

# Critical Thinking: How Much of You Is You?

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## Introduction

This lesson plan was designed to encourage critical thinking about the influences of mass media and popular culture. Specifically, students will investigate, discuss and write about what parts of their lives are influenced. This is followed up by a group writing project and learners read and respond to essays written by other groups. This activity was designed for first-year non-English majors enrolled in a required university EFL course, but could be used in other learning contexts.

## Materials

- VCR and a videotaped collection of TV commercials, excerpts from dramas, sit-coms, MTV, etc.
- Collection of magazines that are popular among this group of learners.

## Procedure

- Students prepare an outline of a typical day, including as much detail as possible regarding actions, activities and lifestyle.
- In pairs or small groups, students explain their outline and ask or answer questions.
- These same pairs or groups discuss and prepare a short report on what actions and activities in their daily schedules are influenced by mass media and popular culture as well as the sources of these influences.
- Pairs or groups report to the class and answer any questions the instructor or classmates have.
- The class watches a videotaped collection of TV clips. Students take notes on what they see and hear, especially possible sources of influence on individual actions, activities and lifestyle.
- Students change partners or groups and compare notes.
- These new groups then go through the magazines looking for implicit and explicit messages regarding actions, activities and lifestyle.
- Using the IPSO (Issue, Position, Support, Outcome) organizational format as a springboard, these new groups then collaborate on a short essay regarding the various influences and the power of mass media and popular culture.
- Essays are posted around the room for public viewing and eventually bound together as a class resource.
- Students write about this task-chain in their reflective journals.

## Outcomes or Productions

The main products will be group essays describing the influences of mass media and popular culture on their lifestyles. Again, these will be posted around the room for public viewing and eventually bound together as a class resource. Another outcome will be the reflective journal entries, which will hopefully encourage students to explore multiple perspectives and explain their ideas and opinions in more detail. This task-chain should provide opportunities to practice each of the four language skills and encourage learners to begin thinking more deeply about their own actions, activities and lifestyles. I also hope students will begin looking at mass media and popular culture more critically.

## Evaluation

Evaluation will be based mainly on observation notes, the finished group essays and reflection journal entries. Ideally, instructors can use this activity to build on earlier lessons and follow it up periodically to take advantage of feeding functions.

## Caveat

The success of this activity is at least partially dependent on what material is chosen and how willing students are to scrutinize their own lifestyles. Instructors will need to experiment with different materials and ways to introduce the activity, maybe modeling for learners as they scrutinize how their own life is influenced by mass media and popular culture. Finally, for classrooms that don't have access to a VCR, teachers can collect more magazines and other examples of mass media and popular culture as a springboard for discussions and writing.

## Conclusion

This task chain should provide learners with the opportunity to develop not only language skills but also critical thinking and reasoning skills they will need in their other studies and after graduation. The following concepts and strategies were taken into consideration.

## Major Concepts

- **Critical Reading and Thinking:** Students will be encouraged to think critically about their daily lives and how they are influenced by mass media and popular culture. Critical reading and thinking will be promoted by searching for implicit and explicit messages in popular magazines. The public viewing of essays will also be an opportunity for critical reading and exploring other perspectives.
- **Dialogical Reasoning:** The group discussions and essays will provide learners with the opportunity to hear and read other ideas and opinions related to lifestyle influences from mass media and popular culture.
- **Argument & Persuasion:** The IPSO framework will be used to help pairs or groups think through their arguments and prepare their collaborative essays.
- **Inquiry and Integration:** Students are encouraged to make connections between the influences of mass media or popular culture and their own lifestyles.

## Main Teaching Strategies

- **Mediative Teaching:** Video clips can be selected which tease students' curiosity and stimulate inquiry, e.g. commercials with implicit and/or explicit messages about **lifestyles**.
- **Collaborative Teaching:** Students spend most of their time in pairs or groups for discussion and work together on the collaborative essay. Verbal interactions will also involve both communication and social skills that should help these learners.
- **Scaffolding:** The collaborative essay should help learners write at a level they would not be able to achieve alone. Scaffolding in this area should influence vocabulary and expressions as well as persuasive writing, examples of reasoning, etc.
- **Collaborative Apprenticeship Learning:** The previous two examples apply here as well. Collaborative writing will help struggling learners in the writing process, while more advanced students should benefit from explaining structure level choices (e.g. essay format) as well as sentence and word level choices (e.g. word order and semantics) in a way that their partners can understand.
- **Inquiry-based teaching:** Students will be required to look for examples of possible influence from mass media and popular culture as well as put their own lifestyles, actions and activities under the microscope.
- **Guided Student Generated Questioning:** This strategy is incorporated into the lesson plan through both the group discussions, collaborative writing and reflective writing follow-up. Students should have some previous training in these questioning techniques but they can also work with a list of questions stems.

