

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE AD?

OBJECTIVE

By viewing and analyzing selected presidential campaign advertisements, students will develop criteria for evaluating what makes an effective political ad.

OVERVIEW

Political ads can communicate, persuade, and even entertain. A 30-second ad can be an effective tool for convincing voters to support a candidate. Ads can target general or specific audiences, and they can be effective or ineffective in different ways and for different reasons. They use emotion, persuasion, factual claims, and cinematic style to influence voters. Critical analysis of political advertising entails evaluating ads on all of these levels.

This lesson addresses topics that are examined in greater detail in other lesson plans on *The Living Room Candidate*. Teachers wishing to explore any of the four levels of analysis discussed here more deeply should consult the other lesson plans on the site:

- Playing on Emotions (emotion)
- The Use of Language in Political Ads (persuasion)
- Evaluating Information (factual claims)
- Developing Critical Analysis (cinematic style)

Either of the AdMaker lesson plans may be used as an extension activity.

Three stills from “Surgeon” (Clinton, 1996)



PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION

Ask the students to imagine that they are creating a television ad for a product, such as soap.

- Who would their audience be? Would it be a general audience, or would they want to target a specific group?
- What would they want viewers to think about the product?
- What arguments would they want to make? How would they support these arguments in the ad?
- How would they want viewers to feel about the product?
- How would they want viewers to think and feel about competitors' products?
- What sounds and images would they use in their ad? Why?

PROCEDURES

Explain to students that a political ad, like the soap ad from the preliminary discussion above, uses sounds, images, and factual claims to make arguments and to influence the way that voters feel. Ask students to imagine that they are making an ad for a presidential candidate. They should consider the same questions they answered in the preliminary discussion:

- Who would their audience be? Would it be a general audience, or would they want to target a specific group?
- What would they want viewers to think about the candidate?
- What arguments would they want to make? How would they support those arguments?
- How would they want viewers to feel about the candidate?
- How would they want viewers to think and feel about the candidate's opponent?

Tell students they will be watching a series of ads and evaluating their effectiveness. The first issue they will focus on is intended audience. They will contrast an ad made for a general audience ("Surgeon") with an ad that targets a more specific audience ("Yes We Can," which is geared towards a young audience). Screen "Surgeon" (Clinton, 1996) and "Yes We Can" (Obama, 2008).

Three stills from "Prouder, Stronger, Better" (Reagan, 1984)



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Does this ad target a general audience or a specific audience? How do you know?
- Do you think these ads were effective? Why or why not?
- “Yes We Can” was a web ad that targeted young voters. Why was this audience important in the 2008 election?
- What are some other audiences political campaigns might want to target? Think about age, race, social class, gender, and region.

Now that students have thought about the intended audience of an ad, they will watch a series of ads and focus on four levels of effectiveness (emotion, persuasion, factual claims, and cinematic style). For each level, they will watch three ads: an ad that is not effective on this level, an ad that is somewhat effective, and an ad that is very effective. The ads and related questions are listed below.

A rubric for rating the ads is included at the end of this lesson plan. You may want to distribute the rubric prior to screening the ads.

(These ads and questions have also been collected in the “What Makes an Effective Ad?” playlist on *Living Room Candidate*, <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/playlists/expert/admaker>).

Emotion

“Prouder, Stronger, Better” (Reagan, 1984)

“Celeb” (McCain, 2008)

“Taxes” (Nixon, 1960)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- How do you think the makers of the ad want you to feel? How do you know? How does the ad actually make you feel? Does the ad succeed?
- What is the tone of the ad? (For example, is it inspirational, hopeful, frightening, sarcastic, etc.?)
- What is the ad’s argument? Does the tone reflect the argument? Why or why not?
- How would you rate the ad’s emotional appeal on the rubric’s scale of 1 to 4 for emotion?

“Prouder, Stronger, Better” (Reagan, 1984) This ad would be a 4 on the emotion level of the assessment rubric. It features inspirational sounds and images: soothing music; a calming, hopeful voiceover; and images of people going to work, moving into homes, and getting married. The ad’s tone reflects its argument that President Reagan has moved the country forward and will continue to do so if re-elected. The ad makers want viewers to feel good about the current state of the country and optimistic about the future.

“Celeb” (McCain, 2008) This ad would be a 2 on the emotion level of the rubric. Its tone is somewhat clear. By intercutting images that evoke Obama’s celebrity with those of other celebrities such as Paris Hilton and Britney Spears, it assumes a critical posture. However, it is unclear how this critical tone relates to the ad’s argument that Obama is “not ready to lead.” There is a potential dissonance between the ad’s intended emotional effect and its inclusion of video footage of Obama that could elicit positive emotions from viewers. The ad ends with an image of a smiling, confident Obama, as voiceover and text criticize his policies. A viewer’s response probably depends on his or her pre-existing feelings about Obama.

“Taxes” (Nixon, 1960) This ad would be a 1 on the emotion level of the rubric. It has no clear tone and makes no explicit emotional appeal. Nixon advances a clear, logical argument, emphasizing reason over emotion.

Persuasion

“McGovern Defense” (Nixon, 1972)

“Accountability” (Gore, 2000)

“Voting Booth” (McGovern, 1968)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What is the central issue of this ad? Does the ad tell you why this issue is important?
- What is the ad’s argument? How does the ad support its argument? Is it convincing?
- How would you rate the ad on the rubric’s scale of 1 to 4 for persuasion?

“McGovern Defense” (Nixon, 1972) This ad would be a 4 on the persuasion level of the rubric. It identifies a central issue (defense) and emphasizes its importance to national security. The ad uses the words of Hubert Humphrey, a Democrat, to argue that Democratic candidate George McGovern would cut “into the very security of this country.” Through its voiceover and its use of toys as props, the ad suggests that McGovern would “play games” with national security. It contrasts McGovern with incumbent President Nixon, who appears on an aircraft carrier while “Hail to the Chief” plays. It concludes that Nixon “believes in a strong America,” implying that McGovern does not.

“Accountability” (Gore, 2000) This ad would be a 2 on the persuasion level of the rubric. It identifies a central issue (accountability in education), but it does not make a case for why this issue is important in this election. By suggesting that Gore and his opponent, George W. Bush, “agree on accountability in education,” it fails to present a distinct point of view or a convincing case for supporting Gore’s plan over Bush’s.

“Voting Booth” (McGovern, 1968) This ad would be a 1 on the persuasion level of the rubric. There is no specific issue identified. The character in this ad does not articulate a strong reason for voting for McGovern over Nixon. In fact, the character in the ad appears confused and uncertain about which candidate would make the best president. (As an exercise, you might ask students to count the number of times the ad uses the phrase “vote for Nixon.”)

Truth

"Accomplishment" (Clinton, 1996)

"Rebuild America" (Clinton, 1992)

"Wolverine" (Bush, 1992)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Does this ad make specific factual claims? List all of the claims the ad makes. Are these claims general or specific?
- Does the ad cite any sources to support its claims? If so, are they reliable sources?
- How would you rate the ad's apparent truthfulness on the rubric's scale of 1 to 4 for truth?

"Accomplishment" (Clinton, 1996) This ad would be a 4 on the truth level of the rubric. It presents nine different, specific factual claims, referencing the Census Bureau, the Office of Management and Budget, and *Time Magazine*. *Despite these references, students should be reminded that they cannot take these factual claims as truth; additional research would be necessary to determine the veracity of the claims made in the ad. (For related activities, see the "Evaluating Information" lesson plan.)*

"Rebuild America" (Clinton, 1992) This ad would be a 2 on the truth level of the rubric. It presents four general factual claims: 1) America has had a "trickle-down" economic policy for twelve years. 2) Income is down. 3) Unemployment is up. 4) Health-care costs are rising. Clinton does not say what he is using as a benchmark for the decline in income or rise in unemployment, and the ad does not cite any sources for these claims.

"Wolverine" (Bush, 1992) This ad would be a 1 on the truth level of the rubric. "Wolverine" contains one general factual claim ("Arkansas is at the bottom of the list"). Instead, most of the people who appear in the ad present their opinions about who won the debate.

Style

"Wind Surfing" (Bush, 2004)

"Roller Coaster" (McGovern, 1984)

"Senator Margaret Chase" (Goldwater, 1964)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What do you see in the ad? How are the images edited together?
- Do you hear music in the ad? Is there a voiceover? Are there sound effects?
- Do the images and sounds advance the ad's argument or heighten its emotional appeal? Why or why not?
- How would you rate the ad's effectiveness on the rubric's scale of 1 to 4 for style?

“Wind Surfing” (Bush, 2004) This ad would be a 4 on the style level of the rubric. The images of Kerry windsurfing, edited so he appears to change direction repeatedly, are used as a visual gag. The ad accuses Kerry of “flip-flopping,” and the images make this charge literal. The amusing music and voiceover mock Kerry. The images, editing, music, and voiceover of the ad heighten both its argument and its emotional impact.

“Roller Coaster” (McGovern, 1984) This ad would be a 2 on the style level of the rubric. It consists of images of people riding a roller coaster, shot mostly from their point of view, accompanied by their screams and the sound of the roller coaster. The ad features an ominous voiceover, warning of the potential dangers of a second Reagan administration. While the images are meant to reflect the argument advanced in the voiceover, the ad may not have the intended dramatic effect. For some viewers, a roller coaster may suggest fun and amusement rather than risk.

“Senator Margaret Chase” (Goldwater, 1964) This ad would be a 1 on the style level of the rubric. It consists of a single shot of Senator Chase talking directly into the camera, and does not use images, editing, or sound to further its argument or achieve any dramatic effect. Though static-camera, talking-head style ads were more common at the time, the ad demonstrates a rudimentary style compared to the other ads from 1964 featured on *Living Room Candidate*.

After looking at each of these fourteen ads, review the pre-screening discussion. Ask students if they would change or elaborate on any of their initial answers.

To conclude the lesson, you may wish to revisit “Surgeon.” As students watch the ad again, they should focus on all four levels of the rubric and evaluate the effectiveness of the ad, making specific reference to emotion, persuasion, truth, and style in their answers.

ASSESSMENT

By analyzing a variety of campaign ads, students should have developed a set of criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of an ad. Students should be able to apply these criteria to other ads on *Living Room Candidate* (as well as other television advertisements).

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES/HOMEWORK

For extension activities, complete the AdMaker activities for either of the two available election years (1968 and 2008).

ASSESSMENT RUBRIC:

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE AD?

	1	2	3	4
Emotion	Establishes no clear tone; it is difficult to determine how the maker of the ad wants viewers to feel.	Establishes a tone, either positive (such as inspirational or hopeful), negative, (such as frightening or sarcastic), or mixed (partly positive, partly negative) that can be identified, but its relationship to the argument is confused; it is somewhat clear how the maker wants viewers to feel.	Establishes a positive, negative, or mixed tone that somewhat reflects its argument; it is clear how the maker wants viewers to feel.	Establishes a strong positive, negative, or mixed tone that clearly advances its argument and the effect of that argument; it is clear how the maker wants viewers to feel; achieves the desired emotional effect.
Persuasion	Central issue is not identified; makes no argument; the point of view is unclear.	Central issue is partially defined; makes an argument; point of view is somewhat clear.	Central issue is clearly defined; makes an argument that is logical; point of view is clear.	Central issue is clearly defined, and the importance of this issue is demonstrated; makes an argument that convinces with logic and evidence; point of view is presented strongly.
Truth	Presents few or no factual claims.	Presents a limited number of general factual claims with minimal reference to sources.	Presents multiple general or specific factual claims with reference to at least one reliable source.	Presents multiple specific factual claims with clear references to multiple reliable sources.
Style	Use of images, sounds, and music does not communicate a political idea or create a dramatic effect (such as amusement or inspiration)	Use of images or sounds at least contributes to communicating a political idea or creating a dramatic effect.	Use of images, sounds, and music together communicates political ideas, organizes ideas into an argument, and creates a dramatic effect.	Use of moving and still images, sounds, music, editing, and transitions together succeeds in communicating political ideas, organizing complex arguments, and creating a powerful dramatic effect.