

Create an Editorial Cartoon

Background Information for Students

What is an Editorial Cartoon?

Editorial cartoons use humor and satire to show a position about current issues. Editorial cartoons constitute both an unusual art form and a commentary on society. Because they express opinions on public issues, editorial cartoons are useful teaching aids for examining historic and contemporary issues and events.

History of Editorial Cartoons:

Editorial cartoons have always been an important feature in our country's newspapers. In fact, they have been in our newspapers even before the original colonies declared independence to become the United States of America. Benjamin Franklin drew the first published American cartoon in 1754. He wanted the colonies to unite together against the British. Instead of just writing about that thought in an editorial, he drew it as an editorial cartoon.

Franklin's cartoon portrayed a snake that had been cut apart. Each piece of the snake symbolized an American colony. Franklin's point was that if the colonies were cut apart; they would not survive. Franklin titled his cartoon, "Join or Die." He got his point across with a picture and very few words. That cartoon is still famous today.



(*Interesting historic cartoon fact: There was a myth at Franklin's time that if a snake was cut apart and the pieces were pushed together, the snake would come alive. That makes his cartoon even more significant.)

Editorial cartoons about current events, especially politics, continued after Franklin. Every American president since George Washington has been the subject of editorial cartoons. Sometimes the subjects of cartoons are not happy about being in a cartoon because the cartoonist can make them look unflattering through exaggeration and caricature.

Early editorial cartoons relied on more words and more realistic artwork than we see in contemporary cartoons. They also had less humor than is found in today's editorial cartoons.

Modern American cartoonists are indebted to Thomas Nast. Nast refined editorial cartooning to an art during the 1870s and 1880s. He worked in New York and is called the Father of Modern American

Editorial Cartoon. He is credited with creating the symbols of the elephant and the donkey for the Republican and Democrat parties. Those symbols are still used today.

(*Interesting historic cartoon fact: Thomas Nast was the first to draw the character we've come to recognize as the American Santa Claus.)

Uncle Sam is a symbol that represents the United States of America. An editorial cartoonist created him. Sam underwent many changes by a variety of cartoonists that drew him. Editorial cartoonist James Montgomery Flagg drew the most famous Uncle Sam. The U. S. Army still uses Flagg's Uncle Sam image on posters. Whenever a cartoonist draws Uncle Sam, that cartoonist wants you to think of the United States. The United States and Uncle Sam even share the same initials.

Today, nearly every major daily newspaper in the country features an editorial cartoon on its opinion page. There are only about 250 editorial cartoonists practicing their craft in the United States. Yet, their impact found in newspaper opinion pages and magazines is profound. Newspapers that don't have their own editorial cartoonist buy the work of other cartoonists to put on their editorial/opinion pages.

The Forum is one of the few daily newspapers in the country that has one editorial cartoonists contributing original work. Editorial cartoons run every day the newspaper is published with two cartoons appearing nearly every Sunday.

Editorial Cartoons Today:

A cartoonist strives to make an opinion about a subject. The cartoonist assumes that you, as the reader of an editorial cartoon will have enough knowledge about a specific current event to understand the cartoon. Because a cartoon must make its point quickly, and usually with humor, it is usually drawn with simplicity you won't find in other artwork. Cartoonists are proud of the work they do. Cartoons can make people mad when they don't agree with the cartoonist or the cartoons can make someone happy when the cartoonist makes a point with which the reader agrees. A cartoonist prime goal is to get people to think about a certain subject and form their own opinions about it.

Cartoonists generally exaggerate the features of a person when drawing an editorial cartoon. The cartoonist takes specific features about a person and makes them bigger. For example a big chin might be drawn as a huge chin, or a big nose might even be more exaggerated.

Cartoonists have usually felt they are working for the public good. They try to attack what they see as wrong behavior and defend what they see as good. They generally try to protect the little guy in this life from being pushed around by powerful interests.

Every cartoonist in the United States knows how fortunate Americans are to have the right to criticize government and other institutions. A cartoonist feels free to exaggerate but not to engage in an outright lie. Editorial cartoons are a marvelous example of the right of free speech found in the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. It is a right that should not be abused. It is right we can all be fortunate we have.

Facts about Editorial Cartoons:

- ✓ Editorial Cartoons are an integral part of many newspaper editorial pages and are used to highlight the single most significant aspect of a news item.
- ✓ Editorial cartoons reflect a subjective evaluation of a news story highlight.
- ✓ Editorial cartoons focus on a single item that is clearly identified. They also may

- ✓ represent a simplification of a complex issue.
- ✓ An effective cartoonist makes use of several specific “tools” to make his or her points clear.
- ✓ It is usually necessary for a reader to be familiar with current events in order to understand the meaning of editorial cartoons.

Essentials of a Good Editorial Cartoon:

- Good editorial Cartoons express the cartoonist’s opinion on a topic and provoke readers to think and clarify their own opinions.
- Thinking skills are much more important than drawing skills in creating a good cartoon.
- A good cartoon is always simple and limited. It never tries to tell everything the cartoonist knows about a topic.
- Drawing should be uncluttered. Heavy, cleaner lines are better for the newspaper than many light lines.
- Any words used (captions, dialogue balloons or words that are part of the drawing itself) should be large, clear and easily recognized.
- Don’t be too much of a perfectionist. If your cartoon is clever and gets across your opinion, you’ve done a good job!

Cartoonist Use These “Tools” to Communicate:

Symbols: Symbols are simple pictures that are commonly understood by people in our society to stand for ideas or groups. For example, a donkey is the symbol for the Democratic Party. Uncle Sam or an eagle symbolizes America and a dove symbolizes peace.

Caricatures: Caricatures are drawings of people that exaggerate certain features to make the cartoon picture of the famous person quickly and easily recognizable. Caricatures also serve sometimes to poke fun at the person they picture.

Stereotypes: Stereotypes are styles of picturing a person or a group of people that call to the reader’s mind commonly held ideas or prejudices about the type of person pictured. Stereotypes often found in editorial cartoons include the lazy, rich Congressman; the old fashioned, bespectacled teacher; the sneaky, fast-talking lawyer; the rumpled, disorganized scientist and many others.

Analogies: Analogies are comparisons. In simplest terms, they tell us that this thing is like that other thing, at least in one respect. They often use symbols and compare a current situation to a well-know historic event, story, book, movie, fairy tale or nursery rhyme.

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Student Activity

Editorial Cartoon Analogy

“The strength of an editorial cartoon lies in its analogy. The best editorial cartoonists do not depict a problem in literal terms. They liken it to something else and invite readers to stretch their imaginations.”

-Cartoonist Roy Paul



When the owner of the Minnesota Twins baseball team threatened to have the team leave the state unless they received a new stadium; many people and fans were upset. The cartoonist observed that many people were mad about high player salaries and the taxpayer being asked to build a new stadium for a team that continued to play poorly, charge a lot of money to get into the games and still get paid very well. He likened the team to a pair of cry-baby twins in the arms of a tired mother.



1. What are the two things being compared in the analogy used in this cartoon?
2. What are some of the points the cartoonist is trying to make by using this analogy?

Newspaper Activity: Look through the newspaper to find a current editorial cartoon analogy. What is being compared in the analogy? What are some of the points the cartoonist is trying to make with this analogy?

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Serious Cartoons?

Editorial page cartoons often provide a humorous comment about a current issue. If a person is not familiar about topics in the news, it may be more difficult to understand the meaning of a political or editorial cartoon. Many of these cartoons use symbols, caricatures and a few words to convey an idea. You can be sure that a cartoon on the editorial page is linked to the news.

1.

Look through your copy of the newspaper to find one editorial or political cartoon.

2.

Clip the cartoon and paste or tape it in the space below.

3.

Try to answer these questions about the cartoon in a few sentences in the space provided. What news topic is the cartoon about? If symbols are used in the cartoon, what are the symbols and what do they mean? Who is the cartoonist? What meaning do you think the cartoonist is trying to convey?

My ideas about the cartoon.....