

LESSON PLAN

Villains, Heroes and Heroines

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: MediaSmarts

Overview

This lesson introduces students to the ways that heroes and villains are portrayed in media. It begins with a discussion of real and media heroes and how they are similar or different. Students then compare a number of hero/villain pairs from Disney films and identify how specific visual cues are used to identify characters as being villains. They then consider the impact of representing features of diverse groups, such as larger bodies or disabilities, as being signs of villainy. Finally, students create a prototype for a photo or video filter that will make someone look more villainous.

Learning Outcomes

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

- Media are constructions:
- Media are an imperfect reflection of reality
- Media works are made by people who make choices that affect the final work

Each medium has a unique aesthetic form:

- Different media communicate in different ways, using different codes and conventions
- Different genres have their own traditions, codes and conventions that creators use and audiences expect to see

Media have social and political implications:

Media representations influence how we see other people, the world and ourselves

Key questions:

- How is heroism different in media than in real life?
- What do villains and heroes look like in media?
- What visual clues tell us someone is a villain in cartoons?

Essential knowledge: Students will know...

Reading media: Elements of character design, such as colour, shape, and facial features, are used in animation to make someone look villainous; Codes and conventions in animation are influenced by older traditions in visual art

Media representation: Media heroes are more likely to use violence to achieve their goals than real-life heroes; Characteristics of diverse groups such as disabilities, larger bodies, darker skin and Jewish features are associated with villainy in animation.

Performance tasks: Students will be able to *understand* the differences between real-life and media heroes and the visual clues used to show that characters are villains in animation, *engage* with the implications of those for our understanding of heroism and the experiences of diverse communities, and use and design a prototype for a simple media tool.

Preparation and Materials

- Prepare to project or distribute the slideshow [Heroes and Villains](#)
- Prepare to distribute the handout *Villainize Yourself!* (Note: Two versions of this handout are provided, one aimed at younger students and one aimed at older ones.)

Procedure

WHAT IS A HERO?

Start by asking students:

- What is a hero?
- Who are some of their favourite heroes in media (TV, movies, cartoons, comics, video games, etc.)?
- Can they think of examples of real-life heroes? (These could be people they know, people alive today, or people in history.)
- What makes someone heroic?
- When you imagine a picture of a hero in your mind, what do you see?

You don't need to come to any sort of agreement on these questions, just get students to start thinking about them and name some examples.

MEDIA HEROES VS. REAL HEROES

Now have students think specifically about *media* heroes. You can prompt them to think about Disney and other animated movies, Marvel and other superhero movies, and video game characters. (You may wish to have students do this in groups or as a whole class.) Remind them that they are listing not just the main character of different works, but characters that fit the definitions of a “hero” discussed earlier.

Have students list the following:

- What do these heroes look like? (Remind them to think about things like gender, race, ability, body shape, etc.)
- What challenges do these heroes face?
- How do they solve their problems?
- What is their greatest achievement?

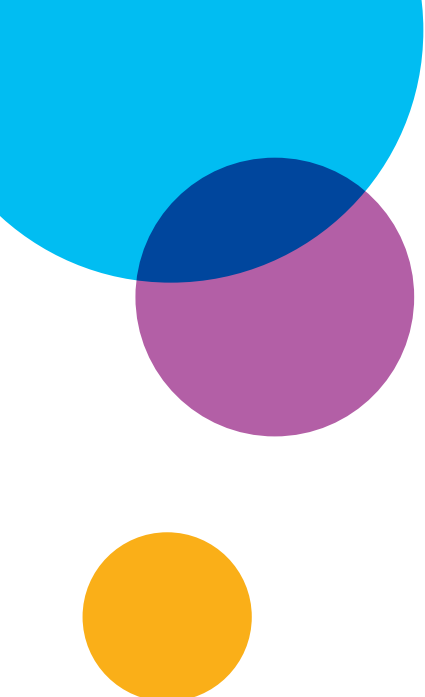
Now ask them to look for any patterns in the list of heroes they made. For example:

- How many are boys or men? How many are girls or women? How many are of another gender, or no gender, or a gender that is not made clear?
- How many are White? How many are not?
- How many have a disability? How many do not?
- How many would you say are handsome, beautiful or good-looking? How many are not? How many have larger bodies?

(You may want to write the answers on the board, or have students write them on chart paper.)

Next, ask students to name some examples real-life heroes. If you have access to age-appropriate books, comics or short videos about heroes, you can use those as inspiration; if not, you can have students list their own heroes and prompt them with examples of real-life Canadian heroes such as Terry Fox or Viola Desmond.

- Appearance
- Challenges and how they solved (or tried to solve) them
- What is their greatest achievement?



Have students discuss:

- What are some similarities between the real-world and media heroes? Some differences?
- How many media heroes used some kind of violence to overcome obstacles? How many real-life heroes did that?
- Ask students if they know the word *genre*. Make sure they understand it means the type or category that a media work fits in, such as a superhero story or a Disney princess movie. Media makers often draw on the *conventions* of the genre they're working in, and audiences expect to see those same conventions. Now ask: What about the *genres* of the media hero stories might make the heroes more or less likely to use violence? Would audiences expect heroes in that genre to be violent, or not violent?
- Think back to when you imagined a hero in your mind. Was the image more like a media hero or like a real-life hero? Why do you think that might be?
- What are some lessons we learn from real-life heroes? What are some we learn from media heroes?

WHAT IS A VILLAIN?

Now ask students:

- What is a villain?
- Who are some of their favourite villains in media?
- What makes someone a villain?
- When you imagine a picture of a villain in your mind, what do you see?

Again, there is no need to reach a consensus on this point. If students start suggesting examples of real-world villains steer them back to media, as this may lead the conversation off-topic.

HEROES AND VILLAINS

Project or distribute slides 1-5 of the slideshow *Heroes and Villains* and ask students to imagine, in each case, that they had never seen the movies represented before and did not know anything about the characters.

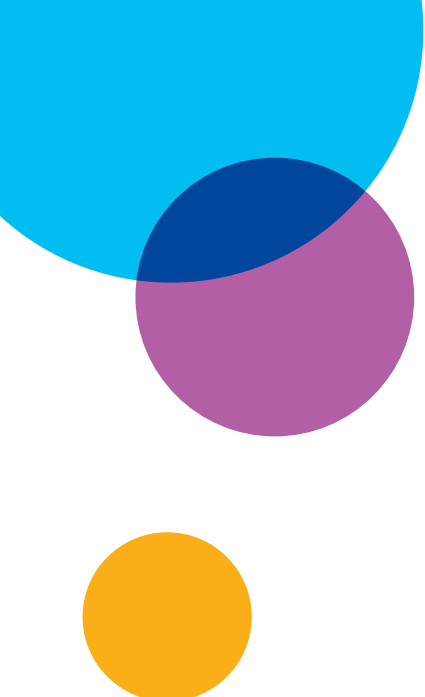
For each of the hero and villain pairs, ask students:

- Which of these is the hero?
- Which is the villain?
- How do you know? (Remember to base your answer only on what you can see in the image.)

If you are projecting the images, you may want to go through the slideshow more than once. Prompt students to think about:

- Colour: What colours are the heroes' skin (or fur) and clothes? What are the villains' colours? How do those communicate either heroism or villainy?
- Shape: Explain that rounded shapes in a character design feel safe and friendly, while pointy shapes feel dangerous. Which characters are mostly made of pointy shapes like triangles? Which are mostly made of rounder shapes?
- Bodies: Which characters have slender or muscular bodies? Which ones have larger or unusually-shaped bodies? Do any characters have disabilities? (Point out that a facial deformity, like the scar on the face of one of the lions, is a disability.)
- Faces: How are the heroes and villains' faces shaped differently? Which are more realistic and which are more cartoony? Which facial features are exaggerated?
 - Point out that three of the four villains are smiling, while their paired heroes are not.
 - Do we normally think of smiling being something nice people do? What about the villains' smiles makes them seem more villainous instead of nicer? (You can have students try to mimic the villains' smiles, which are all turned up sharply at the back of the mouth. Does it feel like a sincere smile? How would you feel if you saw someone smiling at you like that in real life?)
 - Aladdin, in slide five, is the only one of the heroes who is smiling and whose villain is not. What might that tell you about him? (He is a bit roguish, not entirely a hero.)

For older students: Have students compare the villains' noses in particular. How are they similar? (All of them—even the lion!—have sharply downturned or “hooked” noses.) Ask students: Can they think of other cartoon villains with noses like that? (A few examples: Captain Hook in



Peter Pan, the Evil Queen's disguise in *Snow White*, Mother Gothel in *Tangled*.) Why might that kind of nose be used to show that someone is a villain?

Ask students if they know what the word *stereotype* 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. Ask if they know the word *prejudice* and make sure they understand that it means believing that there is something bad about a whole group of people, based on who they are.

Now explain that for many years there was a *stereotype* of Jewish people as all looking a particular way, including having a hooked nose. Because of *prejudice* against Jewish people, when people drew villains they would often make them look like that *stereotype*. That included illustrations in the collections of fairy tales that many Disney movies were based on, such as the drawing of the witch in . As a result, people started to think of things like hooked noses as meaning “villain” even when they didn’t recognize it as a Jewish stereotype.

Now ask: Imagine that something about *you*—your hair or eye colour, what your ears look like, et cetera—was often used as a sign that a character was a villain. How do you think that would make you feel? How do you think people whose bodies or identities *are* often used this way, like people with disabilities or people with larger bodies, feel when they see villains like them on screen?

Go to slide 6 and explain that the image on the left is an early design of Anna and Elsa from the movie *Frozen*, made when the writers intended Elsa to be a villain. (This sketch is from [Claire Keane's website](#), which hosts many of her sketches for films such as *Frozen*, *Tangled* and *Enchanted*. If you have time to explore with students, it can provide opportunities to explore the Key Concepts that *media are constructions* and *each medium has a unique aesthetic form*. Point out that very little changed in the Anna design between the early sketch and the final 3-D rendering.

Ask: What was changed in the Elsa design to make her look less like a villain?

VILLAINIZE YOURSELF!

Ask students if they know what a *photo filter* is. Make sure they understand that this is an app (or a feature of a photo/video app like Instagram, Snapchat or TikTok) that changes what you look like: for instance there are filters that make you look like an anime character, ones that give you cat ears or a dog nose, ones that stretch your face, and so on.

Distribute the assignment sheet *Villainize Yourself!* and explain to students that they will be designing a filter that you can use in a photo or video to make someone look more like a media villain.

Based on your conversation in class, they should think of at least three things the filter will let you *add* on top of the image (like cat ears or a clown nose) and three things the filter will let you *change* about the image (like making eyes bigger or changing hair colour).

Have students draw and label icons representing these on the assignment sheet.

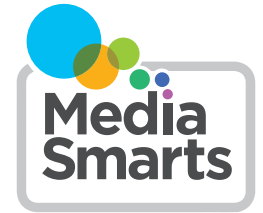
Younger students can explain their choices to you or the class; older students can write a short explanation of their choices.

If you wish, you can have students create a before/after artwork where they take a photo or another image and show what it would look like

Reflection: Have students reflect on the following questions, either in class discussion or in writing as an exit ticket:

- Many of the more recent Disney movies, such as *Moana* and *Encanto*, do not have characters who are clear villains. Why do you think that is?
- Why are villains more important to other genres (like superhero movies) than to Disney movies?

VILLAINS, HEROES AND HEROINES



VILLAINIZE YOURSELF!

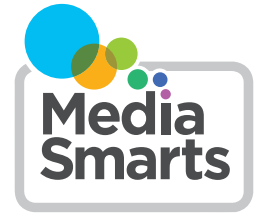
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