Whose story is *not* being told? How is emotion used?

Questions About Social Media Content

- Why do users post (e.g., to make money? Enhance their digital reputation? Share their thoughts? Spread information/misinformation?)
- How do users present information in their posts (look closely at their use of language, media, emotion, and formatting)?
- How reliable, credible, and accurate are the posts? How did you determine this?
- How do users seek to influence others through their posts?
- Do videos feature music or sound effects? Why or why not?
- How accessible are posts (Do videos include accurate closed captions? Do images have alt text?)? Who might be left out from fully experiencing the social media content?
- How do engagement metrics (e.g., likes, shares, retweets, comments) influence people's viewing of, and reactions to, the post? Does higher engagement make a post more trustworthy?
- How easy or hard is it to share someone else's post? Why do you think that is? How might that influence the spread of information/misinformation?

2. Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing Websites

- What is the URL of the website? Can you determine the trustworthiness of the website based on its URL?
- Who owns the website? What are the website owners' aims, values, and objectives?
- What is the purpose of the website? How does the purpose of the website align with the website owners' aims, values, and objectives?
- Who designed the website? What are the designers' aims, values, and objectives?
- Closely examine the structure and visual design of the website:
  - What takes up the most space on each page (e.g., text, images, videos, advertisements)?
  - What attracts your attention first?
  - How does the design of the page influence the way you interact with the content?
  - How does the design of the page influence the way you feel about the content (e.g., does the use of a certain color - like Blue or Red - on a politician's page make it seem more trustworthy?)?
- Is the website made up mostly of original or borrowed content? How can you tell whether the content is original or borrowed?
- How reliable, credible, and accurate is the content? How did you determine this?
- How is the content presented (look closely at their use of language, media, emotion, and formatting)?
- Is there a paywall on this website? If so, how often can you read the pages before being locked out? How much does it cost to gain access?
- Is there an offline/analog version of this website (for example, if you are reading a magazine online, is there also a print version)?
  - If so, what are the similarities/differences between the on/offline versions?
  - If the site is strictly online, what are some possible advantages/disadvantages to being 'just' digital? What might that site replace/disrupt through its presence on the Internet?
- What is the content of the advertisements on the website? Do they correspond in any way with your recent search history? If using your own computer, do the advertisements appear targeted to you in any way? Why do you think that is?

3. Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing News & Newspapers

- Who are the subjects in the news story? Why are they being covered/photographed?
- Whose story is being told? Whose story is *not* being told?
- Who is left out of the news story that should be included? Why do you think that is?
- List three adjectives to describe the news story. Your adjectives can be based on your immediate emotional reactions or more technical aspects (editing, formatting, type of shots, sound). Why did you choose these adjectives?
- Who is covering the story: Mainstream/corporate media or alternative/independent media? How does this influence the way the story is being told?
- Who owns the news source? What are the news source owners' aims, values, and objectives?
- How does the owner and news source encourage viewers to trust their coverage?
- Who is the intended audience? How did you find this out?
- How does the news source use visuals and content to disseminate information?
  - Visuals (photos, video clips, graphics): Are the visuals positive or negative? What word choices, especially adjectives, are used to describe the visuals? What is emphasized in the visuals? Why do you think the editor selected these specific visuals to include in the news story?
  - Photos: Why do you think the photographer captured this perspective? What event might have happened right before or after the photo was taken that is left out because the photograph only shows a single moment in time? Take a look at photos from other news sources that covered the same story - how are the photos similar or different? What is or isn't included in these other photos? Why?
  - Content: What or who are the primary, secondary, tertiary sources? How reliable, credible, and accurate is the content? How did you determine this?
- Do you have any emotional connection to this story? What interests you (or what disinterests you) about this story? Do you see your interests represented in the news?

4. Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing Movies

- How did you watch this movie: In a movie theater? Through a streaming service? On a TV, phone, tablet, or other personal device?
  - How does the medium of viewing contribute to the experience of viewing?
- What is the main story of the movie?
- Whose story is being told in this movie? Whose story is *not* being told?
- Do the actors' physical, racial/ethnic, and/or gender identity match the characters played? Why or why not?
- Who makes up the production team (director, producer, writer) and how might their identities and financial interests contribute to the content of the story being told and the selection of actors?
- Are there special effects in this movie, and if so, what part do they play?
- How and why are music and sound effects used throughout the movie?
- Where/how was this movie released and how easy/hard was it for viewers to access it?
- When was the film released? How does the date of release help you understand the movie in its context of current events?
- Who is the target audience of the movie? How do you know this? How might the target audience have influenced the design of the movie?
- How reliable, credible, and accurate is the movie content? How did you determine this?
- Do you have any emotional connection to this movie? What interests you (or what disinterests you) about this movie?
- Do you see named/branded products within the movie (e.g., showcasing a Lexus as the characters drive into a scene)? If so, how are the names/branded products presented?

5. Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing Television

- How did you watch this TV show/episode: On broadcast TV? Through a streaming service? On a phone, tablet, or other personal device?
    - How does the medium of viewing contribute to the experience of viewing?
- What is the main story of this TV show/episode?
- Whose story is being told? Whose story is *not* being told?
- Do the actors' physical, racial/ethnic, and/or gender identity match the characters played?
- Who makes up the production team (director, producer, writer) and how might their identities and financial interests contribute to the content of the story being told and the selection of actors?
- Are there special effects in this TV show/episode and if so, what part do they play?
- How and why are music and sound effects used throughout the TV show/episode?
- Where/how was this TV show/episode released? How easy or hard is it for viewers to access it?
- When was the TV show/episode released? How does the date of release help you understand the TV show/episode in its context of current events?
- Who is the target audience of the TV show? How do you know this? How might the target audience have influenced the design of the TV show?
- How reliable, credible, and accurate is the TV show? How did you determine this?
- Do you have any emotional connection to this TV show? What interests you (or what disinterests you) about this TV show?
- Do you see named/branded products within the TV show (e.g., showcasing a Lexus as the characters drive into a scene)? If so, how are the names/branded products presented?

6. Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing Images

- Please describe the image:
    - What is happening in the image?
    - What technology was used to create the image?
    - What colors are featured in this image? Why do you think that is?
    - Is it a positive or negative image? How do you know?
    - What/who is emphasized in the image? Why do you think that is?
    - What emotion do you feel when looking at it?
    - Who is included in the image? Who is *not* included? Why?
- What word choices, especially the adjectives, are used to describe the image?
- Why was the name, caption, or description of this image chosen? What do you think might be an alternate name, caption, or description?
- Can you tell if the image has been technologically modified? If so, why?
- Why was this image created? Where was it published/displayed? Why do you think that is?
- How might this image be perceived differently by different groups of people (e.g., people of different ages, gender identities, culture, socioeconomic status)?
- If the image is a photograph:
    - Where was the picture taken and in what context? What event might have happened right before or after the photo was taken that is left out because the photograph only shows a single moment in time?
    - What is going on in this photo? What do you see that makes you say that?
    - What emotions do you see in the expressions/actions of the people in the photo?
    - Who is one figure in the image whose actions may be misrepresented by the photograph?
- What else can you find out about the image?
- Need more prompts? Explore this [How to Read a Photograph post](#).

7. Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing Advertisements

- Where is this advertisement located - in what medium (e.g., TV, social media, websites)?
  - Look at an advertisement for one product, across a range of media (e.g., TV, social media, websites, newspapers) - How are the messages similar/different in different media?
- What is the text of the advertisement (what is it trying to sell?) and what is the subtext of the advertisement (what is the more subtle message?)?
- Who is the ad designed for? Is the ad designed for people from a particular political party? How do you know this?
- If there are people pictured in the advertisement, who is pictured? Who is left out and why do you think they have been left out? How are the people presented (for example, are they looking at the camera or looking away? Smiling, serious, frustrated, etc..? What is the position of the camera in relation to the body?)
- If there is narration, who is speaking? Why do you think that person was selected to provide the narration (e.g., based on gender? Tone of voice? Popularity?)?
- If there is music, why do you think that specific music was selected for the ad?
- Are prices obviously listed for the advertised product? Why do you think the price is included/left out?
- Who owns the product advertised? What do they gain from making the advertisement? What are their goals (financial or otherwise)? How do they influence society?
  - What are the product owners' aims, values, and objectives?
- Who produced the advertisement? What are the advertisement producers' aims, values, and objectives? If you can't find out who produced the advertisement, why do you think that information is not easily accessible?
- What techniques are used to persuade the viewer to buy the product? How are language, storytelling, and emotion used to persuade the viewer? What about the visuals and audio?
- How reliable, credible, and accurate is the advertisement? How did you determine this?
- How influential is the advertisement to you, personally? What aspects of the advertisement do you find to be the most influential (e.g., music choice, narration, storytelling)?

8: Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing Cartoons, Comics, and Memes

- Explore the Analyzing Political Cartoons article by NCPedia & How to Analyze an Editorial Cartoon by the Herb Block Foundation.
- Who illustrated the cartoon/comic or designed the meme? How do you know? Were they commissioned (paid) to do this work? If so, by whom?
  - What are the illustrators'/designers' aims, values, and objectives?
- What is the purpose of the cartoon, comic, or meme? (e.g., to evoke an emotional reaction? To tell a story? To inform?)
- Where did you find the cartoon, comic, or meme (e.g., on a specific website? Social media post?)? What is its larger context?
- What perspective does the cartoon, comic, or meme present?
- Who/what is included in the cartoon, comic, or meme? Who/what is left out? Why?
- What design techniques (font size/style, color choice, illustration style) were used to create the cartoon, comic, or meme? Why do you think these techniques were used?
- How does the illustrator/designer capture the attention of viewers (e.g., humor? Emotional appeal? Surprise?)?
- Who is the intended audience? How do you know this?
- How reliable, credible, and accurate is the cartoon/comic/meme? Why do you think that is?

9. Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing AI Writing Tools (e.g., ChatGPT)

Questions About the AI Writing Tool

- Who created the AI writing tool?
- Who worked on training the AI writing tool?
- What dataset was used to train the AI writing tool? How does the diversity (or lack thereof) of the dataset influence the output of the AI writing tool?
- Why was this tool created?
- What are the objectives, aims, and values of the tool designer?
- What does the tool designer gain from your use of this tool?
- How does the tool designer make money from the tool?
- What do the privacy policies say? What are the terms of service/use and how much agency does the user have in their own participation and privacy? Are the privacy policy and terms of service easy to understand and read? Why do you think this is?
- What are the limitations of this tool? (e.g., ChatGPT is not connected to the Internet, and therefore, cannot draw connections to present-day events; ChatGPT has a limit for how much text you can upload)
- Who is the target audience for this tool? How do you know this?
- Who is harmed and who benefits from this tool? (question borrowed from the [Civics of Technology curriculum](#))
- What are the unintended and unexpected benefits and consequences of using this tool? (question borrowed from the [Civics of Technology curriculum](#))

Questions About the Text Produced by the AI Writing Tool

- What information is presented in the text?
- What information is missing from the text? Why do you think that information is missing? (consider that ChatGPT generates text based on its training dataset)
- What type of language and word choices are used to convey ideas and information in the text?
- How are the language and word choices different from, or similar to, the way humans write? Why do you think that is?
- List three adjectives to describe your response to the text. Your adjectives can be based on your immediate emotional reaction or longer-term reflections. Why did you select those adjectives?
- Who is the target audience(s) for this text? How do you know this?
- How reliable, accurate, and credible is the text? How did you determine this?
- What sources, if any, are cited? How accurate and relevant are those sources?
- What biases are present in the text? Why might this be?
- What might be the original sources used to generate this text? Conduct an Internet search and see if you can find the original sources (it's likely more than one source!) that the AI tool used to generate this text.
- After responding to the prompts in the "Questions About the AI Writing Tool," section above, how does this influence your thinking about the text generated by the AI writing tool?

10. Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing YouTube

Questions About the Social Media Platform

- Who owns YouTube?
- What are the objectives and aims of the platform owner?
- How does YouTube make money?
- How do YouTubers make money?
- What are YouTube's privacy policies?
- What are the terms of service and how much agency does the user have in their own participation and privacy?
- Are the privacy policy and terms of service easy to understand and read? Why do you think this is?
- What are the opportunities (text, audio, video, pics) and limitations (word count, file size, video length, copyright) of YouTube? How does this contribute to how the site is utilized and how information is viewed/shared?
- How does the design of YouTube influence user actions? For example, how are choices made among the banner categories of presumed popular videos, highlighted videos, and/or video shorts?
- Who is the target audience of YouTube? How do you know this?
- What are the differences/opportunities between the YouTube website/app and YouTube TV? What are the differences in access for those who do/do not pay for services?
- How are stories told on this platform? Whose stories are told? Whose stories are not being told?
- How does YouTube use algorithms to increase engagement on the platform?
- How does YouTube use algorithms to make more money (e.g., by keeping users on the platform for longer periods of time)?
- What kind of advertisements are on YouTube videos? Are there any companies that do NOT advertise on YouTube? If so, why not?

Questions About YouTube Videos

- How did you watch this YouTube video (e.g., on your laptop? Desktop? Phone?) How did the device you used to watch the video influence your viewing of the video?
- Who made the YouTube video? Why did they make the video?
- How was the video made (e.g., using an iPhone camera? Using professional cameras and editing software?)?
- How does the quality of production/design of the video influence the way the video is received by others?
- Who is the target audience for the video? How do you know this? How might the target audience have influenced the design of the video?
- How are people interacting with the video (e.g., view counts, subscribers, comments)?
- What is the main story of the video?
- Whose story is being told? Whose story is *not* being told?
- How and why are music and sound effects used throughout the video?
- What kind of visuals (e.g., animations, icons, images) are used? Why do you think these visuals were selected?
- How reliable, credible, and accurate is the video? How did you determine this?
- Do you have any emotional connection to this video? What interests you (or what disinterests you) about this video?
- Do you see named/branded products within the video (e.g., showcasing a Lexus as the characters drive into a scene)? If so, how are the names/branded products presented?
- How accessible is the video (e.g., does it include 100% accurate closed captions or auto-generated closed captions? Are the closed captions only available in English?)? How might the accessibility of the video influence viewers' ability to watch the video?
- Would you share this video with others? Why or why not?