



Evaluating Media Sources

Focus: Kennedy vs. Nixon¹

Overview

By comparing the written with the televised broadcast versions of the famous Kennedy-Nixon debate, students can glean valuable evidence of the impact that television plays on an audience's perception of a speaker's credibility.

Standards

- **9-10.SL.2.** Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally), evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.
- **9-10.SL.3.** Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

Objectives

- To evaluate crucial elements of a speech
- To compare speech in print and performance
- To analyze how television altered an audience's perception of a speaker

Materials

- Computer and internet connection
- Sound system
- [Printed copy of Kennedy and Nixon's first debate](#)
- [Film copy of Kennedy and Nixon's first debate](#)
- Auditory copy of Kennedy and Nixon's first debate

¹ Given that students may already have prior knowledge of Kennedy and Nixon, it would be a good idea to (temporarily) conceal the names of the speakers during the first part of this lesson -- that is, to avoid saying, "Okay, we're looking at the Kennedy-Nixon debates." During the part of the lesson which asks students to read the debate transcript, it would be advisable to black out the names of the debaters in order to look at the speakers' words and rhetorical strategies, not at their public reputations.



Activities

Lecture

Begin by reminding students of the basic ideas of **logos** (logical reasoning based on demonstrable facts), **pathos** (the appeal to an audience's emotions instead of to its reason), and **ethos** (the respect or esteem in which the audience holds the speaker because of her or his reputation or experience) as rhetorical strategies used to persuade.

Teachers could remind students of moments in history or literature that use appeals to logos, ethos, or pathos, and discuss how each one relates to winning the argument by using these kinds of strategies. For example, teachers could previously have taught Sojourner Truth's speech "Ain't I a Woman?" to examine how Truth uses logos, logical reasoning, to argue the following ideas:

- You say women should not be allowed to vote.
- Your reason is that women are weak and weak people should not vote.
- I am a woman.
- I am not weak.
- Therefore, your reasoning is flawed and women should be allowed to vote.

Students should also review [logical fallacies](#) -- the "dirty tricks" of argumentation by improper or inappropriate appeals to irrelevant issues. Some classic fallacies include the *ad hominem* attack (in which a speaker denigrates some personal quality of her or his opponent and ignores the content of the opponent's argument), the "bandwagon" approach in which the argument is essentially, "Well, everyone's doing it; therefore, it must be good," or the appeal to patriotism (e.g., "If you do not do/believe this idea, you are an enemy of the country") and many others.

Discussion

As many teachers know, the visual differences between the telegenic Kennedy and the less-telegenic Nixon played a vital role in the audience's perception of each man during their debate. In brief, a strong majority of those who heard the debate over the radio believed that Nixon had won -- but those who saw the debate on television believed the victory was Kennedy's. Same words, same moments -- different reactions.

As preparation for this crucial aspect of the lesson, discuss the following issues with students. Students should NOT be given prior information about the Kennedy-Nixon debate ahead of



time; in fact, it would be helpful (when they read the transcript) to “black out” the speakers’ names to prevent bias.

Discussion

- Should a speaker’s personal or physical appearance during a debate be an important factor in deciding who won?
- Why do we give so much importance to physical appearance in our political candidates?
- Let’s say you and a friend were both interested in a presidential debate. She saw the candidates’ debate in a television news broadcast; you heard the candidates’ debate on the radio. Would you and your friend necessarily agree who won?
- What elements -- besides the candidates’ political views -- might make you disagree with your friend?
- Who -- the person who saw the television broadcast versus the person who heard the radio broadcast -- has the more reliable understanding of the candidates’ qualities and arguments?

Activity 2

Reading the Debate

Assign the strongest and most able readers to read the transcript of the Kennedy-Nixon debate or read the debate aloud to the class.

Pause frequently to allow the students to write down the following information in their copies of the debate transcript:

Debate Annotation Questions

- Who is “winning” at this point in the debate?
- Why do you think so?
- Label any and all appeals to pathos, to ethos, and to logos.
- For each of these labels (and you should have a minimum of two for each), write down **why or in what way** this moment is an example of pathos, ethos, or logos.



- Label any and all logical fallacies you find. You should find a minimum of two.
- Is one candidate using more logical fallacies than the other? Which one uses more?
- Is one candidate appealing more to pathos than to logos? Who is it?
- Which candidate would you personally vote for? Why?

Small Groups

When the debate has been read and annotated, split students up into small groups and have them discuss amongst themselves whom they believe to be the stronger rhetorician and why. Whose arguments overall were more convincing? Which candidate used more appeals to emotion than appeals to reason? Which candidate used a greater number of logical fallacies?

When students have completed discussion, have them split into two sides -- one for the first candidate and one for the other, and move to separate sides of the room.

Whole-Class Discussion

Have the students from each side summarize why their candidate won and the other guy lost. Write down on the board each group's reasoning. NOTE: The teacher's role in this part of the class is to continually require students to support their conclusions **with evidence from the text**. It is not sufficient for a student to say, "Well, I just thought Candidate A was more credible." Ask him where in the text A was being credible and B was not. "I just think so" or "It's my opinion" is not sufficient information.

Activity 3

The Big Reveal!

At this point, explain to students that television played a major role in the shaping of modern political theater, and that one of the most telling moments of television's impact on the public perception of a political candidate came from polling audiences who had (respectively) listened to or seen Kennedy's and Nixon's first political debate.

WITHOUT (for now) telling students that radio audiences thought Nixon won while television audiences felt Kennedy had, play the film copy of Kennedy and Nixon's first debate. Students



should watch the debate and take notes using the Debate Annotation Questions below. The catch? They should NOT look at their previous notes. They should, to the best degree possible, approach the debate “fresh,” without their previous thoughts or reflections to guide them or shape their responses to the televised version of the debate.

- [Film copy of Kennedy and Nixon’s first debate](#)

Debate Annotation Questions

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- Label any and all logical fallacies you find. You should find a minimum of two.
- Is one candidate using more logical fallacies than the other? Which one uses more?
- Is one candidate appealing more to pathos than to logos? Who is it?
- Which candidate would you personally vote for? Why?

Small-Group Discussion

As before, have students decide who won. Be certain to tell students to take into consideration all of the elements that the media brings to the delivery of the issues and the candidate’s speech. The following questions may be helpful in guiding students’ responses:

- What, specifically, about the winner’s appearance helped him win?
- What, specifically, about the loser’s appearance helped him lose?
- Whose body language was more comfortable? Whose was less?
- Who was more physically attractive by conventional standards?
- Who appeared more confident? More nervous? What is your evidence?

**Whole-Group Discussion**

Discuss the class's view of how the visual and auditory elements of television affected their view of the candidates, the candidates' arguments, and the effectiveness of the speakers.

Closing

Students may spend some closing time in writing down or summarizing the effect of this lesson on their understanding. How did this lesson affect their understanding of the ways in which media changes perception of a speaker? Are we as Americans now more prone to vote for a possibly un- or underqualified candidate because she or he is more telegenic or attractive? In what ways might this present a problem for the democracy in which we live? These answers may be turned into a paper, shared with the class, or kept for personal reflection.

Resources

- [Museum of Broadcasting Corporation](#)
- [Top 10 memorable political moments](#)
- [Kennedy-Nixon Transcript](#)
- [Kennedy-Nixon Video](#)
- [Rhetorical Analysis - need EBSCO access](#)
- [CNN Summary](#)
- [Non-Profit Downloadable](#)
- [Film Archives](#)
- [Kennedy Media links](#)

Analysis

- [The Beard and the Pasty Forehead](#)
- [Power of Television Images: The First Kennedy-Nixon Debate Revisited](#)
- [WSJ Blog - No Wonder Nixon Lost](#)

General Resources

- [Glossary of Rhetorical Devices with Examples](#)
- [Logos, Ethos, and Pathos](#)
- [Logos, Ethos, and Pathos - Cal State Pomona](#)
- [The Writing Center, UNC, Chapel Hill](#)

