

LESSON PLAN

Media Stereotypes

This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.



LEVEL: Grade 3 to 6

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Matthew Johnson, Director of Education, MediaSmarts

Overview

This lesson familiarises students with stereotypes and helps them understand the role that stereotypes play in television's portrayal of life. The lesson begins with a discussion about the types of stereotypes that are common in media, why stereotypes are used in media, and the possible negative influences of stereotyping. Students will analyze a media character in terms of stereotypes and then create their own character as a way of demonstrating their awareness of stereotyping. To further increase their awareness of stereotypes, students will participate in a number of writing, drawing and viewing activities that include deconstructing segments from television programs, drawing stereotypical and non-stereotypical figures, and writing a poem about stereotypes.

Learning Outcomes

Big ideas/key concepts: Students will understand that...

Media have social and political implications

- Media works can be “mirrors” that show us images of ourselves or “windows” that show us images of others.
- Stereotypes can influence how we see ourselves and how we act.

Key questions:

- Why do media works often have stereotypes?
- How do stereotypes influence us?
- What can we do about stereotypes?

Essential knowledge: Students will know...

- Media representation: Different common stereotypes; reasons why stereotypes may happen in media, such as merchandising
- Key vocabulary: *Stereotype*; *window* and *mirror* texts

Performance tasks: Students will be able to...

- Identify examples of stereotypes in media
- Imagine and empathize with the experience of being stereotyped

- Analyze a media portrayal in terms of stereotypes
- Rewrite a text in a way that shows awareness of stereotypes

Preparation and Materials

Prepare to distribute the following handouts:

- A Princess Story
- Disney Princesses
- Describing a Princess
- The Paper Bag Princess (*optional*)
- My Princess: Description
- My Princess: Drawing

The Lesson

GUIDED DISCUSSION

A PRINCESS STORY

Start by telling the class that you will be writing a story together. Using the teacher backgrounder *A Princess Story*, ask students to help you fill in the blanks and record their answers. (Do not tell them the title or anything about the story.)

If you wish, you can use this as an opportunity to teach students about parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, adjective and adverbs. If you would prefer not to, replace the names of the parts of speech with equivalents such as “name of a thing,” “a thing you do,” “a descriptive word,” and so on. For the proper noun, make sure it is not the name of anyone in the class.

Now read the story aloud with the students’ suggestions filling in the blanks. When you are done, ask students: What was odd or funny about that story? Was it particularly odd or funny because the story was about a princess?

Next, write the word “princess” on the board and asking students to shout out whatever words or phrases come to mind. You will probably get results like “pretty,” “nice clothes,” “rich,” “Disney,” and so on.

Now ask:

- What is a princess's job?
- Does she solve her own problems?
- If not, who solves them for her?
- What are the most important things to do (verbs) if you're a princess?
- What are the most important things to *be* (adjectives) if you're a princess?

STEREOTYPES

Now write the word "stepmother" and ask students to say whatever comes to mind. Likely results include "wicked," "evil," "ugly," and "old."

Point out to students that one in ten kids in Canada have either a stepfather or a stepmother. (Statistics Canada, 2016: <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016006/98-200-x2016006-eng.cfm>.) If stepmothers really were wicked and evil, we would all know some wicked stepmothers!

Ask students: If the words that we thought of when we saw the word "stepmother" don't describe real stepmothers, why did we think of them? Where does the idea of the "wicked stepmother" come from and why is it so powerful?

If students do not mention them, explain that these images come from *fairy tales* like *Cinderella* and *Snow White* (and, even moreso, from TV and movie versions of those stories.) Because nearly all of the stepmothers in these stories are wicked, we get the idea that they are even if the ones we know in real life are not.

Now write the word *stereotype* on the board and ask students if they know what it means. Make sure they understand that a *stereotype* is an image or picture of a kind of person that makes it seem like they are all the same: all stepmothers are wicked, all princesses are kind and beautiful, and so on.

Point out that one of the reasons why the "Princess Story" you did seemed so odd was because a stereotype, like the stereotype of princess, *narrows* our idea of what that kind of person can be and do. It seems funny to say that a princess is very strong, for instance, or that they like to clumsily jump rope (or whatever combination your students suggested) because there are only a few ways that seem "right" to describe a princess.

Ask the students to suggest other stereotypes which exist in media. Make sure the following examples come up, and write them on the board:

- age (*old people, young people, teenagers*)
- sex (*women and men, boys and girls*)
- job (*teacher, model, truck driver, doctor, lawyer*)
- culture (*Arab, French, Newfoundland, Irish, Italian*)
- race (*Black, White, Asian*)
- looks (*beautiful, ugly, 'nerdy'*)
- position in a family (*mother, father, sister, brother, grandmother, grandfather*)

All of these categories lead to pre-conceived notions about how people behave.

MIRRORS AND WINDOWS

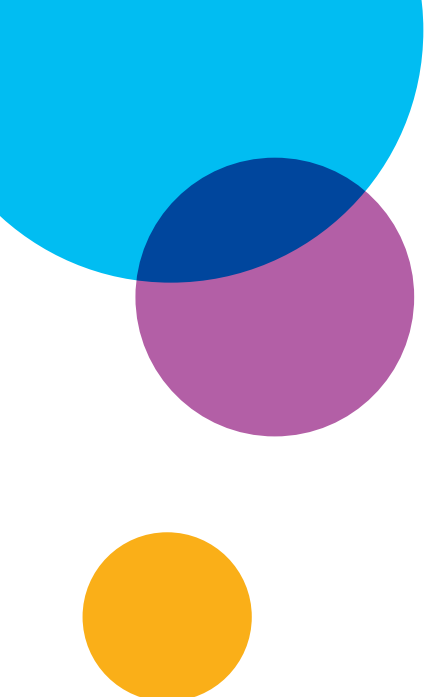
Highlight to students the fact that media play an important role in shaping how we see the world. This doesn't come just from clear morals or fact-based media like news or documentaries, but from seeing how different kinds of people are portrayed. (If you feel students need a clearer understanding of this idea, show them the video [Media Minute: Media Have Social and Political Implications](#).)

Explain to students that media can act as a *mirror* (showing you yourself, or people like you) or a *window* (showing you people and things that are different from you.)

Now ask:

If a media work that was a *window* showed you a stereotype, how might it affect how you see that group? (It could give you an inaccurate view of them, especially if you didn't have much exposure to them in the real world.)

If a media work that was a *mirror* showed you a stereotype, how might it affect how you see yourself? (It could limit your idea of who you are and who you can be; that's why even "positive" stereotypes can be harmful. If a stereotype is negative, it might make you feel bad about yourself. If students need prompting, ask them how they think someone who was a step-parent might feel when they see wicked stepmothers in Disney movies.)



Whether a work is a window or a mirror to us, we may also *generalize* stereotypes to larger groups. If a lot of the girls we see in media are princesses, for instance, we might apply our stereotypes of princesses to girls in general.

DISNEY PRINCESSES

Now project or distribute the handout *Disney Princesses* and ask:

What do you like about some of these princesses and their stories? Are there things you don't like?

Which of these princesses fit the "princess" stereotype that you talked about earlier? Which ones do not?

Ask students to imagine that this picture was the only thing they knew about these characters. Does that change your view of whether or not they fit the stereotype? For example, Mulan (fourth from the left) is dressed in a similar way to the other princesses in this picture, as is Merida (far right), while both characters wear much less feminine clothes in their movies. Would you know that Mulan was a soldier, or that Merida was a champion archer, from seeing this picture?

Why might those characters be portrayed differently in this image than in their movies? (Tell students that this is art from the Disney Princess collection, so it is made specifically to sell toys, dolls or costumes. Point out that a company may earn much more money from these things than from the movie a character appears in.)

Divide students into groups and have each group choose one of the princesses. (If you wish, you may allow students to choose a character from a Disney film who is not in the picture, but make sure that they fit the category. You can follow the rule used by Maui in *Moana*: "If you wear a dress and have an animal sidekick, you're a princess.") Distribute the handout *Describing a Princess*. Have each group summarize that princess's story and then use the handout to consider how well (or poorly) it fits the stereotype of princesses that the class described at the beginning of the lesson:

- What is her job?
- Does she solve some of her own problems? Which ones and how many?

- Who else solves problems for her?
- What things does she do in the story (verbs)? Do those match your list of the most important things to do if you're a princess?
- What words would you use to describe her (adjectives)? (For example, how does she look? How is she dressed?) Do those match your list of the most important things to *be* (adjectives) if you're a princess?

(With younger students, you may wish to lead this as a whole-group activity, or circulate and assist them in note-taking.)

Have students share their analysis with the class.

THE PAPER BAG PRINCESS

Now read to the class the book *The Paper Bag Princess* or, if you do not have a copy of the book available, show a video reading: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dzju9yRmmeO>

Ask students: How well does Princess Elizabeth fit the stereotype of princesses? Remind students of the analysis questions above. (You may wish to distribute or project the handout *The Paper Bag Princess* if students were not able to see clearly how Elizabeth is drawn and dressed.)

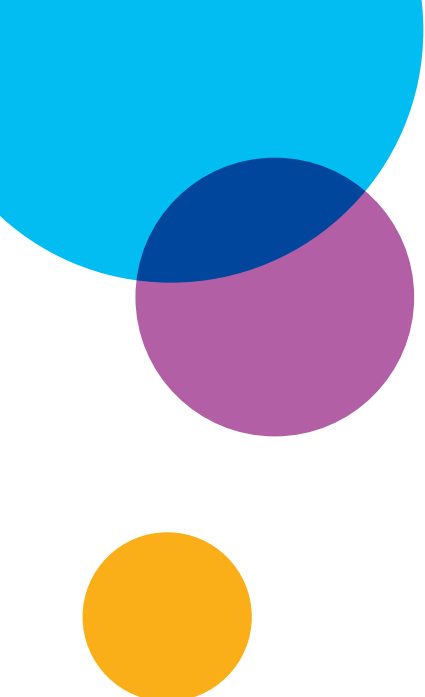
Ask students: What do you like about Elizabeth and *The Paper Bag Princess*? Are there things you don't like?

Then ask: Why do you think Robert Munsch, the writer, made Elizabeth so different from the princess stereotype?

After students have discussed this for a few moments, tell them that Ann Beeler, Munsch's wife, gave him the idea by asking why there couldn't be a fairy tale where the princess saved the princess. Munsch then decided to write a story that reversed as many stereotypes of princesses as he could.

MY PRINCESS STORY

Tell students that there's not necessarily anything wrong with using parts of a stereotype. The problem is when media makers use them without thinking, or assume that stereotyped characters are all that people want to see.



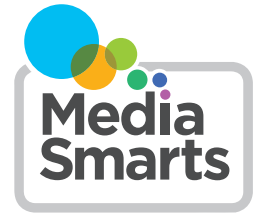
Distribute the handout *My Princess* and have students draw a princess character who would star in a story they would like to read. Tell them that they can have the character fit the stereotype or not, but that they have to think about their choices. They can also mix things that fit the stereotype and things that don't: for instance, their princess might have long blonde hair (fits the stereotype) but also have magic powers (doesn't fit the stereotype).

Have students use the other side of the handout to explain their choices. (With younger students you may choose to have them explain their choices to you verbally instead.)

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Redo the activity above (starting with the "Disney Princesses" activity) but using superheroes instead of princesses. Have students suggest the examples and then identify the stereotype. Can they think of an example like Princess Elizabeth who reverses the stereotype? In general, is it easier to find female characters who reverse stereotypes than male ones?

MEDIA STEREOTYPES



A Princess Story

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Ask students to provide words that fill in each of the blanks below. Do *not* tell them anything about the story, including its title, until all of the blanks have been filled in.

Once upon a time there was a princess named
Princess (common noun: _____).
She was very (adjective: _____)
and also very (adjective: _____).
Her favourite thing to do was to (verb:
_____) which she would do very
(adverb: _____).

One day the princess was walking in her (place:
_____) when she came upon
a (common noun: _____). She
picked it up, but did not realize that it belonged to
a (adjective: _____) (profession:
_____). It had a spell on it that sent
her to (place: _____).

She stayed there for a long time. Every day she had
to (verb: _____) which made her
feel (adjective: _____). Luckily, she
was heard by a (adjective: _____)
(profession: _____) named
(proper noun: _____) who came
to her rescue. He used a magic (common noun:
_____) to defeat the villain and
freed her.

"You're free now," he said. "You can (verb:
_____)."

"Thank you," she sighed. "I knew someday my
(profession: _____) would come."

MEDIA STEREOTYPES

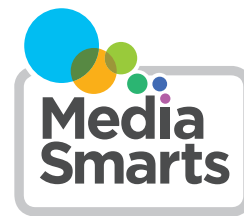


Disney Princesses

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MEDIA STEREOTYPES



Describing a Princess

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Describe your group's princess here.

WHAT IS HER JOB?

DOES SHE FIX HER OWN PROBLEMS?

**WHO HELPS HER OR FIXES PROBLEMS
FOR HER?**

WHAT DOES SHE DO IN THE STORY?

**WHAT WORDS WOULD YOU USE TO
DESCRIBE HER?**

STUDENT HANDOUT

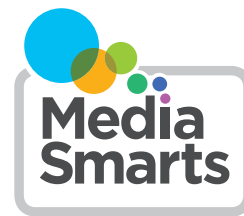
MEDIA STEREOTYPES

Disney Princesses

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MEDIA STEREOTYPES



My Princess: Description

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Explain each of your choices here.

WHAT IS HER JOB?

DOES SHE FIX HER OWN PROBLEMS?

**WHO HELPS HER OR FIXES PROBLEMS
FOR HER?**

WHAT DOES SHE DO IN THE STORY?

**WHAT WORDS WOULD YOU USE TO
DESCRIBE HER?**

MEDIA STEREOTYPES



My Princess: Drawing

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Make five or more choices about how your princess fits or does not fit the stereotype.