10 Things To Look For In Cartoons

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The use of cartoons alongside articles has become more and more popular for School Accessed Courseworks (SACs) and end of year English exam. At first glance and even the second glance, cartoons may not always appear to contain great amounts of information for students to analyse. However, when students know what to look for, it can be a vital jump-start for an insightful cartoon analysis. After all, there is a reason why teachers and examiners choose to use cartoons. It is crucial that students develop a strong ability to analyse cartoons with or without written articles.

While there are many resources helping students gain skills in analysing written articles, few are specifically focused on cartoons. Below are 10 things you should look for in cartoons. These are common techniques used by illustrators and are a fantastic starting point in cartoon analysis.

1. Colour

In coloured cartoons, there are myriad of things you can look for. Ask yourself these questions:

- What colours did the illustrator use?
- What colours are used most? Least?
- Is there a repetition of colours?
- Is there only one colour?

Colours can be separated into two groups – warm colours and cool colours. Warm colours including red, orange and yellow may be used to evoke feelings of comfort and warmth. It can also be used to express anger and embarrassment. Meanwhile, cool colours including blue, green and purple may represent calm and tranquility. Otherwise it can mean sadness and misery.

What colours mean¹:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Emotions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Symbol of menace or evil, popular as an indicator of power. Associated with death and mourning, unhappiness, sexuality, formality, and sophistication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Purity or innocence. Cold, bland, and sterile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Evokes strong emotions, associated with love, warmth, and comfort. Still considered an intense and angry color that creates feelings of excitement, intensity, sexuality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Gives the feelings of calmness or serenity. Described as peaceful, tranquil, secure, and orderly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Symbolizes nature and the natural world. Represents tranquility, good luck, health, and jealousy. Symbol of fertility, has a calming effect and relieves stress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Cheery and warm, but can also create feelings of frustration and anger. Most fatiguing to the eye yet most attention-seeking color (so great color for important details or calls to action- remember the yellow stop/caution color).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>Royalty and wealth, wisdom and spirituality, sex and relationships, exotic and special.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Natural color that evokes a sense of strength and reliability, warmth, comfort, and security.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Orange | Blatant and vulgar colour, makes you feel excitement, enthusiasm, and warmth. As a combination of red and yellow it's often used to draw attention.

Pink | Associated with love, romance, youth, freshness and may have a calming effect. Pink effect depends on the type of pink (strong, light, deep etc).

Remember that a group of colours can represent an overall meaning:

- Red, blue and white – can represent Australian flag and symbolises patriotism.
- Red, orange, and dark brown – can represent earth and nature.

While analysing colourful cartoons, also consider that many cartoons are black and white. Although these cartoons lack colour, illustrators use other methods to create meaning.

- What shading is used? – heavy shading can mean power and solidity; light shading can indicate frailty and insignificance.
- What textures/patterns are used? – smooth or rough.
- What shapes are there?

Remember that no cartoons are simply just ‘black and white.’

For example:

**Analysis:** The monochromatic national broadband laid across mountains and kilometers just to serve one shack may represent a sombre plan that is pointless for Australian citizens.

2. Size

Size is an important element in cartoons and one that is often quite obvious. Investigate:

- Is anything disproportioned?
- Exaggerated? Under-exaggerated?
- What is large and what is small?

For example:
Background: Wikileaks exposes information about Hilary Clinton and Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard’s subsequent condemnation of the website.

Analysis: The oversized ‘WikiLake’ appears to be irrepressible and too overwhelming for any of the three politicians from preventing another information release.

3. Labelling

- What is labeled?
- What do the labels say?
- Do the labels tell us the situation? Person? Time change?

For example:

Background: In the aftermath of the 2011 Queensland floods, many will be seeking insurance for home and business damages.

Analysis: The label ‘Grin Insurance’ is satirical in that one would expect a customer to be ‘grinning’ to have their insurance. However, the insurance policy only ‘covers [them] against small ‘f’ flood’, not the ‘capital ‘F’ Flood’ they
have just experienced, leaving them with no insurance and little to ‘grin’ about.

4. Speech bubbles

- Who is speaking?
- What are they saying?
- Is it a conversation?

For example:

![Cartoon by Nicholson from "The Australian" newspaper](image)

**Background:** Cows contribute to greenhouse gases via flatuence of methane gas.

**Analysis:** The irony of a cow stating that he is a ‘climate change septic’ when his own release of methane gas is a significant cause in growing greenhouse gases.

5. Symbols

A symbol is something that represents or stands for something else, usually an idea. They are commonly found throughout daily lives such as the cross for Christianity or the Red Cross for the organisation that helps victims of war or natural disasters. Sometimes symbols may be as obvious as those mentioned above, yet other times may be more subtle in their meaning.

- What symbols are incorporated?
- Why are particular symbols used?
- Is it a well-known symbol?
- Is the symbol’s meaning clear and identifiable? Or is it vague and can have multiple interpretations?

For example:
**Background:** Ted Baillieu, opposition leader against John Brumby in 2010 Victorian state elections.

**Analysis:** The representation of Baillieu as an iceberg indicates that he is a powerful force preventing the Labor Party from moving forwards and winning the 2010 state elections. The cartoon symbolises the famous movie, Titanic, and indicates that the Labor Party is bound to ‘sink’ against Baillieu and fail to 'move forward' to a victory.

### 6. Focus

The focus of a cartoon can indicate the main issue or situation.

- What is in focus?
- What is in the foreground and background?

**For example:**

**Background:** Wikileaks obtaining information about politicians.
**Analysis:** While a gigantic fly labeled ‘Wikileaks’ is the main focus of the cartoon, it is humorous in that it succeeds in surreptitiously listening in on Kevin Rudd and Hilary Clinton’s unsuspecting private conversation.

### 7. Angle

Angles often provide readers an indication of the status of particular people or things. If the angle is sloping down, then it creates an image of a smaller person or item. This indicates weakness, inferiority and powerlessness. An angle sloping up towards a person or item provides it with power, superiority and authority. A straight-on angle can represent equality.

- Is the angle sloping up?
- Is the angle sloping down?
- Is it straight on?
- From behind? Front on?
- On top or below?

**For example:**

[Cartoon by Mark Knight from “The Herald Sun” newspaper]

**Background:** Banks and Power Companies are two sectors important to Australian society.

**Analysis:** The angle tilted up towards the Bank and Power Company demonstrates that they are domineering, powerful and authoritative.

### 8. Tone

The tone of a cartoon can indicate the illustrator’s attitude and stance towards the issue.

Common cartoon tones include: satire, humour, irony and amusement. For more examples of tones check out: VCE Study Guide’s 195 Tones Vocabulary.

**For example:**
Background: The North Koreans are well known for their possession of nuclear weapons.

Analysis: Although North Korea has made significant technological advances with their nuclear weapons, it is ironic that their other tools of war remain underdeveloped, perhaps since the Middle Ages as the catapult implies.

9. Facial Expression

Facial expressions are key to the character’s thoughts, feelings and emotions.

- What facial expressions are used?
- Do they change (sequential cartoons)?
- How do expressions compare to another’s expression?
- Is it an expression we expect?

For example:
**Background:** Prince William introducing Kate Middleton to his royal family.

**Analysis:** While Prince William appears to be proud and excited to introduce Kate to his family, his fiancé’s expression demonstrates that perhaps she may be apprehensive about the event.

### 10. Context

The context of a cartoon is important. Most of the time, cartoons are attached to articles and usually draw upon a point contended by the writer of the article.

- Does the cartoon support or oppose the article?
- Is it relevant or irrelevant?
- Does it focus on the past, present or future?
- Which aspect of the article does it relate to?
- Does it add further information?

However, there are times when you will have to analyse a cartoon alone, where it is not accompanying an article. In this case you will have to understand the background, the situation and the issue that is represented.

**Reference:**

1. [http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/color-psychology-website-design/](http://www.1stwebdesigner.com/design/color-psychology-website-design/)

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