

# THE CRITICAL PROCESS BEHIND MEDIA LITERACY

Becoming literate about communication media involves striking a balance between taking a critical stand (developing knowledgeable interpretations and judgments) and being tolerant of diverse forms of expression (appreciating the distinctive variety of cultural products and processes). Finding this balance in a media-literate critical perspective involves completing five overlapping stages that build on one another.

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## Stage One: Description

Develop descriptive skills associated with breaking down a story into character types and plot structure. Focus on how music, dialogue, camerawork, and editing come together in a way that encourages audience engagement. Master the terms and understand the techniques of telling stories in a particular medium.

## Examples

- Describe how the conventions of the documentary are used in sitcoms like *Modern Family* and *Parks and Recreation*.
- Describe the use of gritty or graphic content in a network show like *NCIS* and a cable series like *The Walking Dead*.

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## Stage Two: Analysis

Focus on and discuss the significant patterns that emerge during the Description stage. Make connections. How does this song or story connect with other items of popular culture?

## Examples

- How does the satirical approach of *Last Week Tonight* compare to that of *The Daily Show*?
- What are the similarities and differences between *Fox & Friends* and NBC's *Today*?

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## Stage Three: Interpretation

Interpret findings. Ask yourself, What does it mean? If there is a distinct pattern, what is the cause or reason? Consider whether comedy, irony, and satire complicate this stage of the critical process.

## Examples

- What does the presence of criminal protagonists mean for shows like *Orange Is the New Black*, *Better Call Saul*, and *Breaking Bad*?
- What does it mean when Jeff Dunham fashions a comedy act around Achmed, the Dead Terrorist? Why do Dunham's fans find the "I keel you" line so funny?

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## Stage Four: Evaluation

Arrive at a critical judgment that goes beyond your personal tastes. Does the media product under analysis cause harm? Does it inspire thought? Does it perpetuate a dehumanizing view of a group? Does it promote active citizenship or passive consumerism?

## Examples

- The movie adaptation of *Gone Girl* depicts contentious relationships between men and women. Should the movie be condemned for misogyny?
- The villain in *The Muppets* (2011) is a greedy oil tycoon. Is this film anticapitalist propaganda?

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## Stage Five: Engagement

Make your voice heard. Take action that connects your critical perspective to your role as a citizen. Become involved in doing your part to challenge media institutions and make them accountable.

## Examples

- Write letters to media editors about blind spots in news coverage.
  - Contact companies that perpetuate harmful images of women in their advertising and recommend more socially responsible ways of selling their products.
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