

## Holiday Cards and Custom Messages: An Introduction to Media Literacy Education Skills

by Susan Spangler

The National Association for Media Literacy Education's (NAMLE) Core Principles (<http://namle.net/publications/core-principles/>) remind teachers that media literacy education (MLE) cannot be taught in one lesson or even in one unit; rather, the skills developed by MLE "necessitate integrated, interactive, and repeated practice." Which prompts me to ask, if MLE is always ongoing, where and when does it begin?

This simple lesson is a starting point for getting young writers involved in media literacy education because at its root are some fundamental principles: All messages are constructed and require active inquiry and critical thinking to be fully understood.

In this lesson, which is consistent with many of NAMLE's Core Principles, students examine elements of holidays, invent their own original holiday and elements, and examine and create holiday cards based on them. The activities help students focus on the reasons for composing messages as they do. Through reflection, students realize that good communication doesn't just "happen." Good communication is purposely constructed to achieve a particular effect.

This lesson is most appropriate for novice writers, and can give a boost to students who struggle with or lack confidence in their writing. It could also be easily adapted for use with English language learners—students could be asked to follow the same steps, focusing on holidays they have experienced in their own cultures.

### Step 1: Get Writers Thinking about Holidays

I begin by asking my writers to think of a holiday that is celebrated or observed in their family or culture. It doesn't have to be a major holiday—even something as low-key as Flag Day is useful in discussing the elements of a holiday.

I have the students write the holiday on a piece of paper (or computer screen). Then I tell students to list all the elements associated with the holiday, including (but not limited to) the following:

- colors
- special foods eaten mainly on that day
- religious or government ceremonies
- travel
- a "character" of some sort

- a particular place
- family traditions
- mementos/souvenirs
- special decorations
- gifts exchanged
- particular kinds of music
- events that occur on this day
- commercialization/merchandising
- season/time of year/date
- costumes or special items of clothing that are worn

Though the writing is informal, writers should assume an audience who is unfamiliar with the holiday in order to get an appropriate level of detail. Writers could also be encouraged to write about a particular holiday remembrance to share as part of this step.

### Example:

#### Valentine's Day

*Valentine's Day is celebrated in the United States on February 14. The main color associated with the holiday is red, though pink and even purple are sometimes included on the heart-shaped decorations for this holiday.*

*The history of the holiday is somewhat vague. The day is mostly about the mass marketing of chocolate and flowers, along with greeting cards. The holiday has become a day to celebrate romantic love, and it's very common for people to send their love interests gifts. People sometimes get engaged or married on Valentine's day because of the association with romance. I think the day originally honored a Christian martyr, although as I said earlier, the history is a bit vague. Hearts are the main decoration, and restaurants also get a lot of business on this day because people want to take their loved one out for a romantic dinner.*

*Cupid is a character associated with the day. He's some mythical personality that goes around shooting arrows at people so they will fall in love. It doesn't make a lot of sense, but he represents love, so he's part of it.*

*My sister got engaged on Valentine's Day last year. Her boyfriend took her out to a fancy restaurant in town and put the ring in her dessert, which had some kind of chocolate stick coming out of the top. She was really excited, and that made that particular Valentine's day memorable to me.*

After students and I are finished writing, I have someone volunteer a holiday, and that student and others who chose the same holiday list the elements they jotted down on the board/overhead, just so we have a group example. I give a few more minutes to the writers after the discussion so that they can add anything new to their lists that they may have forgotten.

## Step 2: Thinking of a New Holiday

I then ask students to think of an event, person, group, or activity that they think deserves a holiday. It's been said that there are already too many meaningless holidays ("What is 'Sweetest Day' anyway?"), but for this lesson, there is nothing too unimportant to celebrate.

Once again, I have students use the elements previously listed to create a "back story" for the holiday as well as the elements they would associate with the holiday.

I encourage students to use their imaginations to integrate characters, music, food, and other elements into their days—the more the better, because they will have more to work with once they begin to compose in a later part of the lesson. I remind students again that they will need to include a lot of detail to explain their new holiday to people who are unfamiliar with it.

### Example:

#### *Ice Cream Day*

*Ice Cream Day will be celebrated on the first day of summer, June 20 or 21, Summer Solstice. Because ice cream is good to eat in the summer (because it cools you off), that is an appropriate day.*

*On this day, people will treat each other to ice cream, and all the ice cream shops will offer free sample-size cones for everyone. Ice cream would obviously be the main food associated with the holiday. People would wear "ice cream colors," soft pinks, blues, and greens, like strawberry, blueberry, and mint ice cream. Some people will take off of work to get ice cream, but government offices will still be open, and it will not have a religious observance. The week before Ice Cream Day, though, you will probably start seeing ads all over the place for specials on ice cream. All the vendors will want you to buy their ice cream on the special day. Some retailers will probably sell Ice Cream Day t-shirts and tank tops for each year as a way to cash in on the day.*

*For the kids, there will be special "my first Ice Cream Day" bowls that some of the ice cream shops will sell as mementos of the day. A character, Connie Cone, will be used as a reminder of the day. Connie will be a huge ice cream cone that will visit ice cream shops and keep all the kids entertained while they eat their ice cream.*

## Step 3: Examining Holiday Cards

For this part of the lesson, I bring in a stack of old baby shower cards (cards for any event will do) and pass them out to the students, who work in groups. I ask them to examine the colors, images, and sentiments written on the card for a few minutes, and then we discuss how these rhetorical elements are appropriate for the audience and the occasion (in this case, for me and my baby shower).

In a class discussion students usually note the baby-appropriate colors of light blues, pinks, greens, and yellows.

They also notice the images of umbrellas and rain (for showers) or babies, rattles, and stuffed animals—all fitting for a baby shower. The sentiments properly express hope, best wishes, and anticipation for the imminent arrival of a baby.

As each group presents the analysis of their cards, we discuss how these messages were constructed with the audience and occasion in mind as well as how effective the students think the cards are. Through this discussion, students think critically about the messages received through the cards, listen to each other's perspectives and points of view, and come to understand what elements make the cards effective.

## Step 4: Creating a Greeting Card for Students' New Holidays

Because media literacy education encompasses both analysis and expression, students need a chance to write in an authentic genre to demonstrate their learning. The final part of the lesson is for writers to create a greeting card that might be sent on their new holiday. To complete the lesson, my students have used greeting card-making software, Read-WriteThink's Postcard Creator (<http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/postcard/>), and construction paper and markers, depending on what was available at the time. Along with their finished cards (See sample in Figure 1), students write a reflection in which they discuss their choices for composing them as they did. It is in this step that students take ownership of constructing messages purposefully. They demonstrate their understanding that effective communication is not accidental, but rather that authors consciously use rhetorical elements to affect readers.

### Sample Reflection:

*I chose the Curlz font for the card because it seems like a fun, whimsical typeface, and Ice Cream Day is a fun day. The ice cream border on the front gets people in the mood for eating it. On the inside, a picture of ice cream cones is appropriate because, well, that's the focus of the day.*

*Then I made up a short verse that's pretty simple, like eating ice cream is simple. And the verse also reminds the audience that it's a day for buying other people ice cream and that it tastes really good. The pink background is a perfect color for the day, like strawberry or bubble-gum flavored ice cream. I think anyone would like to receive this card on Ice Cream Day and would enjoy having ice cream.*

## Conclusion

In Jim Burke's *Writing Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques* (Boynton/Cook, 2003), Burke encourages students to write in many authentic genres, for different purposes, and on different devices. Moreover, he emphasizes that writers

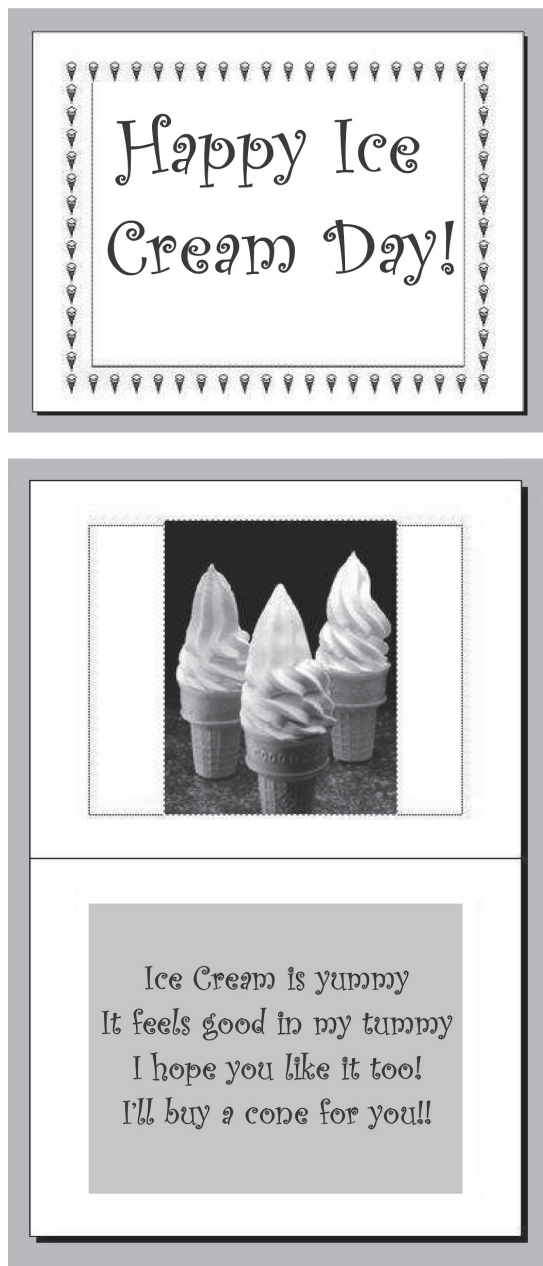


Figure 1: Sample holiday card (front/inside)

must critically think about the best choices for a particular piece of writing. This lesson not only helps novice writers do these things, but it also empowers them to take responsibility for their own media use. Media literacy education must begin somewhere, and this lesson gets students thinking about the messages they receive and create on a basic level they can continue to build on throughout their education.

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