

Analyzing Editorial cartoons:

Cartoonists use images and words, or images alone, to comment on events of the day. Frequently their cartoons deal with issues involving science and the natural phenomena that science studies.

Editorial cartoons on science topics very often deal with the social implications of or political controversy surrounding hot-button scientific issues, and cartoonists often engage in social or political commentary, siding with one point of view or another. At other times the aim of a cartoon is to point out an irony, for humorous effect; sometimes a cartoonist wishes simply to focus attention on an important or emotionally moving subject.

While cartoons are often drawn with little or no use of language, they can nevertheless contain a wealth of information and opinion—that is the cartoonist's art. This information usually will not help you do better on a science or math test, but it will often give insight into the importance of science to our society, and how science and scientists are perceived by the public at large.

The following pointers aim to enhance your appreciation of the craft of the cartoonists and to help you use cartoons to view events with a more critical and informed eye.

Analyzing Cartoons

You could also examine cartoons in your favorite newspapers. Analyze the cartoons with a critical eye, to determine their meaning. Some things to look for:

1. Cartoonists draw images that provide numerous visual clues to their meaning. Treat all these things like information that might give you a clue as to how to interpret the cartoon:
 - Look at the way characters are dressed, the expression on their faces, their size relative to each other; light and shade and characters drawn in silhouette possibly have a specific meaning in a cartoon.
 - Two characters in the same cartoon may have completely different reactions to the same situation—pleasure or alarm, glee or dismay. What does that tell you?
 - The background to a scene may be relevant—but easily ignored.
 - Shapes, too, could be important.

- The weather in a cartoon could bear some significance.
2. Editorial cartoons use labels, speech bubbles or just the titles of the cartoon to supplement the visual image. Read all such information carefully. Some text is tucked away or in small type. Don't disregard it—it might be significant to the meaning of the picture. If there's a calendar on the wall, why is it turned to a particular date? If a character is reading a book, is its title relevant?
 3. Cartoonists frequently use symbols to impart information. Ask yourself if something in the cartoon could possibly stand for another thing. If you think a particular image seems extraneous, assume that the cartoonist had a particular meaning in mind and go from there. The characters the cartoonist uses give you information. Why is Uncle Sam used in a particular cartoon and not the Statue of Liberty? A donkey, not an elephant? A boy scout with a water pistol, not a soldier with an AK47?
 4. Assume that nothing in the cartoon is there by accident—try to read meaning into every image. But also consider: is it possible that the cartoonist is so used to including certain symbols that he might include one that isn't intended in this instance to be interpreted in a particular way?
 5. You might come up with an interpretation that the cartoonist did not intend. That does not mean you are wrong, as long as it makes sense. After all, this happens all the time in literature; a reader often comes up with his or her own interpretation of the text, one which might go way beyond the author's intent. This is critical analysis, and it applies to cartoons too.
 6. Cartoons often incorporate two different issues or events to make their case. Assess how well they work together to make the cartoonist's point. Are the comparisons fair? What another item/event would you have used to make the same point?
 7. Sometimes the same items/situations are used in separate cartoons and by different cartoonists to make a variety of points. Cartoonists have their own language that is transferable between cartoons.
 8. Cartoons are the creator's bully pulpit. Can you trust the cartoonist's information to be accurate or fair if he does not divorce his personal view from the cartoon? Or should you treat the cartoon like a newspaper editorial or op-ed piece?
 9. What is the cartoonist's responsibility to the reader? Should he provide information? Objective analysis? Or just a good laugh?

Now that you have a few pointers about the art, you are ready to draw your own cartoon.

Reference:

“Analyzing Editorial Cartoons.” *Today’s Science*. Infobase Learning, Web. 28 July 2014. <<http://tsof.infobaselearning.com/recordurl.aspx?wid=95172&ID=27408>>.