

Core Concepts Key Questions

In the *MediaLit Kit™*, the Center for Media Literacy identifies **Five Key Questions** for media literacy inquiry. These questions flow from **Five Core Concepts** that have evolved from media literacy practitioners and scholars around the world. Together the Concepts and Questions serve as “Big Ideas” or the “enduring understanding” that students will need in order to navigate their way through life as citizens in a global media culture. Together, they are a unique contribution to 21st century education.

In the classroom, however, the goal is not to teach the core concepts per se, especially for younger students, but, rather, to help students *build the habit* of routinely subjecting media messages to a comprehensive battery of questions appropriate to their age and ability. *It is the learning, practicing and mastering of the Five Key Questions -- over time -- that leads to an adult understanding of how media are created and what their purposes are along with an informed ability to accept or reject both explicit and implicit messages.*

Core Concept #1: All media messages are ‘constructed.’

We should not think of media texts (newspaper articles, TV shows, comic books to name just a few) as “natural things. Media texts are built just as surely as buildings and highways are built. The building materials involved vary from one kind of text to another. In a magazine, for example, there are words in different sizes and typefaces, photographs, colors, layout and page location. TV and movies have hundreds of building blocks -- from camera angles and lighting to music and sound effects.

What this means is that whether we are watching the nightly news or passing a billboard on the street, the media message we experience was written by someone (or probably several people), pictures were taken and a creative designer put it all together. But this is more than a physical process. What happens is that whatever is “constructed” by just a few people then becomes “normalized” for the rest of us; like the air we breathe, it gets taken for granted and usually goes unquestioned. But as the audience, we don’t get to see or hear the words, pictures or arrangements that were rejected. We only see, hear or read what was accepted.

Helping people understand how media are put together — and what was left out — as well as how the media shape what we know and understand about the world we live in is a critical first step in helping them navigate their lives through a global and technological society.

Key Question #1: Who created this message?

Guiding Questions:

- Who is the author?
- How many people did it take to create this message? What are their various jobs?
- What kind of “text” is it?
- How similar or different is it to others of the same genre?
- What are the various elements (building blocks) that make up the whole?
- Is anything missing?

Core Concept #2: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

Each form of communication — whether newspapers, TV game shows or horror movies — has its own creative language: scary music heightens fear, camera close-ups convey intimacy, big headlines signal significance. Understanding the grammar, syntax and metaphor system of media language, especially the language of sounds and visuals which can reach beyond the rational to our deepest emotional core, increases our appreciation and enjoyment of media experiences as well as helps us to be less susceptible to manipulation.

One of the best ways to understand how media are put together is to do just that — make a video, create a website, develop an ad campaign about a community issue. The four major arts disciplines — music, dance, theatre and the visual arts -- can also provide a context through which one gains skills of analysis, interpretation and appreciation along with opportunities for self-expression and creative production.

Key Question #2: What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

Guiding Questions:

- What do you notice about the way the message is constructed?
 - colors and shapes?
 - sounds and silence?
 - props, sets, clothing? etc.
- Where is the camera? What is the viewpoint?
- What are the sounds? -- Music? Words? Narration? Silence? Sound effects?
- How is the story told? Symbols? Metaphors?
- What makes it look “real”?

Core Concept #3:

Different people experience the same media message differently.

Audiences play a role in interpreting media texts because each audience member brings to the media text a unique set of life experiences (age, gender, education, cultural upbringing, etc.) which, when applied to the text – or combined with the text – create unique interpretations. A World War II veteran, for example, brings a different set of experiences to a movie like *Saving Private Ryan* than any other audience member – resulting in a different reaction to the film as well as, perhaps, greater insight. Even parents and children watching TV together do not “see” the same program.

This concept turns the tables on the idea of TV viewers as just passive “couch potatoes.” We may not be conscious of it but each of us, even toddlers, are constantly trying to “make sense” of what we see, hear or read. The more questions we can ask about what we are experiencing around us, the more alert we can be about accepting or rejecting messages. Research indicates that, over time, children of all ages can learn age-appropriate skills that give them a new set of glasses with which they can “read” and interpret their media culture.

Key Question #3:

How might different people understand this message differently from me?

Guiding Questions:

- How does this text fit with your experience of the world?
- What did you learn from the media text?
- What did you learn *about yourself* from experiencing the media text?
- What did you learn from other people’s response?
- How many other interpretations could there be? How could we hear about them?
- Are other viewpoints just as valid as mine?

Core Concept #4:

Media have embedded values and points of view.

Media, because they are constructed, carry a subtext of who and what is important — at least to the person or persons creating the construction. Media are also storytellers (even commercials tell a quick and simple story) and stories require characters and settings and a plot that has a beginning, a middle and an end. The choice of a character’s age, gender or race mixed in with the lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors that are portrayed, the selection of a setting (urban? rural? affluent? poor?), and the actions and re-actions in the plot are just some of the ways that values become “embedded” in a TV show, a movie or an ad.

It is important to learn how to “read” all kinds of media messages in order to discover the points of view that are embedded in them and how to assess them as part of the text rather than merely accepting them as “natural.” Only then can we judge whether to accept or reject these messages as we negotiate our way each day through our mediated environment.

Key Question #4:

What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

Guiding Questions:

- What questions come to mind as you watch / read / listen?
- What kinds of behaviors / consequences are depicted?
- What type of person is the reader / watcher / listener invited to identify with?
- What political or economic values are communicated in the message?
- What is represented about personal or social relationships?
- What is the cultural context or worldview?
- What ideals or values are being promoted?
- How is the human person represented?
- How does this message compare to your own experience? To others’ experiences?
- Who or what is left out?

Core Concept #5:

Most media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power.

Media messages are made for many reasons. One of them is to make money. Newspapers and magazines lay out their pages with ads first; the space remaining is devoted to news. Likewise, commercials are part and parcel of most TV watching. What many people do not know is that what’s really being sold through commercial media is not only the advertised products to the audience — but also the audience to the advertisers! The real purpose of the programs on television, or the articles in a magazine, is to create an audience (and put them in a receptive mood) so that the network or publisher can sell time or space to sponsors to advertise products – usually in a way that entices us to want what we really don’t need! Sponsors pay for the time based on the number of people the station predicts will be watching. And they get a refund if the number of actual viewers turns out to be lower than promised.

But the issue of message motivation has changed dramatically since the Internet became an international platform through which groups and organizations – even individuals -- can attempt to persuade others to a particular point of view. As an exercise in power unprecedented in human history, the Internet provides numerous reasons for users of all ages to be able to interpret rhetorical devices, verify sources and distinguish legitimate online sources from bogus or hate websites.

Key Question #5:

Why is this message being sent?

Guiding Questions:

- Who’s in control of this message?
- What’s being sold? What’s being told?
- Who profits? Who pays?
- Who wins? Who loses? Who decides?
- What economic decisions may have influenced the construction of the message?
- Who is served by or benefits from the message?
 - The public? Private interests?
 - Individuals? Institutions?