



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 9–11

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Viewing a Crime Drama

Overview

In this lesson students explore how the stereotypes and technical devices used in television crime dramas impact real life attitudes and perceptions about crime. Technical devices explored include elements such as film and shooting techniques, lighting, music, sound effects, recurring visual patterns, plot and characterization. Stereotypes that are discussed include representation of policemen, policewomen, criminals, women, old people, teenagers and minorities. This lesson also provides students with a series of key media concepts that can be applied to this genre.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- understand how crime shows construct reality
- appreciate the differences between the constructed reality of crime dramas and the handling of crime in real life
- understand how the technical aspects of the filming of a drama contribute to its overall effect
- understand the plot formulas that underpin crime drama
- become aware of the limited representation of criminals, police, women, the young, the elderly and minorities within this genre

Preparation and Materials

- Create an overhead transparency of *Key Concepts*
- Photocopy the following handouts:
 - *Camera Shots*
 - *Plot and Characterization Viewing Guide*
 - *Advertising Target Market and Values Viewing Guide*
 - *Camera Techniques Viewing Guide*
 - *Film Effects Viewing Guide*
 - *Group Oral Presentation Contract*
 - *Individual Viewing Guide*



Procedure

Ask students: Which of the following most accurately reflects reality?

- a television newscast
- a documentary
- a reality-based crime show like *Cops* or *America's Most Wanted*
- a drama like *NYPD Blue* or *Law and Order*

The truth is, that none of these programs accurately reflect reality. (A newscast story or documentary is never entirely objective. It may contain slant or bias; it may only show one aspect of an issue; and it invariably contains dozens of arbitrary decisions. Also, the types of stories that make the news - the "if it bleeds it leads" approach - do not create a well-rounded picture of events as they occur in real life. "Reality-based" crime shows are edited, contain re-enactments, and offer only the more sensational aspects of policing. Crime dramas, although fictitious, may perpetuate stereotypes that influence our perceptions about criminals, police, women, young people, the elderly and minorities.)

When we watch crime drama (or any drama, for that matter) on television, we know that we are not watching "real life," but that doesn't mean that we are unaffected by what we see. Ask your students what stereotypes come to mind regarding the roles of the following in police dramas:

- policemen
- policewomen
- criminals
- women
- old people
- teenagers
- Minorities

When we study crime dramas, there are several key media concepts to be aware of. Project the *Key Concepts* transparency and discuss each point with students.

Formulas and stereotypes are just two aspects of crime dramas. The techniques used in the filming of these shows also affect our reaction to what we see. Ask students: "What are some of these techniques?" (Shot distance, camera angles, camera movement, lighting, music, sound and special effects, clothing, settings and editing all contribute to the overall effect of crime dramas.)

Distribute the *Camera Shots* handout and discuss the various terms that are listed.

Activities

The following activities can be done individually or in a group. For each activity, students will view and analyze specific aspects relating to a television crime drama. Because students may need to refer to the program more than once, or use clips to highlight specific points when presenting, it's recommended that the program be recorded.



Group Activity

Note: If possible, students should watch their crime drama as a group. Remind students that one viewing will not be sufficient to complete this assignment.

- Divide the class into four groups. Each group will select a crime drama to analyze.
- Once this is done, the group will complete and submit the *Group Oral Presentation Contract*.
- Distribute the four viewing guides - *Plot and Characterization Viewing Guide*, *Advertising Target Market and Values Viewing Guide*, *Camera Techniques Viewing Guide* and *Film Effects Viewing Guide* - to each of the groups and review the terms used.
- Within each group, individual members will be designated as Viewers One, Two, Three or Four.
- Viewer One will focus on plot, characterization, and audience appeal.
- Viewer Two will focus on advertising and value messages.
- Viewer Three will focus on camera techniques.
- Viewer Four will focus on visual techniques and music and sound effects

While watching the crime show, each viewer is to record his or her observations, using the incidents or examples from the worksheets. As a group, members will discuss their findings and determine how these devices affect the viewer's feelings and perceptions. Each group will present an oral report of their findings to the class.

Individual Activity

Distribute *Individual Viewing Guide* to students. Each student is to watch a crime show and complete his or her guide. (Pick an evening with at least two crime dramas, or give students a few days to complete the assignment.) Once their comments have been completed, students should be permitted a brainstorming and discussion session in small groups before writing their final report.

Post-Activity Class Discussion

Once presentations or reports have been completed, discuss the effects on the viewer of watching a TV show analytically. Students have probably discovered that the experience of watching is different from the act of reflecting and analyzing. Ask your students:


- Do people hate to analyze TV shows because it spoils their enjoyment?
- Does enjoyment sometimes come from knowledge, as in sports?
- Does the realization that the programs follow patterns, or use definite techniques shock the viewer or please the viewer?

Evaluation

- Group oral presentations
- Individual reports



Viewing a Crime Drama: Key Concepts



Key Concepts

There are several key media concepts that relate to crime shows.

- Crime shows are constructed realities
- Crime shows construct versions of reality that will sell
- Crime shows contain commercial messages
- Crime shows embody values & ideologies
- Crime shows rely on formulas



Camera Shots

Television is made up of hundreds and thousands of pictures, called shots, each of which must be carefully planned. To make television programs more interesting, various types of shots are used.

Camera Distance

There are three main shots describing how near or far the camera is from the subject. A **close-up** shows only one part of the subject, usually in great detail. Close-ups would include shots of a person's face, or the paws of a dog walking down a path, of a hand on a doorbell, or of a tree branch. A picture showing half of the subject, such as a character from the waist up or the back end of a car, is a **medium shot**, while a **long shot** shows the whole subject: a person from head to foot or the entire car. Any of these shots can show one subject or more at the same time.

These three shots are used for specific reasons. An **establishing shot** at the beginning of a scene tells viewers where they are; for example, a long shot of a car driving up to a hotel or a close-up of a restaurant sign. To show the effect of one person's words or actions on the other people in the scene, a **reaction shot** is used.

In general, television is a close-up medium: things look better in close-up because the screen is small. However, mixing the shots provides variety and gives information needed to keep the story moving.

Camera Angle

The angle from which a shot is taken is another way to give variety as well as information. A **high-angle shot** positions the camera above eye-level, looking down on the subject, which consequently appears insignificant, weak, helpless, or small according to how extreme the angle is. At **eye-level**, the impression is neutral. A **low-angle shot** has the camera looking up at the subject, which then appears important, powerful, or domineering, again depending on how exaggerated the angle is. Usually the camera looks at the subject, but occasionally the camera shows what the subject is seeing. This is a **reverse-angle shot**.

Camera Moves

Another way to give television programs variety is for the camera to move. When the camera changes its position by moving left or right, this is called **tracking or trucking**. Changing the camera's position by moving it forward or backward is known as **dollying**. When the camera stays in the same position but turns left or right, this is **panning**, and when it turns up or down, this is known as **tilting**. Even when the camera is stationary and not turning it can appear to move closer to or further from its subject; by using a special ring or lever on the lens, the camera person can **zoom in or out**.

Although these moves are useful, they should not be overused or they will lose their effect. In fact, any camera movement must be planned and rehearsed so that it will be smooth and in tune with the action.

Source: TVOntario's *Behind The Scenes, Resource Guide For Television Literacy*. 1990



Plot and Characterization Viewing Guide

Viewer's Name:

Title of Show:

Here are some guides to help you in analyzing the crime show you have chosen.

Plots

- Does the main character work through a situation to new growth and maturity?
- Are there unusual twists of events, odd complex plots with several dramatic events, or
- Are ordinary, realistic events and issues portrayed?

Characterization

Are the characters:

- Stereotyped or ideal?
- Heroes or villains?
- Complex or ordinary?

Audience appeal

- What is your program's appeal?
- Is it entertaining and humorous?
- Does it help probe life's real problems?
- Does it appeal to curiosity or mystery?
- Does it inspire one to think or to ask questions?
- Does it appeal to our fears?
- Is it visually engaging?
- Does it use sensationalism?



Advertising Target Market and Values Viewing Guide

Viewer's Name:

Title of Show:

Keeping in mind that it is advertising that supports television programs, discuss the relationship between the crime show that you are watching, and the advertisements that it contains.

Advertising

What is the target market of the advertisements?

- Youth
- 18 - 30
- Female over 30
- Male over 30
- Over 55

What are the indicators for the target market you have chosen?

Values

What "value messages" are endorsed in these ads? Is there a connection between these messages and those found within the crime drama?

- Physical beauty
- Youth
- Slimness
- Verbal wit
- Consumer society
- Acceptance of authority
- Women as passive, emotional, decorative, dependent
- Men as wise, dominant, intelligent, decisive
- Equality of sexes
- Society as multi-racial
- Old people as odd, silly, useless victims
- Youth as source of problems
- Youth as witty, bright, purposeful
- Minorities as source of problems
- Workers as less capable than employers



Camera Techniques Viewing Guide

Viewer's Name:

Title of Show:

Technique	Examples	Effect on Viewer
Camera angle: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • low-angle • high-angle • eye-level • reverse-angle 		
Camera distance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • close-ups • extreme close-ups • medium shots • long shots • establishing shots • reaction shots 		
Camera moves: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tracking or trucking • hand-held • zoom in or out 		



Film Effects Viewing Guide

Viewer's Name:

Title of Show:

Technique	Examples	Effect on Viewer
Lighting		
Music		
Sound Effects		
Costumes		
Recurring Visual Patterns		



Group Contract: Oral Presentation

Names of group members:

Crime drama title:

Audio-visual aids needed for presentation:

Date of presentation:

Signature of members of group:

Teacher's signature:



Individual Viewing Guide

Title of Show:

Technique	Examples	Effect on Viewer
Camera angle: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • low-angle • high-angle • eye-level • reverse-angle 		
Camera distance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • close-ups • extreme close-ups • medium shots • long shots • establishing shots • reaction shots 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lighting • Music • sound effects • costumes • recurring visual • patterns 		

