


# Analyzing Political Cartoons

**Grade:** 6-8, 9-12, UNIV

**Type:** Question & Inquire / Read Actively

 **20-30** MINUTES

**When:**

Before, during, and after reading

**Materials:**

Analyzing Political Cartoons graphic organizer, political cartoon, whiteboard or display, writing utensils



## Description



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The Analyzing Political Cartoons strategy teaches students how to decode and interpret political cartoons through a systematic analytical process. This structured approach guides students through identifying visual symbols, understanding text elements, recognizing persuasive techniques, and evaluating the cartoonist's message and perspective. By learning to analyze these complex visual texts, students develop critical media

literacy skills, deepen their understanding of current and historical issues, and gain insight into how political cartoons influence public opinion. This strategy encourages students to distinguish between facts and opinions, recognize bias, and form their own evidence-based interpretations of political and social issues.



# Procedure

- ① Prior to the lesson, select a political cartoon related to your current curriculum topic from **Britannica School**, **ImageQuest**, or another royalty-free or approved source. Choose cartoons that contain clear symbols and messaging that students can reasonably interpret based on their background knowledge.
- ② Begin by explaining the purpose and function of political cartoons as a form of editorial commentary that uses visual symbolism, exaggeration, and other techniques to communicate a point of view about current events or issues.
- ③ Distribute an **Analyzing Political Cartoons graphic organizer** to each student, and display it alongside the image of the selected political cartoon. Model each step as students work through the organizer for the first time, using a gradual release of responsibility approach.
- ④ Display the political cartoon—either project it for the class or print and distribute individual copies so that students can view it up close. Then read aloud the “Getting Started” section of the graphic organizer:
  - “Before you begin analyzing, take a full minute to observe the cartoon carefully. Look closely at every detail—characters, objects, text, and symbols. In your own words, describe what you notice. Don’t rush—focus on what is in the image.”
- ⑤ After reading, invite students to share their observations. As they respond, emphasize key words and visual details they mention, encouraging them to pay close attention to what they notice.

⑥ Guide students through Step 1: Visual Elements Analysis:

- Identify and list all objects and people visible in the cartoon.
- Note any text and dates or numbers that appear.
- Identify the title or caption, if present.

⑦ Model this process with the displayed cartoon, thinking aloud as you identify visual elements. For example, for a political cartoon relating to the founding of the United States, you might say: "I notice there's an eagle representing America, a scale symbolizing justice, and several figures in the background. The date shown is July 4, 1776, which is significant because it's when the Declaration of Independence was signed."

⑧ Transition to Step 2: Symbols and Words Analysis:

- Identify which objects are symbols and what they might represent.
- Locate specific words or phrases used by the cartoonist, and determine which words appear to be most significant.
- List adjectives describing emotions portrayed in the cartoon.

⑨ Continue modeling your thinking using a think-aloud strategy. For example, you might say: "The eagle often symbolizes America, and here it looks like it's struggling against chains. That could represent oppression or a threat to freedom. The bold text, 'Liberty at Risk,' really stands out—its size and placement suggest it's an important part of the message."

⑩ Move to Step 3: Message Analysis:

- Describe the action taking place in the cartoon.
- Explain how words clarify the symbols.
- Interpret the overall message.

⑪ Complete your modeling by explaining the overall message: "By showing America's symbol in chains with the phrase 'Liberty at Risk,' the cartoonist expresses concern about threats to American freedoms. Groups that believe government regulations protect citizens might disagree with this message, while those concerned about government overreach would likely agree."

⑫ Facilitate a whole-class discussion comparing different interpretations, emphasizing how various backgrounds and perspectives may lead to different understandings of the same cartoon.

⑬ Conclude by having students turn and talk with a partner to reflect on the effectiveness of the cartoon. Ask them to consider one of the following questions:

- How effectively does this cartoon get its message across? What makes it strong or weak?
- What persuasive techniques (for example, exaggeration, irony, or symbolism) do you notice, and how well do they work?

After the discussion, invite a few students to share their thoughts with the class.

# Differentiation

**Complexity Adjustment:** For students who would benefit from additional support, begin with simpler cartoons that have fewer symbols and more explicit messages. Provide background information about the events or issues depicted before analysis begins. For advanced students, select more nuanced cartoons with subtle messaging and multiple layers of meaning. Ask them to research the historical context independently to inform their analysis. This helps ensure all students can access the content at their level, building confidence and comprehension while encouraging deeper thinking for those ready for more challenge.

**Digital Extension:** Have students use school- or district-approved digital annotation tools to mark up the cartoons directly, identify symbols, label persuasive techniques, and add their interpretations. This allows for more interactive engagement and can help visual learners better organize their analysis. This also helps students engage more actively with the content, making abstract ideas more concrete and supporting various learning styles, especially for those who benefit from visual or hands-on learning.

## Multilingual Learning Support

**Beginning Proficiency:** Support students by using visual examples to pre-teach key vocabulary related to political cartoons (e.g., *symbol*, *exaggeration*, *caption*). Provide a simplified version of the Analyzing Political Cartoons graphic organizer with more visual cues and fewer written prompts. Invite students to discuss their observations in their home languages first by pairing beginning language learners with peers who can support translation while working through the analysis process. Then encourage them to translate these key points into English.

**Intermediate Proficiency:** Provide bilingual dictionaries or glossaries with political and analytical terminology. Offer sentence frames to support analysis: "This symbol represents...because..." or "The cartoonist is trying to show...through...." Allow students to annotate the cartoon with notes in their home languages if helpful, and then guide them to express their main observations in English using the provided sentence frames.

**Advanced Proficiency:** Challenge students to compare political cartoons from English-language sources with those from approved publications in their home languages/cultures. How do the symbols, techniques, and messages differ? Encourage students to use comparative language structures: "While American cartoonists often use..., cartoonists from my culture tend to use...." Have students lead discussions about how cultural context affects the interpretation of visual symbols.

## Variations

**Historical Perspective:** Focus on historical political cartoons related to a specific time period being studied. Have students analyze how the cartoons reflect that era's issues, attitudes, and values. Then invite students to compare historical cartoons with modern ones that address similar themes, in particular, how perspectives and approaches have changed over time.

**Creation Component:** After analyzing examples as a class, challenge students to create their own political cartoons about a current issue or historical event relevant to the curriculum. Encourage students to incorporate symbols and persuasive techniques studied during the analysis activity.

