



Visual Literacy and Civic Life

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During the cold winter months, the Morven Park Education Team is out at schools delivering fun, curriculum-focused activities to Loudoun County students. In our programs, students practice using their voice, standing up for their ideas, and collaborating to solve problems. Another skill that we highlight, particularly through our *Stars & Stripes* program, is the importance of understanding visual literacy in civic life.

Being able to recognize how art and civics intersect might not seem like an obvious or important skill for students to practice, but it is an impactful and relatable topic to many teens. Try to imagine how many images we encounter in a lifetime. Paintings, television commercials, billboards, and cat memes alike—every image has a purpose. Images are designed to send a message and influence viewers in some way. Visual literacy, or being able to identify and interpret messaging in imagery, is a skillset that today's kids should be building more than any generation before them, especially with the prevalence of social outlets like Instagram and Snapchat.

In the *Stars & Stripes* program, we highlight the ways messages can be communicated using WWI Propaganda as examples. Every aspect of propaganda conveys a message; the text, the symbols found within the image, and the color all work together to evoke a feeling. The ability to dissect all these elements with a quick glance is important to understanding the world around us.

Take the *Join the Navy* image (right) that was used as a WWI propaganda piece as an example. Consider the decision or intention of the artist. A simple way to identify their probable stance on issues is to ask:

- What is the purpose of this image?
- Are they telling me their position on world issues?
- Are they trying to convince me to align my beliefs with theirs?

In this case of WWI propaganda, the message was clear. Imagery was created to persuade citizens that joining the war was the right decision.

Symbolism is an easy way for an artist to catch your attention and deliver meaning with little effort. But, as we remind the students during our *Stars & Stripes* program, those symbols can be altered, adjusted, or layered to expand the message.

After seeing *Join the Navy*, many students point out that the sailor looks **happy** to be a part of the Navy, because of the smile on his face. He also looks to be having **fun**. The colors the artist chose to use are **calming**, yet **bright** to catch your attention. The text is **direct** in its messaging, and the large words “Join the Navy” are a **contrasting** color to the imagery, which



Join the Navy, the service for fighting men, Babcock, 1917, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

makes it stand out. The gold torpedo has meaning, not only is it the brightest object in the image, but it could represent wealth or even **winning** a gold medal. In summary, this artist is conveying a positive outlook on joining the navy and supporting the war.

Taking it one step further, we ask students to consider one simple change that could alter the piece. For example, what if the artist of *Join the Navy* had made the water **red** rather than sea-green? How could that have changed the meaning?

By the end of *Stars & Stripes* we want students to see that artistic decisions are intentional and that they will need to be able to recognize bias, persuasion, and purpose in order to make informed decisions about the images they see every day. In this modern area, we could all be better citizens by practicing these skills as we encounter imagery in the world around us.