

Drawing for Change: Analyzing and Making Political Cartoons

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This cartoon by Patrick Chappatte appeared in the April 25, 2015 International New York Times. He titled the cartoon "Migrants and the European Union," and added the caption, "Europe looks for an answer to the migrants reaching for its shores."

Political cartoons deliver a punch. They take jabs at powerful politicians, reveal official hypocrisies and incompetence and can even help to change the course of history. But political cartoons are not just the stuff of the past. Cartoonists are commenting on the world's current events all the time, and in the process, making people laugh and think. At their best, they challenge our perceptions and attitudes.

Analyzing political cartoons is a core skill in many social studies courses. After all, political cartoons often serve as important primary sources, showing different perspectives on an issue. And many art, history and journalism teachers take political cartoons one step further, encouraging students to make their own cartoons.

In this lesson, we provide three resources for working with political cartoons:

- an extended process for analyzing cartoons and developing more sophisticated interpretations;
- a guide for making cartoons, along with advice on how to make one from Patrick Chappatte, an editorial cartoonist for The International New York Times;
- a resource library of links to both current and historic political cartoons.

Materials | Computers with Internet access. Optional copies of one or more of these two handouts: [Analyzing Editorial Cartoons](#); [Rubric for our Student Editorial Cartoon Contest](#).

Analyzing Cartoons

Photo



In this famous anti-Tweed cartoon from 1871, Thomas Nast writes: "Who Stole the People's Money?' -- Do Tell. N. Y. Times. 'Twas Him."

While political cartoons are often an engaging and fun source for students to analyze, they also end up frustrating many students if they don't possess the strategies or background to make sense of what the cartoonist is saying. In other words, understanding a cartoon may look easier than it really is. Learning how to analyze editorial cartoons is a skill that requires practice. The analysis process should emphasize visual thinking and close reading skills.

Open-Ended Questioning

We suggest beginning cartoon analysis using the same three-question protocol we utilize every Monday for our "What's Going On in This Picture?" feature to help students bring to the surface what the cartoon is saying:

- What is going on in this editorial cartoon?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

These simple, open-ended questions push us to look closely at the image without the pressure to come up with a "correct" interpretation right away. We should, take notice of details and make observations each time, while the cyclical nature of the questions keeps sending us back to look for more details.

Developing an Academic Vocabulary and a Keener Eye

Once you gain confidence in noticing details and suggesting different interpretations (that are backed up by evidence), take note of the specific elements and techniques the cartoonists used to communicate the message. Examples include: visual symbols, metaphors, exaggeration, distortion, stereotypes, labeling, analogy and irony. Recognizing and identify these cartoonists' tools will enable you to make more sophisticated interpretations.

[The Library of Congress](#) (PDF) and [TeachingHistory.org](#) (PDF) both provide detailed explanations of what these elements and techniques mean, and how cartoonists use them.

In addition to these resources, three other resources that can help you develop a richer understanding of a cartoon:

- The [SOAPSTone strategy](#), which many teachers use for analyzing primary sources, can also be used for looking at political cartoons.
- The Political Cartoons for the Classroom [student handout](#) (PDF) breaks up the analysis into two parts: identifying the main idea and analyzing the method used by the artist.
- The National Archives provides a [cartoon analysis work sheet](#) to help students reach higher levels of understanding.

The Making of an Editorial Cartoon

By PATRICK CHAPPATTE (New York Times) on September 16, 2015.

Use these steps — a variation on the writing process — to help guide you in making your own cartoons.

Step 1 | Brainstorm: What Is a Topic or Issue You Want to Comment On?

Find themes that connect to the big news of the day. As a student, you may have access to a wider or narrower range of topics from which to choose, especially if this a class assignment - you may have specific instructions.

Step 2 | Make a Point: What Do You Want to Say About Your Topic?

Once you pick an issue, you need to learn enough about your topic to have something meaningful to say. Remember, a political cartoon delivers commentary or criticism on a current issue, political topic or historical event.

For example, if you were doing a cartoon about the [deflated football scandal](#) would you want to play up the thought that Tom Brady must have been complicit, or would you present him as a victim of an overzealous N.F.L. commissioner? Considering the [Republican primaries](#), would you draw Donald Trump as a blowhard sucking air out of the room and away from more serious candidates, or instead make him the standard-bearer for a genuine make-America-great-again movement?

You can see examples of how two cartoonists offer differing viewpoints on the same issue in Newspaper in Education's [Cartoons for the Classroom](#) and [NPR's Double Take](#).

Mr. Chappatte explains that coming up with your idea is the most important step. "How do ideas come? I have no recipe," he says. "While you start reading about the story, you want to let the other half of your brain loose."

Strategies he suggests for exploring different paths include combining two themes, playing with words, making a joke, or finding an image that sums up a situation.

Step 3 | Draw: What Are Different Ways to Communicate Your Ideas?

Then, start drawing. Try different angles, test various approaches. Don't worry too much about the illustration itself; instead, focus on getting ideas on paper.

Mr. Chappatte says, "The drawing is not the most important part. Seventy-five percent of a cartoon is the idea, not the artistic skills. You need to come up with an original point of view. And I would say that 100 percent of a cartoon is your personality."

Consider using one or more of the elements and techniques that cartoonists often employ, such as visual symbols, metaphors, exaggeration, distortion, labeling, analogy and irony.

Step 4 | Get Feedback: Which Idea Lands Best?

Student cartoonists won't be able to get feedback from professional editors like Mr. Chappatte does at The International New York Times, but they should seek feedback from other sources, such as teachers, fellow students or even family members. You certainly can ask your audience which sketch they like best, but you can also let them tell you what they observe going on in the cartoon, to see what details they notice, and whether they figure out the ideas you want to express.

Step 5 | Revise and Finalize: How Can I Make an Editorial Cartoon?

Once you pick which draft you're going to run with, it's time to finalize the cartoon. Try to find the best tools to match your style, whether they are special ink pens, markers or a computer graphics program.

As you work, remember what Mr. Chappatte said: "It's easier to be outrageous than to be right on target. You don't have to shoot hard; you have to aim right. To me the best cartoons give you in one visual shortcut everything of a complex situation; funny and deep, both light and heavy; I don't do these cartoons every day, not even every week, but those are the best." That's the challenge.

Step 6 | Publish: How Can My Editorial Cartoon Reach an Audience?

The genre itself is meant to have an audience. That audience can start with your peers and teacher, but ideally it shouldn't end there.

Students can display their cartoons to the class or in groups. Classmates can have a chance to respond to the artist, leading to a discussion or debate. Students can try to publish their cartoons in the school newspaper or other local newspapers or online forums. It is only when political cartoons reach a wider audience that they have the power to change minds.

Where to Find Cartoons



CreditPatrick Chappatte

Finding the right cartoons to analyze, and to serve as models for budding cartoonists, is important. For starters, Newspaper in Education provides a new “[Cartoons for the Classroom](#)” lesson each week that pairs different cartoons on the same current issue. Below, we offer a list of other resources:

The New York Times

- [Patrick Chappatte](#)
- [Brian McFadden](#)
- **A Selection of the Day’s Cartoons**
- [Association of American Editorial Cartoonists](#)
- [USA Today](#)
- [U.S. News and World Report](#)
- **Recent Winners of the Herblock Prize, the Thomas Nast Award and the Pulitzer Prize**
- [Kevin Kallaugh](#) in the Baltimore Sun
- [Jen Sorensen](#) in The Austin Chronicle
- [Tom Tomorrow](#) in The Nation
- [Signe Wilkinson](#) in the Philadelphia Daily News
- [Adam Zyglis](#) in The Buffalo News
- [Kevin Siers](#) in The Charlotte Observer
- [Steve Sack](#) in the Star Tribune
- **Historical Cartoonists**
- [Thomas Nast](#)
- [Herblock](#)
- [Paul Conrad](#)
- **Other Historical Cartoon Resources**
- [Library of Congress | It’s No Laughing Matter](#)
- [BuzzFeed | 15 Historic Cartoons That Changed The World](#)

Editorial Cartoon Evaluation Checklist

Name: _____

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Criteria to be marked:

Marks Scale (1 Needs Improvement – 5 Excellent)

Application

The cartoon clearly communicates the issue being addressed	0	1	2	3	4	5
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The cartoon clearly communicates a message from the author's point of view	0	1	2	3	4	5
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Several techniques were effectively used to create the editorial cartoon	0	1	2	3	4	5
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Cartoon was creative and thoughtful, and illustrations are appropriate and created with effort	0	1	2	3	4	5
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Communication

Written summary clearly and accurately describes the issue being addressed and the author's perspective and purpose	0	1	2	3	4	5
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Written summary clearly and accurately explains the the techniques used to create the cartoon	0	1	2	3	4	5
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Comments: