

## **HIDDEN TEXT: Making the Invisible Visible**

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*B*ecause our students are the target audience of marketers, they are constantly bombarded with jingles and slogans designed to appeal to their perceived sense of what the world is like or how the world should be. These media messages so closely align with their own way of thinking that these slogans and jingles become acceptable truths in the form of clever sayings or catchy tunes, representing their own ideologies. As a result, they tend not to question what lies beneath the various claims to which they are exposed day in and day out, nor do they perceive a need to examine these claims.

Given that these media messages are accepted at face value as truth, the teaching of hidden subtext becomes an arduous task. However, arduousness aside, it is an important issue that must be addressed by educators. For democracy to thrive, it is crucial that our students have the ability to think critically by not only identify underlying assumptions in texts, but closely examining and questioning them.

What do we mean by assumptions? What are they? Why and how are they hidden? In *Reading Rhetorically* (2004), Bean, Chappell, and Gillam define assumptions as “the often unstated values or beliefs that the writer expects readers to accept without question.”<sup>1</sup> Additionally, in *Asking the Right Questions* (2004), Browne and Keeley point out that “[T]hese ideas are important invisible links in the reasoning structure, the glue that holds the entire argument together.”<sup>2</sup> The primary reason these assumptions may be hidden is because the author expects that the audience shares the same values and beliefs.

### EXAMPLES

How assumptions are hidden is best explained using a specific example:

*Socrates is a man, so Socrates is mortal.*

In this famous syllogism, the main premise/assumption, “All men are mortal” is omitted. The reader supplies it and thus links the claim to the conclusion via the generally agreed upon fact. So this is an example of how assumptions work in texts. When they are unstated, the readers supply them out of a general repository of beliefs, facts, or knowledge. Arguments fail when readers cannot or will not agree to the unstated or stated premise.

In this more contemporary example,

*Helmets save lives. The government ought to pass a helmet law,*

the unstated assumptions are that life is worth saving and it is the role of the government to prevent accidental deaths of its citizens. If the reader agrees with the conclusion, the reader accepts the unstated assumptions. The over-arching issue of government responsibility is not made clear, but it is the hidden link between the claim “The government ought to pass a

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<sup>1</sup> Bean, John C., Virginia A. Chappell, and Alice M. Gillam. *Reading Rhetorically: Brief Edition*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2004, 73.

<sup>2</sup> Browne, M. Neil, and Stuart M. Keeley. *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking*. Seventh ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004, 54.

helmet law” and the reason, “helmets save lives.”

## PEDAGOGY

So how do we teach students to uncover these hidden assumptions in complex, academic texts? First, we can teach them to distinguish between claims and reasons that support them. Then, we teach them to ascertain what links the reason to the claim. This is where the real challenge lies. Instead of telling students exactly what the assumptions are, we must teach them to ask the right questions.

Questioning a text is an effective, research-based strategy that helps students figure out how a text does its work.<sup>3</sup> Teaching rhetorically-based reading comprehension is grounded in formulating a series of questions that call attention to a variety of textual features and authorial strategies. For example, to understand how an author supports his/her argument we ask questions such as: **What reasons support the claim?** What type of evidence is used? How reliable is this evidence? How does the author use the evidence to support the argument? Similarly, to make the invisible assumptions visible, we offer students a series of questions. Asking questions about the author’s background is a good starting point for uncovering assumptions. Although we can’t assume that the author’s background will always lead to definitive conclusions about his/her values, it is a useful first step in the process of discovering assumptions. Some questions to investigate the author’s background are:

- Who is the author?
- What is the author’s ethnic background, age, and gender?
- What do is known about the author’s political views?
- What alliances or organizations does the author belong to?
- What other texts by this author are available? What do these texts reveal about his/her stance?

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<sup>3</sup> Ogle, Donna and Camille L.Z. Blachowicz. “Beyond Literature Circles: Helping Students Comprehend Informational Texts.” Block, Cathy Collins and Michael Pressley, eds. *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Practices*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2002, 262.

Another set of questions that may illuminate assumptions is applied directly to the text:

- What is the conclusion/proposal?
- What beliefs about human beings, human nature, society, culture, government, the way the world works or should work do I have to buy into in order to accept this argument?
- What are the consequences of this proposal and for whom? Who would gain? Who would lose? What unintended consequences might this proposal have if it were widely instituted?

To further get at these hidden assumptions, we also ask students questions about the values that underlie the reasoning structure:

- What ideas or concepts are valued?
- What does the author's word choice reveal about what is valued?
- What values are prioritized over others?
- What would this author say is good, important, or worthwhile?

Questions are important facilitators; they provide students with a method of textual analysis and critical reading. In fact, questions are really the best way to allow students to discover a text and take ownership of their learning. The goal when questioning, according to Ogle and Blachowicz, is "[R]ather than accept the text at 'face value,' students think more deeply about the text and evaluate both the message and the author's point of view and purpose."<sup>4</sup> These question sets presented here are important tools to make the invisible assumptions in a text visible. **What happens if we take the underlined stuff out? Somehow, the grammar doesn't**

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

quite fit the sentence the way we constructed it.

Now, take a group of iPod-laden, Pepsi-drinking, label-loving young people and teach them about hidden text. No problem, right? Wrong! Tackling hidden assumptions in a text is a daunting task for both teachers and students. However, if students do not learn how to identify and analyze an author's hidden assumptions, they will lack the ability to make their own informed decisions and will be easily persuaded by unexamined opinions. Therefore, for all of us who value democracy, the process of examining a text's hidden assumptions and making the invisible visible through questioning is a preferable alternative.