

Developing A Media Education Language:

From Persuasive Techniques to Analytical Tools

A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection—not an invitation for hypnosis.

—Umberto Eco



- 1. Symbols:** Persuading through the use of idea-conveyances (an American flag on a lapel pin) that associate one thing (a politician) with another (support for his speeches or policies). Symbols are often phrases (“Just Do It”), images (the famous “Earth seen from space” photo) graphic brands (McDonald’s Golden Arches), or icons (well-known politicians, athletes, or artists). Symbols are rarely used by accident or chance; they are usually employed very carefully.
- 2. Big Lie:** Persuading through dishonesty; not telling the truth about X. An easy technique to spot in advertising (“Smoking makes you glamorous,” “Drinking makes you cool”), but sometimes harder to spot in political propaganda. This is where reading a variety of independent media sources comes in handy.
- 3. Flattery:** Persuading by complimenting insincerely or excessively. Advertisers use this technique all the time (“You deserve a break today”), and television programs (including so-called “reality TV”) uses this technique in a more subtle way, suggesting that the audience is more smart, cool, etc. than people on the screen.
- 4. Hyperbole:** Persuading by making exaggerated claims. Found all the time in advertising media (“The best smoke ever!”), and often in political propaganda.
- 5. Bribery:** Persuading through the offering of a bribe—money, favors, savings, or a little something extra. Advertisements use this technique all the time (“Act now and we’ll throw in extra X or save you Y dollars.”)
- 6. Bandwagon:** Persuading by insisting that “everyone’s doing X.” Works in both advertising and political propaganda.
- 7. Scapegoating:** Persuading by blaming problems on one individual or group (The Nazis blaming Jews, for example, for Germany’s problems during the 1930s).
- 8. Simple Solutions:** Persuading by offering a simple solution to either a manufactured or more complex problem. (“Take these pills and lose all the weight you need!” What about a responsible diet, regular exercise, the influence of genetics on one’s weight, and a healthy sense of individual self-esteem despite being larger than some?)
- 9. Rhetorical Questions:** Persuading through the asking of questions designed to provoke further exploration or generate a certain predicted response. (“Do you want greasy hair?” “Why did politician X lie about Y?”)
- 10. Straw Man:** Persuading by setting up your opponent’s argument and then knocking it down with your own argument. (“While my opponent John Kerry argues that the Iraq War is misguided, it is clear that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was necessary to destroy weapons of mass destruction, overthrow the corrupt Hussein regime, and liberate Iraq from emerging terrorist groups.”)
- 11. Fear/Defensive Nationalism:** Persuading by appealing to an enemy—Communists, terrorists, or godless liberals. (The Bush administration leveraged the 9/11 tragedy to attack so-called “rogue na-

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tions"—Iraq, Korea, and Iran—that comprise an "axis of evil.")

12. Humor: Persuading through appeals to the funny bone. Laughter is often the best medicine, especially if you don't want people to think too deeply about something.

13. Testimonial: Persuading by invoking support from respected individuals (like athletes, movie stars, and doctors) or institutions (like having the American Association of Publishers approve media literacy curricula or a former Surgeon General endorse pharmaceutical products).

14. Plain Folks: The opposite of testimonial; persuading by appealing to the common man or portraying yourself as "just one of the guys/gals." Used in many beer advertisements, as well as by millionaire politicians who stage "photo ops" of themselves chopping wood, fishing, or reading to school children.

15. Repetition: Persuading through, you guessed it, repeating the same image, word, symbols, or phrase over and over. Advertisers use it—"diamonds are _____"—as do politicians: how many times have you heard the phrase "weapons of mass destruction"?

16. Nostalgia: Persuading through appeals to a more simple or romantic (and often mythical) past. (See Tom Brokaw's book *The Greatest Generation* or any Hollywood World War II movie.)

17. Diversion: Persuading by diverting attention away from damning information or an alternative point of view. The alcohol and tobacco industries use this technique in all of their advertising.

18. Denial: Persuading by avoiding (or seeming to avoid) an attachment to unpleasant symbols, moments, or stories.

19. Warm Fuzzies: Persuading with appeals by cute little children, large furry animals, or anything else that warms your heart. Think "Little Debbie" snack cakes—a classic example.

20. Beautiful People: Persuading through images of good-looking individuals to sell products,

lifestyles, behaviors, or ideas. Common in advertising and politics.

21. Group Dynamics: Persuading by building a sense of solidarity; replacing the "I" aloneness with "we" togetherness. Look for "we," "our" and other group dynamic power words. ("We the people," begins the US Constitution.)

22. Either/Or: Persuading by appeals to simplistic black and white and either/or thinking. (To quote Mr. Bush, "you're either for us or against us.") Used all the time by lazy journalists and our mind-numbingly shallow mainstream McNews culture.

23. Maybe: Persuading with promising but "hedgy" language—words like "might," "could," or "maybe." ("Play the lottery—you could win a million dollars!")

24. Strength: Persuading by appeals to strong leadership—be strong, aggressive, bold, firm, and "in charge." (Watch any action movie or State of the Union message.)

25. Scientific Evidence: Persuading with scientific (or pseudo-scientific) language—graphs, diagrams, charts, statistics and "jargon." (See Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth*.)

26. Card Stacking: Persuading by taking information out of context or not providing the whole story. Movie advertising featuring critics' one liners—"the best movie I've ever seen!"—does this all the time.

27. Name Calling: Persuading with personal attacks that features colorful, offensive, crude and humorous language. (Listen to Rush "FemiNazi" Limbaugh or Howard Stern.)

28. The Race Card: Persuading through appeals to race, often mythical notions of racial harmony (advertising) or race-based fear appeals (politics).

29. Timing: Persuading through the orchestrating of various story elements or production techniques to enhance media's meaning and power. (Study scary or tear-jerking movie scenes, or effective advertisements, to see this at work).