



Union of Concerned Scientists

Citizens and Scientists for Environmental Solutions

Editorial Cartoon Lesson Plan

Introduction

Editorial cartoons can be a great teaching tool help explain an historical or current event. They complement history, government, social studies, science, and art classes by providing a visual aide for potentially obtuse topics.

But cartoons can also be used to teach higher-level thinking and analytical skills on their own. In order for an editorial cartoon to be meaningful, readers must analyze and interpret the images and define both parts of the metaphor, while keeping in mind the historical or political context of the issue at hand. Without analytical skills and knowledge of current or historical events, editorial cartoons just aren't funny. It is for this reason that Advanced Placement (AP) tests often include editorial cartoons as examples of primary documents for document based questions.

This sample lesson plan includes:

- a very brief history of American editorial cartoons
- an outline for a discussion on why editorial cartoons are an important part of our culture and media
- a list of the key components of editorial cartoons
- sample cartoons to discuss
- artistic components of cartoons
- tips on how to draw editorial cartoons
- an assignment

Part 1: A very brief history of American editorial cartoons

By 1776, biting political cartoons that openly criticized the British government and political parties were quite common. They were often distributed to the public through political parties and were sold as art prints in bookstores and published in British newspapers. But editorial cartoons were just starting to be used in the American colonies.

It took dramatic events and much emotional conflict for the editorial, or political, cartoon to really break-in to the American media. The first widely distributed American political cartoon was drawn by Benjamin Franklin:



What do you think it means?

This cartoon was drawn years before the American Revolution. Ben Franklin designed the cartoon to persuade the delegates of the Albany Convention of 1754 to prepare to defend themselves. England and France were fighting for control of the North American continent. This fight became the French and Indian War. This cartoon urges the American colonies to join together, to unify, or risk being destroyed in the battle between the French and the British.

This cartoon was used again just a couple years later by Paul Revere in 1760 as a visual protest to the Stamp Act and the other injustices forced on the colonists by the British. This cartoon became a call for the colonies to unite together as one country, independent from the British Crown.

This cartoon was so effective that it became an icon for American independence. The title of the cartoon was changed to, "Live Free or Die" and was put on revolutionary flags. The slogan "Live Free or Die" is still part of our culture—it is featured on flags flown with pride by many Americans and even on New Hampshire's license plate.

Editorial cartoons continued to be published in American media in the early days of the republic, but not with wide-spread appeal or popularity until the 1860s. As the tension and conflict that led up to the Civil War grew more heated and passionate, political cartoons again grew in popularity. Thomas Nast, an illustrator at *Harper's Weekly*, was the leader of the new wave of cartoons and caricatures.

Nast became famous for his depictions of and commentary about New York's Boss Tweed. Boss Tweed was American politician and head of Tammany Hall, the name given to the Democratic Party political machine that controlled New York City at that time. Boss Tweed was eventually convicted of stealing millions of dollars from the city.

Nast's caricatures were often brutal to their subjects and were very popular with the public. Nast is credited with being the first to assign the images of the donkey and elephant to the Democratic and Republican parties. He also created the modern image of Santa Claus that we recognize today. His personal bigotries and beliefs, including hatred of Irish immigrants and the Catholic Church and support for the abolition of slavery, were often prominent in his cartoons.

When there is an obvious and direct outside threat, Americans and American cartoonists often rally

around the cause and editorial cartoonists focus on these threats, such as the Nazis in the build up to World War II. American political cartoonists served as propaganda to build support for American troops against the Germans and Japanese. These cartoons often portrayed negative and offensive stereotypes of our enemies. The cartoonists of the time, like the rest of the country, were cohesive in their message of unity against the Nazis and their allies.

Controversy or urgency generally increases the willingness of cartoonists to tackle a subject. During World War II, Americans were generally united in the belief that the war was just and necessary, so the cartoons were fewer and less powerful. On the other hand, Americans are currently strongly divided about the Iraq war and political cartoons are flourishing.

Today, political conflict is an accepted part of life and cartoons are used in the editorial sections of our newspapers and magazines and in electronic media to criticize, support, and otherwise comment on our lives and our politics. Editorial cartoons can cover all aspects of our lives, from environmental concerns to mistakes made by politicians.

Part 2: A discussion outline: Why Editorial Cartoons Are an Important Part of our Culture and Media

Some cartoon images are so accepted that they become icons, like Benjamin Franklin's snake and the Democratic Donkey and Republican Elephant. These images came from political cartoons! Why do you think these images translated so well from the editorial section of the newspaper to our everyday lives?

Are there any current cartoon images that will have the same staying power as these?

Why are political cartoons so popular?

What do these cartoons contribute to public debate? What do they detract from it?

Are there any subjects that are too sensitive to editorialize through cartoons—issues that can be written about but not drawn?

Are you familiar with the riots overseas about the political cartoons that included a drawing of Muhammad? What caused that fighting? Is there an issue that could create similar anger if editorialized here?

Part 3: What makes a political cartoon work?

As you have learned, a political cartoon can distill a complex issue or problem and make it accessible to the general public. For example—a long, wordy report or article about a serious (but complex or inaccessible) bureaucratic issue can prevent people from getting involved or becoming informed. A clever cartoon can distill that issue and bring it to light.

Cartoons can also show emotion in a way that purely written editorials cannot. When politicians lie, interfere with the scientific process, or make decisions that harm our health or environment, it is necessary in a democracy for citizens to demand better. Cartoons allow us to use emotion to portray opinions in a way the more people can understand.

In order for an editorial cartoon to be successful, it must include several common elements from both artistic and journalistic perspectives. As art, the cartoon must have aesthetically pleasing lines, shapes, and textures. The cartoon has to flow—the eye must follow the line of the cartoon smoothly. The image should also cause an emotional response, whether it is laughter, just a smile, or even anger. As Benjamin Franklin’s rather crudely drawn snake shows, successful cartoons don’t have to be impeccably drawn. In fact, cartoonists often exaggerate and caricaturize to emphasize their point.

Caricature, the distortion or exaggeration of a human figure, is an easy way to quickly satirize a person. Artists often exaggerate a well-known physical quality, like Jay Leno’s chin, for example. This helps identify the person being depicted in the cartoon, and is funny. During the 2004 presidential election, Senator John Kerry’s naturally long face was distorted to be comically long. Some cartoonists drew him as a long-faced horse. President Bush is often drawn with exaggerated ears, like a rabbit, or dressed as a cowboy.

How would you caricature a person to portray a cute or innocent character?

(Exaggerated eyes, tiny mouth, big head.)

How would you draw a bully?

(Huge arms and torso, tiny head—for a tiny brain—with snarling teeth.)

As commentary, editorial cartoons must clearly represent the context of the situation and both sides of the metaphor. In most political cartoons, cartoonists choose an image to represent a person or idea. Sometimes words are added, but usually the cartoon relies on images to explain the metaphor.

In Franklin’s example, what does the broken snake represent? And how do you know? What clues give it away?

A metaphor must have two parts: the tenor and the vehicle. The vehicle is the image that carries meaning and the tenor is what is being explained. In Franklin’s example, the broken snake represents the way conflicts kept the colonies from forming a united and cohesive country. The snake is the vehicle and the separate, disjointed colonies are the tenor.

Editorial cartoons are meant to persuade the viewer to feel a certain way about an issue or event. To do this, a successful editorial cartoon clearly expresses the artist’s opinion on a current issue or event through wit, exaggeration, and creative use of artistic elements such as line and shape while including enough detail to explain the current context.

Part 4: Tips for drawing your own editorial cartoons

When drawing your own cartoons, it helps to choose an issue or event about which you feel strongly. This passion will often come through in your drawing. Also, take some time to consider making your cartoon understandable to as wide an audience as possible. While your friends will likely be persuaded by different images or words than your grandparents, your goal is to figure out what type of cartoon would be most accessible. Decide what kind of humor and cultural references your audience will understand and appreciate.

Once you have chosen a topic, decide on a character to be the vehicle of your metaphor. How will you best be able to make your point? What can best be exaggerated about your subjects that will be both funny and helpful in conveying your message?

As you are working through your sketches, consider what words you will want or need to add to the drawing. Will you label your characters? Will you include a caption or a quote? Will the characters have a thought or speech bubble?

Part 5: Draw your own editorial cartoon!

Cartoons add value to our political debate. Famous artists, like Ben Franklin and Thomas Nast, have influenced the public in broad and immeasurable ways. Now it is your turn to influence the public by drawing your own cartoon!

Go through newspapers or websites to find inspiration about a current issue or event. The Union of Concerned Scientists website (www.ucsusa.org/scientific_integrity) has plenty of information on all kinds of issues, from public safety to air pollution.

Make sure you understand the context of the story. Remember, political cartoons can be about social or environmental issues, politicians, votes in Congress, local events, or your high school sports teams. You have an entire world of situations before you, waiting to be satirized!

Take time to practice and experiment with different characters, exaggerations, and wording. Keep in mind the artistic principles of line, shape, and texture. It will probably take some time to come up with a character that will successfully tell the story that you want to tell.

Turn in your preliminary sketches, a final cartoon, and a newspaper or internet article about the issue or event you editorialized.

Part 6: Submit your cartoon to the Union of Concerned Scientists' 2007 Science Idol: Scientific Integrity Editorial Cartoon Contest!

Because editorial cartoons can influence and educate the public in a more profound and convincing way than the most detailed report ever could, the Union of Concerned Scientists is hosting an editorial cartoon contest!

On issues from air quality to global warming, politicians are censoring, manipulating, and distorting science. To respond, UCS is hosting **Science Idol: the Scientific Integrity Editorial Cartoon Contest**.

We are looking for **creative, original, and compelling** representations of political interference in science. When politicians distort science, they endanger our public health, damage our environment, and threaten our democracy. For example, interference in science has hidden the knowledge of dangerous contaminants in our air and dangerous drugs on the market from the public.

Frustration is growing at the idea of our government interfering in science. This contest is a way to relay that emotion to the public and, in this case, affect positive change on an issue that is really important.

A panel of celebrity and award-winning cartoonists will choose the 12 finalists. The contest winner, chosen by the public, will receive a cash prize, an all-expenses paid trip to Washington, DC, other prizes, and priceless promotion by the Union of Concerned Scientists. The contest is open to people of all ages.

Our website, <http://www.ucsusa.org/scienceidol>, has plenty of information to inspire creativity, the official contest guidelines, and the winning cartoons from last year.