

CLUE SPOTTING 1: Cereal Box Disguises

Grades K-3 (20 minutes)

Students will be introduced to selected words and phrases that advertisers use to mislead or misinform. To practice spotting the words, they'll analyze cereal boxes as a form of communication and use the clues they've learned to draw conclusions about the sugar and fruit content of the food inside each box.

Students will learn that

- Food packaging is a form of media and a type of advertising.
- Food packages are “talking” to them and there are clues they can look for to determine what the package is saying or if it is wearing a disguise.
- There are specific words and phrases that are clues that a cereal has a lot of added sugar. (see activity for vocabulary list)
- Asking questions like, “What does this want me to think or do?” and “Why wouldn’t they just tell me what’s inside the box?” can help people understand a media maker’s motives (the reasons they include or exclude certain things) and knowing someone’s motive can help me determine whether they are being deceptive.

Students will practice

- Making careful observations
- Looking for clues on cereal boxes that indicate lots of added sugar
- Linking answers to evidence

Recommended prerequisite: That students already know basic nutrition information about added sugar and it’s relationship to health and whether one feels energetic or fatigued. This prior knowledge will allow them to concentrate on the media analysis rather than splitting attention between learning about sugar and also about misleading words and phrases.

Materials: A way to show images to the group

Images

[Lucky Charms Box](#) – slide #11

[Cocoa Puffs Box](#) – slide #12

[Trix Box](#) – slide #13

[Frosted Mini Wheats Box](#) – slide #14

[Fruity Pebbles Box](#) – slide #15

Note: This activity is partially based on Project Look Sharp’s lesson: [Is This Cereal Healthy?](#) It has been adapted to specifically build skills related to identifying misinformation.

Step 1

Introduce the lesson saying something like:

Library shelves are filled with books that tell stories and contain information. Grocery stores also have shelves, but theirs are filled with product packages. Did you know that those packages also tell stories and give information? That's how we know what's inside the bags and boxes.

Sometimes the packages don't exactly tell the truth about what's inside. It's like they are wearing a disguise. Today you're going to learn how to spot the clues you can look for to spot cereal boxes that are wearing a disguise.

Show the Lucky Charms box ([slide #11](#)) and ask, *What do you think the box is saying? What are the messages?*

Accept all responses (asking for respondents to provide their evidence, of course) and then ask, *Do you see anything that tells you whether the cereal has a lot of sugar?* If students don't already know about sugar or need a reminder, let them know that added sugar is one of the things that we pay attention to because eating too much can hurt our bodies and make us feel tired.

If a student suggests reading the ingredients label, acknowledge that it's a good idea but it is not today's lesson. For now, the evidence is only what's visible on the slide.



Then reveal the code to see if the students identified any of its elements:

Cereals that have a lot of sugar (often as much or more than a candy bar) don't usually proclaim their high sugar directly, but they do use these clues on their packages:

- sparkles
- marshmallows

- cartoon character(s)
- the word "frosted" (which, in the context of cereal, means "coated with sugar")

How many of these clues did the students spot?

Step 2

Invite students to try the same thing with another cereal box. Show the Cocoa Puffs box and solicit responses.



Continue to display the Cocoa Puffs box as you deepen the analysis: *You've noticed clues (like the cartoon character) that this has a lot of sugar, but the box also says "with Whole Grains," which seems healthy. And the information in the green banner at the top also seems to suggest it's healthy. Maybe our clues are wrong, or maybe phrases like "with" or "made with" are also clues - part of a disguise that some packages wear on the outside to hide what's actually on the inside.*

Also explain that learning to spot even more clues can help students be more certain. There are words that indicate a package is wearing a disguise. Review and explain the meaning of these words (below). If you're working with pre-readers, suggest that they can learn the first letters of the words and use those to spot them on the package, or they can ask someone to read the package to them.

sweetened - if students know what "sweet" means in the context of food, see if they can guess that "sweetened" means that sugar has been added

artificial - not real (Some students may have encountered artificial Christmas trees at home or in a store. They know it's not a living pine tree and the white skirt isn't actually snow. That reference can help them understand that "artificial"

indicates something that is trying to imitate the real thing, but is not the real thing)

flavored – not to be confused with “flavor,” which means the way something tastes. Adding the “ed” means something (artificial or natural) has been added to make it taste like the real thing, but is not actually the real thing

adding “y” or “ey” to the end of a word – to indicate it’s like something, but not actually that thing (like “chocolatey” on the Cocoa Puffs box)

“with” or “made with” – indicates the ingredient is inside, but we don’t know how much. It could be a very tiny amount and the box wouldn’t technically be lying, but if it’s a small amount, the box isn’t exactly being honest either. Also point out how small the word is on the Cocoa Puffs box compared to “Whole Grains.” Our brains tend to pay more attention to large print than tiny print, so print size is a clue that the product makers are trying to mislead about how much of the cereal is actually made with whole grains.

Note: Advanced readers can also learn the “clue” that the first thing listed on the nutrition label ingredients is the highest percentage ingredient, and ingredients are listed in descending order.

Step 3

Engage students in more practice to see if they can spot the new clues, analyzing these boxes one at a time:



Note again that the boxes aren’t technically communicating anything false. Cocoa Puffs real do taste “chocolatey” and Trix has shapes that mimic fruit. But “fruity” doesn’t mean there is fruit inside,

even if there is a picture of fruit on the package.

Step 4

End by choosing one of the cereal boxes and asking: *What does this want you to think or do? Why would they want you to think or do that? Why wouldn’t they just tell you what’s inside the box instead of giving the box a disguise?*

If students don’t offer sales among their reasons, explain that food packaging is advertising and the purpose of advertising is to convince us to buy a product or identify with a brand (i.e., I’m the kind of kid who buys x or eats y).

For students who are developmentally capable of engaging in a discussion, invite them to respond to one another’s ideas. Expect that some will say that the cereal maker wants them to have fun or to give them something yummy to eat for breakfast. Point out that this could be true and that people who make products and media (like advertising) want us to buy what they are selling, but they don’t know us. So the things they encourage us to do aren’t necessarily the best choice for us.

If the activity has included a cereal that is a student favorite, do a check-in to ask students how it feels to find out that a favorite food is wearing a disguise that might be trying to mislead them.

You might end by telling students that if they (and their families) decide that they feel healthier when they don’t eat a lot of added sugar, now they know how to spot cereals they would want to avoid.

Note the careful wording here. Any time you are discussing food choices with children it is essential to take great care not to condemn things that their parents or guardians might be doing or imply that their families are doing something bad. The purpose of the activity is to empower students, not alienate them from their families!

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Use the cereal box analysis to reinforce primary grade lessons about health and what happens in the body when we eat lots of sugar.

Invite upper elementary teachers to follow-up with lessons on how to read nutrition labels.

Help students apply the lessons from the cereal box analysis to book covers (or vice versa). The purpose of both is to interest us in what's inside. And many book covers also use large print to draw our attention and smaller print for the things they think won't convince us to read or buy the book. What other similarities do students notice?

AASL Standards Correlations

A. VI. 2. Understanding the ethical use of information technology and media.

A. VI. 3. Evaluating information for accuracy, validity, social and cultural context, and appropriateness for need.

B. I. 1. Using evidence to investigate questions.

C. V. 3. Expressing curiosity about a topic of personal interest or curricular relevance.

D. I. 3. Enacting new understanding through real world connections.

D. III. 1. Actively contributing to group discussions.