

Political Cartoons: An Introduction

Political cartoons (also known as editorial cartoons) are defined as illustrations or comic strips containing a political or social message that usually relates to current events or personalities.

Cartoonists use specific devices to get their message across:

Symbols (simple pictures that are understood to stand in for ideas or groups). Examples: Dove/Peace, Donkey/Democratic Party

Caricatures (drawing of a person that exaggerates his characteristics for comic effect). Examples: Big ears, extra long nose

Stereotypes (generalization, usually exaggerated or oversimplified and often offensive, that is used to describe or distinguish a group). Examples: Dishonest lawyers, Italian gangsters

Analogies (comparisons—this thing is like the other thing). Examples: a situation is compared to a well known event, book, myth

Juxtaposition (positioning people or things side by side). Example: putting a politician next to a \$ sign

Irony (use of words to convey a meaning that is the opposite of its literal meaning, an outcome of events contrary to what was expected). Example: when someone says it is “beautiful” when they mean ugly or “as clear as mud”

Captioning and labels (used for clarity and emphasis). Example: words at the bottom or top of cartoon to further its message

According to Charles Press, author of *Political Cartooning*, in order for a political cartoon to be effective it must have the following four qualities:

- Artistic quality—but the artistry must not get in the way of the message
- Genuine sentiment—but it should not feel phony
- Fresh, uncomplicated imagery—should be striking, forceful, and amusing
- Lasting importance—the subject of the cartoon should be important so the cartoon can be understood by future readers



Political (or editorial) cartooning began in America with Benjamin Franklin's “Join or Die.” The image was created to emphasize the importance of colonial unity and reflected the well known superstition about snakes coming back to life after being cut in half.

In the 18th and 19th Centuries political cartoons were commonly independent of other writing and were used to get messages across to those who could not read. Thomas Nast, considered to be the father of political cartoons, made a name for himself with his famous

cartoons of William “Boss” Tweed and the Tammany Hall scandal.

Today, political cartoons can be found in newspapers, magazines, on opinion and cartoon pages—practically everywhere you look. Political cartoons have, according to the 2007 documentary *The Political Dr. Seuss*, “taken their place on the page and screen as valid outlets for expressing political thought, championing activism and affecting social change through creative use of visual art.”

