

How to Read Political Cartoons

Political cartoons communicate an opinion about a current event or political situation in a humorous way. Although the political cartoon may be humorous, the message of the cartoon may be quite serious. Often, it is necessary to have an understanding of the events in the news to understand political cartoons fully.

When reading political cartoons, it is important to look at the context of the cartoon. Look at the details in the cartoon that provide details about the issue.

Common techniques are used by artists of political cartoons. Look for the following visual devices.

- **Caricatures** are used to exaggerate deliberately a person's distinguishing features. A large nose, wavy hair, and a big forehead are distinguishing features.
- A simple **setting** provides geographic reference.
- **Symbols** help the reader understand the cartoon. For example, a maple leaf or beaver symbolizes Canada, a dove means peace, or a hawk may mean war.
- **Size** is exaggerated.
- Dark **shading** is negative; light shading is positive.
- Captions, balloon comments, or **dialogue** give the message.
- A **title** is often used if a caption is not.

Below are questions to ask yourself when reading and analyzing political cartoons.

- What is the event or issue that inspired the cartoon?
- Are there any real people in the cartoon? Who is portrayed in the cartoon?
- Are there symbols in the cartoon? What are the symbols and what do they represent?
- What is the cartoonists' opinion about the topic portrayed in the cartoon?
- Do you agree or disagree with the cartoonist's opinion? Why?