



Students can learn a lot about the candidates by watching how they speak, how they move, and how they dress.

Note to teachers: A worksheet based on this article has been developed for your students to use as they watch the debates. Download the worksheet from www.ciconline.org/cicmagazine-sept08.

LIGHTS, CAMERA ... DEBATE!

How to watch the presidential debates from a media-literacy perspective.

by Frank W. Baker and Karen Zill

Welcome to debate season 2008. Fasten your seatbelts; it might just be another bumpy ride (with apologies to Bette Davis).

The term *debate* is a misnomer—the candidates don't debate in the traditional sense. Instead, the debates offer us opportunities to see and hear the candidates face each other and answer questions from journalists and voters. They might be allowed to direct a question to one another, but that is as close to a real debate as we will experience.

Candidates spend numerous hours preparing for these debates, studying briefing books and demonstrating their comfort on stage and in front of the cameras. In fact, some experts say that appearance is as important as, if not more than, what the candidates say. It is the camera that will transmit their images to millions of people watching on television and online.

How important are debates to the candidates? Just ask Al Gore, who was soundly lampooned by the cast of *Saturday Night Live* for his infamous "lockbox" comment and know-it-all attitude during his first debate with opponent George W. Bush. The candidate reportedly was blindsided by the public needling and sat with his staff to study the comedy bit to temper his tone in time for the candidates' second debate.

FORMAT

The tradition of televised debates between U.S. presidential candidates goes back to the 1960 race between Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy. Those debates set the format we now expect: candidates standing behind a podium, answering questions posed by journalists. From a media-literacy perspective, those debates were notable for the contrasts they presented, with Nixon winning points on content matters while Kennedy won over viewers with his speaking style and other visual cues.

This year, there are a few changes in the debate format. The first and third debates will have a single moderator seated at a table with the candidates, while the second debate will resemble a town meeting, with questions posed by audience members and e-mails from viewers.

The first and third presidential debates, as well as the vice-presidential debate, will be comprised of eight 10-minute "issue" segments. Each debate will begin at 9 p.m. ET and last 90 minutes.

HOW TO WATCH

Although the debates are meant as a platform for

the candidates to articulate their proposed policies, when viewed from a media-literacy perspective, these events provide a more nuanced view of the candidates and a look into our political process.

Listening for details of a candidate's issues is important, of course, but understanding the visual language of the medium along with the language used to frame issues is increasingly important. Here are some tips:

★*Setting/format:* The debate locations have been carefully chosen—mostly because of their ability to host large audiences and to handle media requirements. Watch for:

- the use of patriotic colors and symbols on stage;
- where the TV cameras are positioned and how they photograph and frame the candidates; and
- differences in the candidates' clothing, movements, and speaking styles between the first two sit-down debates and the town-meeting format.

★*Cutaways:* In previous debates, candidates have been caught on-camera in unguarded moments. (One notable example was the George H.W. Bush look-

ing at his watch during a debate.) The “cutaway shot” is nothing more than the reaction shot of an opponent or individual audience members while the candidate is speaking. Take note of when the TV director uses a cutaway shot and what possible impact it might have on viewers.

★*Techniques of persuasion:* Most states’ teaching standards include having students identify the popular techniques of persuasion, and the debates are another occasion for students to listen for and identify these. They include glittering generalities, name-calling, appeal to emotions, euphemisms, plain-folks, and other techniques. Also note whether a candidate makes eye contact with his questioner or the camera when answering questions. (For a complete list of persuasion techniques, see www.propagandacritic.com.)

★*Favorite phrases:* During the campaign, specific words, phrases, and slogans have entered the lexicon of both candidates and with their supporters (e.g., Barack Obama’s “change” and “Yes, we can” and John McCain’s “straight talk” and “Bring it on”). Keep a scorecard of how many times a candidate uses these buzzwords or phrases.

★*Rehearsed responses:* In many past TV debates, presidential candidates have used phrases that, on the surface, appeared to be spontaneous but in fact were well rehearsed, mostly because the candidate expected the question (e.g., Ronald Reagan’s “There you go again”). Listen carefully for signs of the candidate’s rehearsed responses. Also note whether he is using prepared talking points to make a statement rather than directly answering a specific question.

Often, these well-rehearsed phrases become the main sound bite that news outlets use to recap a debate. See if you can pick out the comment that will make the next day’s headlines.

★*Horse-race journalism:* In every campaign, we hear a lot about who’s raised the most money, who’s ahead in the polls, and strategies for appealing to niche voters. The news media’s tendency to focus on the “horse-race” aspect of campaigns, rather than the issues, has been criticized for years, yet it continues. Following the broadcast, watch for commentators and pundits who use sports analogies (e.g., knockout, homerun). Also note how campaign spokespeople spin the debate outcome

to make their candidate appear to be the winner.

Asking, “Who won?” misses the point. The question to consider after a debate is this: What did we learn about the candidate and his positions that we did not already know?

NEW MEDIA

For alternative voices and viewpoints to those of the mainstream media, look online for bloggers who will be writing, commenting, or reacting during the actual debates. Log on to your favorite news source as well and compare the bloggers’ comments as you watch. Be aware of the author: He or she may have an agenda and a bias.

CHECKING FACTS AND PERCEPTIONS

During the debate, you will likely hear the candidates cite statistics to support their stands on the issues. Jot down one or two of those numbers to verify later. After the debate, you can check the accuracy of a candidate’s claims at the Annenberg Political Fact Check website.

Finally, based on your media-literate approach to watching the debate, assess each candidate’s overall performance. How do you think your perception of the candidates may have been affected by the techniques and imagery used in the debate? Your media-literate perspective may not determine who you would vote for in November, but it can certainly make for more lively classroom discussions of the debates. ■■

Frank W. Baker is a media-education consultant and 2007 winner of a Cable’s Leaders in Learning Award. His new book, Political Campaigns and Political Advertising: A Media Literacy Guide, will be published in November by Greenwood Press.

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RELATED RESOURCES

The American Presidency Project: Debates
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/debates.php

Annenberg Political Fact Check
www.factcheck.org

CNN: Election Center 2008
www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/debates

C-SPAN Politics
www.c-span.org/politics

Commission on Presidential Debates: Transcripts
debates.org/pages/debtrans.html

Discovery Education Streaming—Video: Techniques of Persuasion
streaming.discoveryeducation.com (registration required)

The History of Televised Presidential Debates
museum.tv/debateweb/html

History.com: Speeches & Video Gallery
history.com/media.do

Inside the Presidential Debates: Their Improbable Past and Promising Future.
Newton N. Minow, Craig L. LaMay, and Vartan Gregorian (University of Chicago Press, 2008)

PBS Vote 2008
www.pbs.org/teachers/vote2008/

Presidential Debates: Fifty Years of High-Risk TV
Alan Schroeder (Columbia University Press, 2008)

★ DEBATE SCHEDULE

2008 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

DATES	LOCATIONS
9/26/08	University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS
10/7/08	Belmont University, Nashville, TN
10/15/08	Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY

DEBATE TOPIC(S)
Domestic policy
Town-meeting format with questions from audience members and via the Internet
Foreign policy

2008 VICE-PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

10/2/08	Washington University, St. Louis, MO	Domestic and foreign policy
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