

# Modern Editorial Cartoons: An Integral Part Of A Balanced Current Events Program For The History Classroom

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Every year the body of knowledge in each of our social studies disciplines increased; curricular time becomes more precious than ever. Certainly we want our students to have an awareness of local, state, national, and international affairs, but few individuals can fit a current events course into an already crowded schedule. To reach the maximum audience despite inherent time constraints, educators must therefore look to include news background materials in required course offerings.

Time set aside for current events instruction must represent an acceptable opportunity cost and not cause us to lose course of study focus. Periodic utilization of instructor – prepared packets of editorial cartoons offer an inexpensive, student pleasing avenue to meet this challenge, provide instructional variety, and aid visual learners.

Cartoons alone, however, are like icing without a cake. First we must establish functional current events literacy as a precondition to further study, and insist that students prepare reports based on TV news programs and local newspaper articles at least once a week on an ongoing basis.

Selecting cartoons for utilization in your presentation is no problem. They appear on a regular basis in almost all large newspapers and are often reprinted in major news magazines and opinion journals.

The Washington Monthly (September, 1988) had an incisive article on editorial cartooning from the Civil War era's Thomas Nast to the present and gave credit for the current popularity of this genre to the arrival of Pat Oliphant at the Denver Post in 1964.

He came from Australia with a bag of tricks that included satire, wit, caricature, and, most of all, irreverence – just the sort of political commentary the increasingly skeptical children of the sixties were craving.

Oliphant is still a popular cartoonist and his liberal interpretation of events contrasts nicely with those of conservative Mike Ramirez. Mike, formerly of the L.A. Times, is now with Investors' Business Daily. Cartoons by both along with those of other top artists are found at Daryl Cagle's free service, Cagle.com. An often humorous liberal viewpoint is

available from the pen of The Dayton Daily News' Mike Peters. His cartoons are archived at [Grimmy.com](http://Grimmy.com).

Amassing enough cartoons to produce a 1 -2 day instructional package is a longitudinal endeavor. Any cartoon which offers educational promise should be cut or ripped out immediately and placed in the accumulation box until the rough sort by topic takes place. Libraries offer access to myriad newspapers and may allow an instructor to “harvest” selected cartoons after a few days on the shelf.

Roughly a week before presentation, teachers should rough sort their trimmed cartoons by topic, determine sequence within groups and provide for transition between topics. Editing an instructional set is challenging, and provision should be made for an “attention getter” opener and “strong impact” or humorous closer.

At first glance a lecture method of presentation seems mandated, but cartoons can be individual quizzes and a combination Socratic questioning/lecture format appears to work best. An opaque projector or transparencies with overhead can be used to allow large numbers to see the cartoons. Another possibility is photocopying individual sets of cartoons for each student, including a “for instructional purposes only” disclaimer on the master. This technique works best in rooms which are too light and in situations where the teacher can prepare class sets or even allow students the luxury of taking notes on the cartoons themselves. Obviously if student behavior is a problem this latter method offers the prospect of better classroom control.

Variety is an important component of pedagogical technique. Visual learners may benefit from utilization of either technique, and almost all students enjoy the humor in many editorial cartoons. Classroom use of cartoons on a quarterly basis offers the potential of an affective change in the student as he becomes a “cartoon junkie” and takes a greater interest in current events and the political process.

## USING EDITORIAL CARTOONS IN THE HISTORY CLASSROOM

As history educators know, human beings learn in many different ways. A pure auditory strategy may work with some students, but visual learners get left behind. Teaching with editorial cartoons offers students a chance to experience opinion pieces from any period being studied. Student interest increases as instructional variety is enhanced.

Cartoons can be used to introduce, reinforce or review content. They can also be used as evaluation pieces. The AP exam is a good example of this strategy.

Utilizing contemporary cartoons in instruction offers a creative way to teach about current topics and their historical antecedents. This strategy produces a continual review opportunity for regular course content.

From Ben Franklin's "Join Or Die" in 1754 to the cartoon in today's newspaper, students must merge their historical knowledge with a fundamental visual literacy to decipher the cartoonist's opinion. How do they acquire this skill? I suggest a strategy which I refer to as SLICK...Student Literacy In Cartoon Knowledge. This familiarity with cartooning fundamentals is achieved when students, with your help, are able to recognize some one hundred symbols/caricatures which cartoonists often use in their work. Deciphering individual cartoons becomes a lot easier after mastery of this technique. Introducing SLICK in the first week of your course empowers students to "speak the language" and enjoy this path to historical knowledge and greater understanding of today's world.

## SLICK...STUDENT LITERACY IN CARTOON KNOWLEDGE

The symbols/caricatures which I have selected to create a foundation of cartoon literacy for students are as follows, first alphabetical then categorized...(symbols and caricatures will be included when appropriate, some repetition in categorized section)

baby...new year  
 bear...declining stock prices  
     bear...symbol of Russia  
 bull...rising stock prices  
 bulldog...Britain/England  
     buzzard...death  
 Capitol Hill...Congress or U.S. Government  
 CCCP...the former Soviet Union  
     devil...evil  
 domino...a chain reaction  
 donkey...Democrat Party  
     dove...peace  
     dragon...China  
     eagle...America  
     elephant...Republican Party,  
 GOP...Grand Old Party/Republicans  
 Gorbachev...last leader of USSR  
     guillotine...beheading device  
 Lenin...led the Russian Revolution/communist  
     white hooded figure or KKK...Klan/racism  
     Khrushchev...Soviet leader 1953-1964  
 Kremlin...Soviet Union/Russia/Red Square/Moscow  
     Mao...led the Chinese communist revolution  
     maple leaf...Canada  
 meat grinder...war or battle with constant death  
 Marx...founded communism

military helmet...modern style means now  
 Mother Teresa...charity/giving/good works  
     Mounties...Canada  
     mushroom cloud...nuclear war  
     native American...Indian symbol  
     needle...drug use  
     nuclear symbol...atomic power/nuclear war  
 olive branch...peace, Olympic symbol, Palestinian head apparel, peace symbol  
     Pentagon...America's military HQ  
 pig...pet congressional spending programs/wasteful spending/Pork Barrel  
     spending/overindulgence/taking more than your fair share  
     poodle...a French symbol  
     pound symbol...British currency  
 Red Star...communism/USSR/Communist China or other communist countries  
     scales of justice...fairness  
     sheep...sleep  
     sombrero...Mexico/Mexican  
     Sphinx...Egypt  
     Stars and Bars...Confederate flag  
     Star of David...Israel/Jewish  
     Statue of Liberty...America/freedom  
     stork...baby/New Year  
 swastika...Fascism/Nazism/Hitler's Germany  
     tam...Frenchman  
     target...danger  
     tight rope...trouble  
     Twin Towers...New York City/9-11  
     trident...devil/evil  
 Uncle Sam...America/patriotism, Union soldier  
     vulture...death/dying/trouble  
 White House...U.S. president/American government, WW1 helmet, WW2 helmet  
     XXX...pornographic/poison

#### PLUS BY TOPIC:

AMERICAN PRESIDENTS...Washington, Lincoln, TR, and FDR-present  
 WORLD LEADERS/HISTORICAL FIGURES...Castro, Churchill, Eleanor Roosevelt,  
     Gandhi, Gorbachev, Hitler, Lenin, Mao, Marx, Napoleon, and Stalin  
     CURRENCY SYMBOLS...dollar, Euro, Yen  
 HATS/DRESS...cowboy (west, Texas, free spirit/wild), German helmet  
     Mounties uniform...Canada,  
     Palestinian headdress,

WW1-WW2-modern helmets  
Vietnamese peasant garb