Propaganda and “Truth”: How Do You Know?

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Abstract:

This curriculum unit on propaganda is intended for the high school level in English class. While it can be implemented as a stand-alone set of activities, it can also find its place as part of a more lengthy study of persuasion and rhetoric. Teachers should make their own decisions about the length of time provided for each portion of the unit, taking into consideration how much homework is appropriate and the speed at which students typically work. I suggest that the unit take 8 to 12 class periods (assuming each period lasts approximately one hour.) While some activities will be much easier to complete with access to internet-enabled computers, I have included suggestions for modification whenever possible.

Students will begin this unit by evaluating their previously held beliefs about persuasion and truth as they complete an anticipation guide, which will hopefully engender some debate. After reading and discussing two fiction selections—an excerpt from Orwell’s 1984 and “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut—students will explore the various nuances of “truth” and “lie”. The unit will conclude with time spent analyzing persuasive techniques, including a study of Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals, and finally, students will demonstrate their understanding of the unit concepts by creating propaganda materials. The ultimate goal of this unit is to inspire a spirit of constant inquiry and doubt in students, whereby they will get into the habit of questioning every new piece of information that comes their way.