

TIPS FOR DECODING MEDIA DOCUMENTS

Go to www.projectlooksharp.org for information about [Constructivist Media Decoding](#)



Preparing for a Media Decoding

1. **Define your objectives** in leading a CMD (*Constructivist Media Decoding*), including:
 - Teach (or having students apply) content area knowledge.
 - Practice [Habits of Questioning](#) media messages and other [media literacy objectives](#).
 - Use CMD for additional purposes such as: providing a hook to a new unit, empowering student voice and agency, teaching SEL, preparing students to create media, and/or assessing student learning.
2. **Find “rich” media document(s)** that are appropriate for your students and tie to your objectives:
 - Use a [PLS lesson](#), finding your own media examples, or working with your librarian.
 - Consider excerpts from books, videos, websites, social media, maps, ads, paintings, etc. – a short clip/excerpt or a single document might be better for addressing your objectives than a longer one or many documents.
 - Make sure the document(s) are of sufficient quality/clarity to enable students to read/hear key details.
 - Evaluate appropriateness for your class, including the potential for emotional responses, perpetuating harmful ideas (e.g., stereotypes or disinformation) or provoking hurtful comments or conflict.
 - Know the sourcing and accuracy of your documents.
 - Consider copyright. *Fair Use* applies if you critique the document (e.g., asking *Who made this and why?*).
3. **Decide on your approach to the decoding:**
 - Do a whole class, small group, paired, or individual decoding – in writing or spoken – or a combination.
 - Use handouts or technology (e.g., smart board) that will enable greatest student input and interaction.
 - Have the students watch/listen to the document(s) several times with different questions each time.
4. **Make a decoding plan** aligned with your objectives, including:
 - Provide the background information students will need to effectively decode the document(s).
 - Plan your questions linked to your curriculum and media literacy objectives and their order/sequence.
 - Consider likely student answers to your questions and your possible responses.
 - Anticipate potentially challenging comments, particularly about polarizing or sensitive topics.
 - Have classroom agreements about how we engage in conversation (e.g., *No attacking others*).
 - Consider strategies to have students talk to each other, ask their own questions, think about their own thinking (metacognition), and challenge each other’s and their own thinking.

Leading a Media Decoding

The key to an effective CMD is the questioning (and listening) process. Watch short annotated [video demonstrations](#) at www.projectlooksharp.org

5. **Set up the decoding** by giving the context for analysis:
 - Provide key background information before or during the decoding if necessary.
 - Consider telling students what to look/listen for – or even the objectives of the lesson.
6. **Sequence your questions** and follow-up probes to ultimately get to your objectives:
 - Typically start with content area questions (e.g., *What are the messages here about ___?*) to get students to scrutinize the document before asking more interpretative questions (e.g., *What biases do you see?*).
 - Consider concluding with synthesis questions (e.g., *What has this activity taught you about ___?*).
 - Balance support for the independent thinking of your students with your planned objectives. This will require you to make quick decisions about what comments to pursue and when to move on – the art of CMD.

7. **Respond to student comments** based on your goals in the decoding:
- Seek document-based evidence: *Where do you see that?*
 - Seek clarification: *Do you mean _____?*
 - Ask for elaboration - to teach their peers: *Say more about that.*
 - Acknowledge but bypass a comment and move on: *OK (or Thanks)*
 - Elicit a different response or engage other students: *Does anyone have a different thought?*
 - Assess the groups' view on a comment or idea: *Raise your hand if you agree.*
 - Challenge a potentially hurtful comment: *I need to challenge that.*
 - Have students identify strategies for answering their own questions: *How could we find that out?*
 - Have students ask their own questions: *What questions do you have about _____?*
 - Have students synthesize or make connections: *What does this teach us about _____?*

Cautions

8. **Empower independent thinking** – teach your students *how* to think but not *what* to think:
- Recognize the power behind your choice of documents to decode. Decode documents that you celebrate as well as documents of which you are critical.
 - Craft questions that enable students to draw their own judgments (e.g., *What are the messages about Native Americans in this clip?* vs. *How is this depiction racist?*).
 - Typically avoid telling students what to see, or what the answer is; instead use questions to draw them to key understandings. Share correct answers where appropriate.
 - Recognize how your own biases may show up in your body language, word choice, and framing.
 - Try to limit the impact of inappropriate biases (e.g., towards or against a particular political party or position) while owning other biases (e.g., towards critical thinking or facts).
9. **Do No Harm** – be aware of the power of media and the potential for unintended consequences:
- Consider the possibility of unintentionally reinforcing the very stereotypes you intend to critique.
 - Consider the possibility of unintentionally reinforcing the misinformation you intend to debunk.
 - Assess our student's understanding – not what we think they *should* understand.
 - Cue into student's emotional responses to documents. Follow-up (often privately) where appropriate.
 - Avoid asking questions that would provoke comments that would likely be hurtful to some students (e.g. *Why do you think that LGBTQ books should be banned?*).
 - Know your students and your class well enough to assess what would be appropriate to decode and when.
10. **Be both cautious and courageous** when decoding potentially hurtful content:
- Think through possible concerns and seek advice when addressing challenging topics.
 - Pay attention to the most marginalized and vulnerable students in your class.
 - Set norms and expectations for civil discourse (e.g., *respect differences of opinion, no attacking the identity of others, support risk taking*).
 - Stick to document-focused questions (e.g., *What is being said here?*) if one is concerned about safety.
 - Embrace the paradox that students need caring adults to help facilitate challenging conversations and students need to be safe in your classroom.
 - Assess the difference between classroom *safety* (which is essential) and *comfort* (which is not).
 - Listen well to the meaning-making of your students.

Following the Decoding

11. **Assess** how well the decoding went, including:
- The alignment of your objectives with your document(s) and questions.
 - The balance between asking questions and providing information.
 - Your ability to be both student-centered and objectives-focused.
 - The level of student engagement, the timing, and the flow of the activity.
 - Any surprises or unintended consequences.
 - What you would change next time (make notes).