

## LESSON PLAN

### Reading Media

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 5-9

**DURATION:** 1 to 1 ½ hours, plus time for the assessment activity

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*This lesson plan is part of the [Close Reading Media Across the Curriculum](#) program. Funding provided by the Government of Ontario.*

### Overview

In this lesson, students are introduced to the idea of “reading media” through a medium’s *rules of notice* and the maker’s *framing* choices of what to include and what to emphasize. After a modeled and then guided introduction to these ideas, students analyze a work to identify how it uses rules of notice and framing and consider what meaning these choices communicate.

### Learning outcomes

*Key concepts/big ideas:* Students will **understand**...

- Media are constructions: every visual element and decision (e.g., lines, shapes, colours, distance and angle) is a choice made by a creator, and these creative choices are influenced by the creator’s purpose and point of view
- Media have commercial considerations: commercial purposes (such as advertising) influence the content and framing of a work
- Media have social and political implications: all works communicate messages about people and society, which may result from conscious choices or unconscious biases
- Each medium has a unique aesthetic form: different media and genres possess distinct “rules of notice” and conventions (e.g., specific uses of line, shape, colour, distance and angle) that creators utilize to direct attention, communicate messages, and shape the audience’s experience

*Framework topics:* Students will **know**...

- Reading media: the effects of common “rules of notice” used in visual media, such as line and shape, colour and distance and angle
- Media representation: advertising often presents different representations of reality based on perceived target demographics

(e.g., boys vs. girls), reflecting advertisers' assumptions about their interests and preferences

- Consumer awareness: how choices of rules of notice and framing are used to appeal to specific audiences

Core competencies: Students **will be able to**...

- **understand** that all media works are deliberate “constructions” rather than objective reflections of reality and that these creative choices are influenced by the creator’s own point of view, opinions, biases, and assumptions
- **engage** in critical discussions about the social implications of media, such as how advertising reinforces or challenges stereotypes related to gender, and how their personal views align with or diverge from these portrayal

## Preparation and materials

Prepare to project the slideshow [Reading Media](#)

The slideshow includes three embedded videos. You can also access these videos separately:

- [Reading Media: Introduction](#)
- [Reading Media: Framing](#)
- [Reading Media: Genre](#)

Prepare to distribute the following worksheets:

- *Reading Media: Rules of Notice*
- *Reading Media: Putting It All Together*

Image credits:

- “Black and White Hardtail Bike on Brown Road Between Trees” by Philipp M., from Pexels.
- “Two Bicycles Parked Upright” from Pexels.
- “Man Riding a Bicycle” by Josh Kur, from Pexels.

## Procedure

### RULES OF NOTICE

Start by projecting the slideshow [Reading Media](#) and showing the video *Reading Media: Introduction* embedded in the first slide. (It can also be viewed [here](#).)

Show slides **2-15** and read the following narration (also available in the slide notes):

**Slide 2:** In the video, you learned about the idea of rules of notice, and some examples. Here are the ones that are most often used in visual media, like movies, videos, comics, photos or video games: distance and angle, composition, planes and focus, line and shape, colour and contrast.

**Slide 3:** Let's start with a simple example – this image of a bicycle in a forest – and see how the maker used three of those rules of notice: line and shape, colour and distance and angle.

I'm going to do a “think aloud” of what I see when I look at this image.

**Slide 4:** All images, even abstract ones, have two essential elements: *lines* and *shapes*, and our eyes follow them in particular ways.

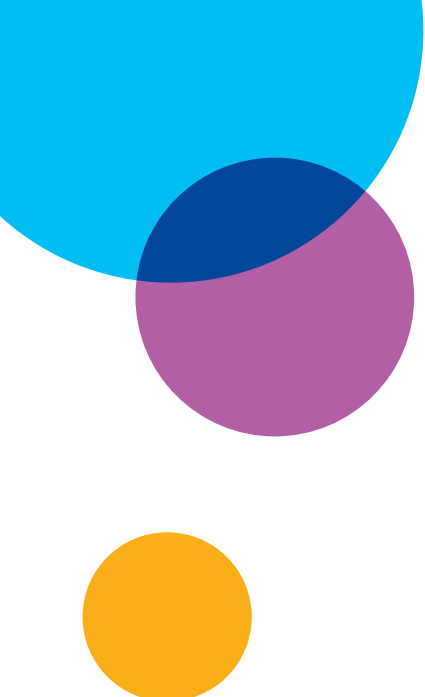
Our eyes start at the top left corner, then move down and to the right. (That's assuming we have learned to read in a language where writing follows that pattern.)

Next, our eyes will tend to follow the outlines of shapes and the direction of lines. We also connect repeated shapes and colours.

Finally, in a realistic image, our eyes will follow any prominent hands and characters' eyelines.

**Slide 5:** Media makers can use lines to guide our attention to what they want us to focus on. Here, for instance, we follow the *converging* lines of the path to focus on the bicycle, then into the background and out of sight. The lines of the bicycle frame also converge on more or less the same point, drawing our focus to both the bicycle and the centre of the image.

Even a simple line, though, can also *tell* us how to feel. Horizontal lines are the least dynamic, while diagonal lines have the most energy. The lines at



the side of the path are just slightly diagonal, giving us a small feeling of movement, but because all of the lines converge in the centre our overall feeling is one of stillness.

**Slide 6:** *Shapes* have their own language, too.

Squares and rectangles feel strong and reliable, but they can also feel inflexible like a wall or a locked door.

Circles feel friendly and open, because they don't have any straight lines or sharp points, but they're not as stable as rectangles – we all know that a ball will roll if set in motion.

Triangles, on the other hand, are *all* points, so they may feel dangerous and unpredictable. But because they have diagonal lines, they add dynamism and movement that rectangles don't have.

**Slide 7:** Makers can also modify shapes in different ways to get more complex effects.

Rounding a square's corners gives us a combination of its strength and the safety of the circle for a protective feeling.

Rotating shapes can change how we read them, too. Flipping a triangle de-emphasizes the points and gives it the strength of a square, giving a sense of being powerful.

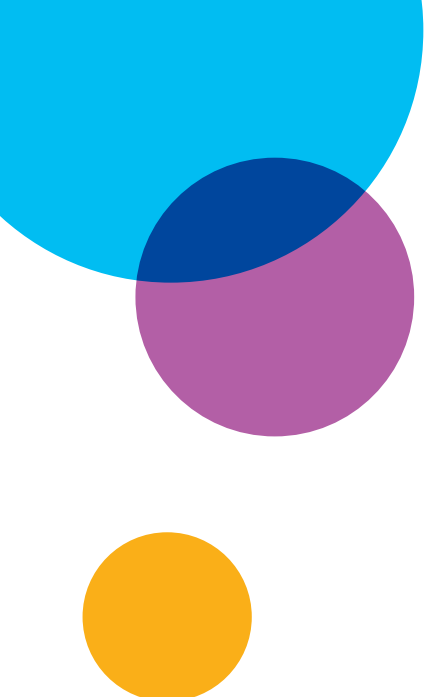
Changing the balance of a square by tilting it, on the other hand, *emphasizes* the points by making them sharper. This can make an inflexible square feel more dynamic, but it can also give a feeling of being unstable or off-kilter.

**Slide 8:** There are two main shapes in the image: two big circles – the wheels – and a triangle that's been rotated on its side. The circles give a feeling of safety, while the triangle gives it a bit of energy and forward motion, keeping it from being totally static.

**Slide 9:** *Colour* is another of the most basic visual rules of notice.

*Note: You may choose to skip Slide 10 if you are delivering this lesson to younger students.*

**Slide 10:** When we talk about colour, we actually mean three different things: hue, brightness and saturation.



*Hue* is where a color sits on the color wheel (red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, blue, violet or magenta).

Brightness is how much white or black has been added to that basic hue. We can turn red into pink by adding white, or turn it into maroon or burgundy by adding red.

A colour that only contains a single hue is fully *saturated*, a colour that contains some of any other hue less so. A colour made up equally of two *opposite or complimentary* hues will be fully desaturated and grey.

**Slide 11:** We have three main colours in this image: the black of the bicycle, the brown path (a pale orange *desaturated* with red and bit of blue) and two greens: a darker one at the edges, and a lighter one in the centre.

Placing the black bicycle against lighter, relatively unsaturated colours adds contrast, drawing our attention to it. (The little lines of very saturated orange add to this.)

Using darker greens and browns at the edges, and lighter ones in the centre, also adds contrast, as though there's a spotlight behind the bike, and gives a feeling that the path is opening up in front of us – it's cheerful and

Some colours mean different things around the world – red may mean danger in some cultures, for example, while it means good luck in others. But almost anywhere, these greens and browns are going to be connected with nature. (They're the same colours that advertisers put on a package if they want something to seem “natural” or “organic.”)

**Slide 12:** When there are people (or recognizable things) in an image, media makers also decide how the viewer is looking at the subject in terms of *distance* and *angle*.

Distance means how far away from the subject “we” are. (In film, TV and video, that means how far away the camera is. In comics or animation, it's where the artist places our point of view.)

**Slide 13:** *Angle* means whether we're above, below, or level with the subject of the image.

A *level angle* is the default, used when a maker doesn't want to tell the audience to interpret the image in any particular way.

**Slide 14:** On the other hand a low angle or worm's-eye view makes someone look strong, brave or impressive. Here, for instance, we are looking up at the bike and rider in a way that makes them seem heroic.

**Slide 15:** If we switch to a high angle or bird's-eye view, the bike looks a bit sad – we might guess that it had been abandoned.

**Slide 16:** Our original image looks like a level angle shot, which may seem neutral and natural --

**Slide 17:** -- Until we think about how the person who took it would have had to crouch down to be at the same level as the bicycle.

They chose to turn what would normally have been a high-angle shot into a level-angle one. That keeps the bicycle in the middle of the frame and keeps us from feeling sad or sympathetic for it.

## READING MEDIA

Now project **slide 18** and distribute the worksheet *Reading Media: Rules of Notice*. (If you like, you can arrange so that half the students get only the first page, and the other half only the second, so each student is only analyzing one of the images.)

- Tell students to do the same analysis on these images that you did on the first image.
- Remind them to focus on the same rules of notice – line and shape, colour, and angle and distance. How did the makers of these images use those tools differently from the first image, and from each other?

Leave the slide on screen so students can see the colours, lines and shapes clearly. Point out that their copy already has the rule of thirds grid on it, and encourage them to draw lines or shapes they see on top of the image.

Project **slide 19** and ask students how this image uses **line and shape**.

Make sure the following points come up:

- The way the two bicycles lean towards each other makes them look as though they have a relationship together; this is underlined by the way the two handlebars cross and the way it looks like the right-hand bike's kickstand is reaching towards the left-hand bike.

- If these bikes were on a date, which one would you say is more into the other? Clearly the one on the right.
- The almost horizontal lines in the background give a feeling of safety, making sure we don't worry even though these bikes are on a roof.

Project **slide 20** and ask students how this image uses **colour**.

Make sure the following points come up:

- Coloring the bikes with hues that are next to each other on the colour wheel reinforces the feeling of a connection between the two bikes.
- The dark red and saturated orange gives the image a warm feeling, especially in contrast to the light, desaturated grey in the background.
- And of course these are both colours found in sunsets, which gives a feeling like we're at the end of a satisfying day.

Project **slide 21** and ask students how this image uses **angle and distance**.

Make sure the following points come up:

- We're very close to the bicycles, which makes us feel emotionally closer to them – they feel more like characters.
- Like our first image, the person who took the photo had to crouch to keep from taking a high angle shot.
  - In this case, though, they went a bit further so that we're looking up at the bikes just a little bit. That helps make them feel alive, too, by putting their seats where we would expect someone's head to be in a full-body shot.

Project **slide 22** and ask students how this image uses **line and shape**.

Make sure the following points come up, moving to **slide 23** when needed:

- The main line in this image is a sharp diagonal from top left to bottom right, which gives it a feeling of movement and dynamism.
- The character's eyeline leads to the top of that line, drawing our attention to it even more and together making a very unstable triangle in negative space.
- While this image does have circles, both are *cropped* (cut off) so that they don't add much of a feeling of safety.

Project **slide 24** and ask students how this image uses **colour**.

Make sure the following points come up:

- The colours in this image are mostly dark and desaturated – pale blue, grey, yellow brown, and black or almost-black.
- The pants are almost the same colour as the bike, which reduced contrast and makes them feel almost like they're attached.
- Only the man's face and shirt have much bright or saturated colour, making sure they pop against the desaturated background.

Flecks of dark, saturated red here and there add a bit of excitement and danger.

Project **slide 25** and ask students how this image uses **angle and distance**.

Make sure the following points come up, moving to slide 26 when needed:

- Though this isn't quite a close-up shot, we are close enough that – as we saw – the whole bike doesn't fit in the frame. We're also close enough that we can see the person's face clearly. Both of those draw us more into the action of the photo.
- The angle here is a "worm's eye view," where we're looking up at the person and bike in a way that makes them look much more impressive.
- If we switch to a high-angle "bird's eye view" shot, the subject seems much less impressive – a child popping a wheelie instead of a trick rider doing a stunt.

## FRAMING MEDIA

Now advance to **slide 27** and show the video "Reading Media: Framing." (It can also be viewed [here](#).)

Advance to **slide 28** and ask students:

- How are the two works *framed* differently?
- What is included and left out in each one?
- What do the rules of notice draw our attention to, or away from, in each one?
- What clues *kind* of image is this – what clues does each one give about how to read it?

Point out that unlike our questions about rules of notice, there are no clearly right or wrong answers here – but there are some answers that are better supported by what we’ve observed about those rules of notice. For instance, what we’ve noticed about colour might tell us that in the first image our attention is drawn to the bikes (because their colour stands out against the background) while in the second image it’s drawn to the man (because his face and shirt stand out, while the bike blends in.)

Advance to **slide 29** and show the video “Reading Media: Genre.” (It can also be viewed [here](#).)

Advance to **slide 30** and ask:

- How is this framed differently from when we saw it before?
- How can you recognize that this new image is an ad?
- How does knowing it is an ad help us read it? What does it tell us about what it might have been made for, or what to expect from it?
- How does it grab your attention? Why is that important in an ad?
- Who do you think this ad is aimed at? Why? Think about the rules of notice we already talked about. Who would those choices about line and shape, colour, and distance and angle appeal to?

Advance to **slide 31** and ask:

- How is the **explicit meaning** (what it’s saying “out loud”) changed by how it’s framed?
- How is this different from the previous version of this image?
- How can you recognize that this new image is a social network post? That it’s an ad?
- How does the image “read” differently when you see it as a social network post? When you see it as an ad? How does knowing about those two genres help us read it?
- Who do you think this ad is aimed at? Why? Think about the rules of notice we already talked about. Who would those choices about line and shape, colour, and distance and angle appeal to?

Advance to **slide 32** and ask:

If we assume that the ad on the left is aimed at boys and the one on the right is aimed at girls – what can we say about how advertisers see them differently?

What do they think each audience will like, and will *not* like?

How does that match with what you think about boys or girls? How might you feel differently if they did match what you think, and if you didn't?

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Distribute the worksheet *Reading Media: Putting It Together* and advance to **slide 33**.

Explain to students that they will now be doing the same process independently with another work, this ad for “Maxi-Milk.”

They will start by looking at how it uses the rules of notice they have learned about - line and shape, colour, and angle and distance - to communicate its **explicit meaning**.

Next they will consider the framing: What is included and what's left out? What is our attention drawn to, and what is easy to ignore? How does that support the explicit meaning?

Finally, they will put that all together to draw some conclusions about the work's broader message or meaning.

- Make sure students don't focus just on what it's saying “out loud”: have them think about what its use of rules of notice and framing say more broadly about the world or about different kinds of people.
- How might that seem different if you are its intended audience, or if you aren't?

If you choose, you can lead a discussion after students have completed the assignment so they can share their analysis and different points of view.

- Emphasize the difference between questions that have definitive answers (how rules of notice are used, what is included and excluded), analysis of the effects of those choices, and interpretations of the broader meaning of those effects.

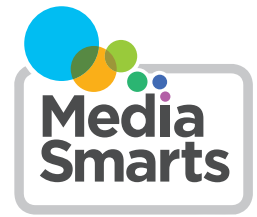
## REFLECTION

Have students complete a brief reflection with the following prompt:

*When I watched or looked at media, I used to...*

*But now I...*

# READING MEDIA



## Reading Media: Putting It All Together

Now that we have practiced reading images like media experts, it's your turn to look closely at a brand-new one all by yourself.

Your job is to study the ad for “Maxi-Milk,” spot all choices the media maker used and decide what message those choices are sending. Fill out your worksheet as you go!

### STEP 1: LOOK CLOSELY AT THE RULES OF NOTICE (VISUAL CLUES)

In this first step, you are looking at how the image maker used lines, colors, and the picture layout to get your attention.

1. **Lines and Shapes:** Look at the lines in the ad. Are there horizontal, vertical or diagonal lines? What are lines and eyelines pointing to? Are there triangles, circles, or rectangles? Don't forget to look for shapes made with **negative space**.
  - *Ask yourself:* What do the shapes and lines make you feel? (Like movement? Danger? Safety?). You can draw shapes and lines right onto the image on your worksheet to trace where your eyes go.
2. **Color:** Look at the colors the maker used.
  - *Ask yourself:* Are the colors bright and exciting, or are they dull and calm? Which colors stand out the most? What colours are used more than once?
3. **Angle and Distance:** Think about where the maker placed our point of view.
  - *Ask yourself:* Is it a level angle, a high angle or a low angle? Are these extreme angles (bird's eye or worm's eye) or less extreme? Which characters and things in the image are we looking straight, up or down at?
  - How close or far away are we from the different people and things in the image?

### STEP 2: ABOUT THE FRAMING (CHOICES)

The way a picture is “framed” means figuring out what the creator chose to put in the picture, and what they

left out.

#### 1. Inclusion and Exclusion:

- *Ask yourself:* What things are included in the picture? What is in the background?
- *Ask yourself:* What is left out of the picture that you might think would be included?

#### 2. Focus:

- *Ask yourself:* What do the rules of notice (Step 1) draw your attention to? What do they draw your attention *away* from? What is easy to notice, and what is easy to ignore?

#### 3. Genre:

- *Ask yourself:* What tells you this is an ad? What tropes of advertising does it use?

### STEP 3: FIND THE BIG MESSAGE (PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER)

Now, put everything you noticed in Steps 1 and 2 together to figure out the work's broader meaning. This **may not be something the maker intended to say!**

#### 1. The Unspoken Message:

- *Ask yourself:* What does this ad say “out loud”? (What is its **explicit message**?)
- *Ask yourself:* What does this ad tell you about different people? Does it use the rules of notice to appeal to boys, or to girls, or to parents?
- *Ask yourself:* What does this ad say about the world?

#### 2. Your Point of View:

- *Ask yourself:* Who do you think the work was made for (the intended audience)? What about the rules of notice or framing makes you say that?
- *Ask yourself:* How might the ad feel if you were the person it was made for (the intended audience)?
- *Ask yourself:* How might the ad feel if you were **not** the intended audience? (Does it still seem exciting, or does the message seem a little strange?).



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Line and Shape

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