



Tips for Online Media Decoding

Project Look Sharp recognizes the many challenges that educators at all grade levels face in a world of distance learning, including how to lead media decodings with students in an online learning environment. We have spent the past year working with teachers and librarians on effective approaches for online media decoding, developing tips leading online media decoding in both synchronous and asynchronous ways. You can use any of the media documents from the thousands available in the free Look Sharp collection, posing the questions for discussion and analysis found in the lessons and activity plans.

Acknowledging the Challenges of Doing Media Decoding Online

The realities of engaging in distance learning with students presents many challenges, especially for younger children. Before planning an online media decoding activity, it's important to think about barriers that may be encountered and how to address them. These might include:

Technical Barriers

- Weak internet connection that does not allow for viewing a video or other media document in real time without interruption or impedes the ability of students to have their camera on and respond in real time.
- Internet disruption or platform malfunction that removes a student from the live meeting
- Multiple family members learning/working from home that their internet signal can't support.
- Students having multiple tabs open at the same time, disrupting or preventing them from hearing/viewing clearly.
- The device the student is using to access the class session (e.g., smartphone) that may not allow the student to see the chat or written directions (may only see the spotlighted speaker).

Environmental & Personal Barriers

- Some students are overwhelmed and or self-conscious participating in a virtual space and will not share verbally or in the chat.

- Some students have IEPs (e.g., with directions to read and reread, have increased wait time, work in smaller groups, use modified materials) that will make it very hard to participate in a live meet synchronous environment.
- Some students will sign into a live meet and leave it on, but then leave the room or spend the time doing other things.
- Some students may not ask for clarification, but when looking at their screens from a monitoring system (e.g., Go Guardian) they are clearly not engaged in the activity.
- Disruptions in the home in the background may affect participation. This may include students caring for younger siblings, auditory distractions from multiple children learning in the same house, signing in from an environment that is not the home (e.g., shelter or day care), family members watching TV or having conversations, etc. Students have been known to stay muted with cameras off due to all of these.

Given all of these potential challenges, what can educators do? The suggestions below will offer some guidelines that can help maximize the success of online media decoding. And we acknowledge that remote learning during a pandemic has many unsurmountable obstacles that call on our resilience to make it through to better times.

Synchronous (Live, Real Time) Media Decoding with Students

This type of decoding would likely occur using a video conferencing tool (or platform) like Zoom or Google Meet that allows for students and educators to interact in real time, discussing topics through a typed chat or verbal conversation and responding to polls or yes/no questions with raised hands. As with any media decoding activity, the teacher would show a short video clip, image, or piece of text, or play an audio clip or music excerpt – then ask the students questions about what they’ve seen, read or heard. Some questions are likely to be specific to the content and your curriculum goals, while others will reflect media literacy objectives (e.g., exploring the source and purpose, techniques used in making the message, credibility, and impact on the audience). When doing synchronous decodings online, here are some specific guidelines to make them effective:

- Make sure the media example(s) can be seen and/or heard clearly by the students through the platform you are using. It’s important to test it out the first time you do this, and there may be specific settings to enable your device’s sound or optimize videos for the platform you’re using.

- If possible, find someone to be your assistant during the decoding who can monitor the chat (and summarize it for you) and keep an eye on the raised hands (calling on students by name, who can then unmute themselves and answer the question). This could be a teaching assistant, another teacher or aide, a parent, or even a student in the class. Students who prefer not to share publicly might be able to send a private message to the assistant who could share it with the class without that student's name.
- As you introduce the CMD activity, be clear about what the students are being asked to look or listen for, and how they should respond to the questions (e.g., through the chat or with raised hands). It's a good idea to provide written directions for students to be able to see when they are doing the activity. For older students, make extensive use of the chat function for responses to media decoding questions. For some questions, you could ask all students to type responses in the chat – and then follow up with one or two to expand on their responses verbally.
- For a more in-depth media analysis, start with the whole class together to lay out relevant background information and the context for the decoding (e.g., using the teacher guide or activity plan provided in one of the Project Look Sharp lessons). Show the media image, text, or video clip, giving students a chance to take notes. Then send students into smaller groups (e.g., using breakout rooms) to discuss what questions they think are most important to ask about that media message - and what the answers might be to those questions - with one person designated to report-out when the class gets back together.
- If possible, record the media decoding (and save the written chat responses) so that you can review the contributions for purposes of assessment and planning for future decodings.

Asynchronous (Preset, Offline) Media Decoding with Students

While asynchronous decoding doesn't easily allow you to engage in back-and-forth probing of student responses, it does have the huge advantage of allowing students to participate in the decoding at any time and to take more time to come up with their responses. In this case, the teacher provides a media example (e.g., short video clip, image, piece of text, audio clip, music excerpt) posted on an online platform like Jamboard or Padlet, along with questions about that media example that relate to content and curriculum goals, as well as media literacy goals. When doing these types of asynchronous decodings online, here are some specific guidelines to make them effective:

- Use a platform that will allow you to upload or otherwise share your media example in such a way that your students can easily and clearly see, hear and/or read it. If it is a still image or piece of text, it helps if the students can zoom in or increase the size to see details clearly.
- Provide a written, audio and/or video introduction that frames the activity. Be sure that the students know what they're being asked to look or listen for, how they are expected to respond, and roughly how long their responses to each question should be.
- Decide if you want students to see (or hear) each other's responses – and if you want them to respond directly to each other's comments. If you don't have a way to do that through your regular classroom platform, use tools like VoiceThread, FlipGrid, Padlet Comments, or Poll Everywhere to help you to achieve that goal.
- Don't pose all the questions at once in your instructions, as they are likely to only answer the first one. Spread the questions out on the platform so that students can answer each one before moving on to the next.
- You might use one of the online annotation apps for students to communicate their analysis of media messages (e.g., Flipgrid or Voice Thread for audio/video sharing).
- Encourage students to ask their own questions (“What else would you like to know about this message that would help you judge its credibility?”) and deepen their analysis by occasionally embedding follow-up probes (“Describe where you see or hear that in the message” “Give evidence from the media document to support your conclusion”).
- If you are asking students to respond to each other's comments, be clear about your expectations. It helps to note that you're expecting their additional comments to enrich the conversation by adding new information, bringing in a concept from class, or asking new questions.
- If using Project Look Sharp lessons or activities, you could share digitally with students the Background Information, Document Notes, Additional Info, or other text from the lesson plan that you would otherwise share orally with the class.
- You may want to create a simple graphic organizer or a question guide (like the *Key Questions for Analyzing Media Messages*) for students to use every time they do a media decoding.

Synchronous/Asynchronous Blended Media Decoding with Students

A synchronous/asynchronous blend may be required to meet the particular needs of many distance learning classes. In this format, the teacher would set up the activity and expectations as one would with a synchronous delivery in order to present the image,

video or text in the video conferencing platform. The teacher would frontload the activity first, which should be pre-set in a platform that students can respond in (see the asynchronous decoding section). As a whole group, the teacher will present the media example (e.g., video, audio, text, photograph) for decoding. Then, the teacher will present the questions that the students will think about and answer, providing them with a link to the platform in which they will respond. After clear directions are given (including how long they have to complete the activity), students would then go off to respond. On the given platform, students would have access to:

- the video/text/images
- the questions that they are answering
- questions or suggestions to push their thinking further
- the link to return to the main meeting if they have left

One way to keep the conversations going during this work time is to utilize breakout rooms for students to discuss the questions (before or while responding individually). While students are working, the teacher remains in the meeting to help answer questions that arise, help students navigate to the platform they're using and ask probing questions that are read (and reread) to students as needed. After a set amount of time, everyone will regroup and the teacher will ask the students the questions that were posted, allowing as many students to share what they're thinking as possible. In essence, this format breaks up the synchronous decoding before and after the work time. Doing it in this way helps to work around the issues of students not being able to access content in real time due to the myriad reasons listed in the challenges section.

Some Unplugged Ideas

- Give your students the handout [*Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages*](#) and encourage them to apply these questions to the media that they see, read and hear in their homes and neighborhoods.
 - For younger students, this can easily be applied to food packages, books, online videos, and commercials.
 - For older students, asking key questions about news, advertising, and social media messages can help them step back a bit to gain new perspectives on how they know what they know.
 - Encourage all children and teens to point out things they notice in the media, and to discuss different interpretations and perspectives among members of the family.



- Have your students keep journals (on paper or digitally) about their own media use, noticing changes in their media diet on weekdays vs. weekends, during school closings, pre-pandemic times vs. times during the pandemic, etc.
- Have students collect examples of media messages (from product packaging, print materials, etc.) to share with the class or teacher when in-person learning occurs.
- Have students create their own versions of media messages (e.g., their own news show to report on the day's events, "counter-ads" that revise an existing ad to change the message, different endings to a movie or TV show).