

CLUE SPOTTING 2: Using Words + Images to Mislead

Grades K-3 (20 minutes for K-1; 45 minutes for grades 2-3; additional time required for optional steps)

Sometimes words can be true and pictures can be true but combining them leads to misleading messages, as happens when online posts of real photos are intentionally tagged with mismatched captions.

Adult online content is not appropriate to share with young students, but we can begin preparing them for the social media they'll eventually encounter by using a more age-appropriate example. Students will learn to pay attention to a phrase that is included in the voiceover of nearly every U.S. kids' cereal commercial: "This cereal is part of a complete breakfast." And they'll learn why it is misleading.

Additionally, the activity offers an opportunity to teach research skills to 2nd & 3rd graders by showing them how to use the resources available in your library, classroom, or school to investigate the ad's implication that sugary cereals are healthy. It also offers a compare/contrast example using a cereal ad from another country (Australia) to introduce the concept of media regulation.

Prerequisite: This activity will be more effective if students have already done the Clue Spotting 1 activity.

Students will learn that

- Some media makers mislead us by combining true words with real pictures. Showing sugary cereal as "Part of a complete breakfast" is one example.
- Eating lots of added sugar can make people feel tired instead of healthy and energetic.
- There are reliable sources they can access for information about sugar and other healthy eating choices. Ads aren't typically a reliable source.

Students will practice

- Analyzing a cereal commercial
- Listening skills
- Making careful observations and linking conclusions to evidence
- Contrast and compare (2nd & 3rd grade)
- Research skills (2nd & 3rd grade)

Materials: A way to show videos to the group; whatever materials you need to show students how to use your library resources to research sugar and health

Videos

[Frosted Flakes](#) – [slide #16](#) and [Fruit Loops \(AUS\)](#) – [slide #17](#)

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

Assess what students already know by asking if they have ever seen an ad for breakfast cereal. Invite a few students to share examples. Then ask if those who have seen ads have heard the line, “This cereal is part of a complete breakfast.” What do they think it means?

Accept all answers and invite everyone to explore that question a bit further by taking a careful look at an ad for Frosted Flakes.

Step 2

Show the [Frosted Flakes ad](#) (clip from 3:25 – 3:40 or [slide #16](#)). Prompt students to look for the telltale shot of the cereal bowl and listen for a version of “part of this complete breakfast.” (The ad actually says, “the tasty part of a complete breakfast.”).

The shot goes by very quickly, so be prepared to show it more than once. On a repeat viewing, ask, *What is in the shot besides the cereal? What is most prominent / biggest in the shot?* Be prepared to pause on the shot so they can look at the still frame if needed.

Ask, *Why do you think the people who make Frosted Flakes and the people they hired to make the ad decided to include this shot?* Engage everyone in a brief discussion, always pausing to ask students to explain the evidence on which they base their answers.

Step 3

If students don’t identify anything related to making the cereal seem healthy, step in and do so, modelling the process of making inferences from document-based evidence:

- *The setting is kids playing baseball and starts with the phrase “fuel up.” After eating the cereal they play with energy and win.*
- *Frosted Flakes has been making ads featuring athletes (who presumably need to be in good shape) for many years.*

- *The shot includes an apple and milk, both of which are healthy choices, but the biggest thing in the image is the box of cereal. And the bowl is huge!*

All these things make me think that Frosted Flakes is trying to convince us that it is a healthy food choice. But is it?

When the ad says “the tasty part of a complete breakfast” does that mean apples aren’t tasty? Could they make the claim about it being part of a complete breakfast if they didn’t put it next to fruit and milk? The cereal makers want you to think it’s a healthy part, but is it? They could put anything in the shot next to healthy foods, and it wouldn’t be a lie to say that the thing is part of this healthy breakfast! It’s deceptive.

Ask, What else could they put in the shot and still have the voice over about it being part of a complete breakfast still be true? (The answer is anything, because the cereal isn’t really the healthy part of the breakfast). Suggest a silly option (e.g., my socks!) and invite kids to suggest a few of their own silly options.

Optional Step

If time and circumstance allow, have some fun reinforcing the message that the shot is misleading by letting students re-create the shot. Start with a set of healthy choices – the ads typically use milk, a glass of orange juice or a piece of fruit, and sometimes whole grain toast. Then let them add anything they want to the image, snap a picture and re-write the ad copy. Instead of “this cereal,” substitute their item: “This candy bar (or rock or elephant or whatever) is part of this complete breakfast.” The sillier the better.

For kindergarteners and 1st graders, end the lesson here with a reminder that commercials for food are often not a good source for reliable information about healthy choices.

Step 4

Tell students that different countries have different rules about what advertisers are

allowed to do. For an interesting contrast/compare, invite students to watch for the “complete breakfast shot” in this Australian ad For [Froot Loops](#) (shot is at approx. :16 seconds in or on [Slide #17](#)). What do they notice? Why might they be different? Why might a government decide not to let advertisers use the “complete breakfast shot?”

As time allows, connect the discussion to civics by asking students what they would want their government’s policy to be.

Step 5

Return to an image of the Frosted Flakes box and ask what they notice. Even on a blurry image, what clues can they spot that might indicate high sugar content? (the word “frosted” and the cartoon character, Tony the Tiger, are clues they learned in the Cluespotting 1 activity).

Shift the lesson from analysis to research by asking: *How could you confirm or disprove the ad’s message that the cereal is healthy and a good choice for athletes?*

Then introduce them to one or two resources in your library, school, or classroom that might have an answer. Teach them how to use those resources, or where they could look to find answers.

Caution: Take care to vet sources ahead of time. General searches are likely to turn up a lot of claims that sugar is beneficial for athletes. For some serious athletes, some types of complex sugars can, indeed, provide an energy boost. However, simple sugars, like the type of sugar in Frosted Flakes actually drain the body of energy. If you want a quick reference for yourself, check: <https://youtu.be/Ut6BBZxlOI>. With students you may want to try searching “Should kids eat sugar?”

Do the research together and, as a group, review what they found, but keep the focus of this step on the research process. The point is that they don’t just have to take your word for it or accept what an advertiser says. They are building the skills to find credible answers themselves.

If your research includes use of a search engine, briefly explain how you would decide what to select from the list of responses to your query. If you are a librarian, you are an expert because you have earned a degree that required you to know how to judge and select resources that are credible and age-appropriate. Share some of your strategies for doing that (e.g. I clicked on this source because...).

End by asking, *You’ve now consulted a few sources of information about sugar and health. Would you include the ad as a reliable source? Why or why not?*

Optional Step

With older students, you could begin to explore the relationship between captions and photos in information sources. Engage them in the Shorts activity from Be Internet Awesome, It’s Cool to Be Kind: “How Words Can Change a Picture.”

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Connect to civics by offering students an opportunity to tell the company that makes a favorite sugary cereal or to tell the government about what they have learned and what they think should happen.

Let them know that many Americans believe that the government previews ads and disallows those that are misleading. This is not true. There is no agency that checks ads ahead of time. Instead, the system relies on competitors or customers to complain and then the FDA or the FTC may take action that forces a company to remove a deceptive ad. This happens only rarely, especially in cases like kids cereal ads, because all the major companies use a version of the “complete breakfast” shot. But they can speak up.

As a class, do a lesson on measurement. Look on a box of Frosted Flakes for the serving size. Measure out that amount into a bowl. Then compare that to the bowl of cereal in the ad’s complete breakfast shot. Use the apple as a comparison of size. What do students notice about the size of the bowl in the ad? What’s the message (Why did the media makers choose to make the bowl that size)?

Connect to health or physical education lessons on what sugar does to the body and what sorts of food the body needs to be healthy.

AASL Standards Correlations

- A. I. 2. Recalling prior and background knowledge as context for new meaning
- A. IV. 3 Making choices about information sources to use
- A. VI. 3. Evaluating information for accuracy, validity, social and cultural context, and appropriateness for need.

- B. I. 1. Using evidence to investigate questions.
- B. I. 1 & 2; Using evidence to investigate & Devising and implementing a plan to fill knowledge gaps.
- B. IV. 3. Systematically questioning and assessing the validity and accuracy of information.

- D. I. 2. Engaging in sustained inquiry.
- D. I. 3. Enacting new understanding through real world connections.
- D. III. 1. Actively contributing to group discussions.