

The Power of Words

80-minute lesson for a writing class, 15-60 students

- finding bias
- word choice in writing

SWBAT:

- Analyze media for purpose, approach, and audience
- Evaluate word choice to understand authorial bias
- Choose vocabulary according to their own rhetorical goals

Intro:

Even though we're talking today about the power of words, let's start off with a picture.

SLIDE: "The Final, Decisive Battle," [*Poslednii, Reshitelnyi Boi*] – portrays Red Army soldier bayoneting a capitalist on Planet Earth.

Ask students – regardless of their level of knowledge about the historical context – to make some observations about what's going on in the poster.

Who's the good guy? Who's the bad guy? Why do you think so?

(Sun is right behind the good guy, the good guy seems to be winning, he's on the top of the planet)

Any guesses as to who the bad guy might represent? (fat, tuxedo, top hat – capitalist stereotype)

What about the good guy? (Young, strong, militant – worker type. Wearing red star-Communist symbol)

So, given all these observations, what do you think the poster is trying to do?

(Convince people to be on the red star guy's side, build confidence in the Red cause).

EXPLAIN: This is a poster of Revolutionary Russia, made in 1920. It celebrates the 3rd anniversary of the Russian Revolution – more on this shortly. It's what most people might call a propaganda poster – it is intended to bring people over to the Revolutionary cause and to give them confidence, even though – in 1920 – there is still a civil war going on in Russia, and the fate of Russia is still uncertain.

Congratulate students on how much they are able to pick up on in the poster – even though they may have no idea about the poster's context, let alone its language.

Today, we're going to be taking that kind of analysis beyond visual material. Explain that written texts use the same kind of subtle allusions to convey the author's perspective. Today, we'll talk about how writers can choose vocabulary to sway the reader's opinion – before the argument is even made. We'll look at some historical texts about one of the most controversial events in world history – the Russian Revolution of 1917. We'll examine these texts much in the same way we've looked at the poster, but instead of color and form, we'll look at word choice. (8-10 minutes)

SLIDE First, we'll think about ourselves as *consumers* of media. We'll look at the smallest level – individual words – to ask important questions about the texts we encounter: What does the author believe? What is s/he trying to accomplish? ASK students why it might be important to understand the author's bias in texts we read. (It helps you know where to be skeptical, it helps you assess when to check facts, it helps you understand why the author wants you to read his/ her text)

Second, we'll use those skills – of critical reading – to consider how to *write* effectively for the audiences we want to reach and the goals we want to accomplish. After all, writing is communication. This means it's not just about *what* you think or want to say – it's about *who* you're talking to and *how* you say it.

Now, many of you may have heard of the Russian Revolution, but you may wonder, why bother with it for a writing class? Well, here's your answer – the Russian Revolution is, to this day, one of the most controversial moments in world history. Starting in 1917, many voices have tried to lay claim to its legacy – or to reject its legacy. Today, we're going to look at some of those voices. We'll look closely at the language they use to talk about the revolution, and discuss how that language works (or doesn't work) to communicate their perspective. (15 minutes)

Before we begin, though, let's talk through some of the basic facts of the Russian Revolution. Anyone want to take a stab at describing what the Russian Revolution was about?

Ask students who ruled the Russian Empire before the Revolution (a Tsar – specifically, Tsar Nicholas II - SLIDE)

The Empire had undergone one “revolution” in 1905, after a humiliating defeat by the Japanese, but the tsar stayed in power.

ADD SLIDE In 1917, all of Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and the United States were embroiled in World War I. The war wasn't going well, and many of Russia's workers felt like it wasn't their war to fight – they called it an “imperial war.” Meanwhile, at home, they were feeling really squeezed. Workers weren't earning enough money to support their families. There were a lot of food shortages due to the war. Men were being called up to go to war, leaving their families even more destitute. So, in February, they staged a revolution. At first, there was lots of diversity of opinion about what should happen – some people wanted to keep the Tsar, others wanted to depose him; some wanted a Communist government, others wanted a constitutional monarchy like there was in Britain. In the meantime, during most of 1917, the government was barely held together by a guy named Kerensky (ADD SLIDE).

In the fall – October to be precise - Lenin (show SLIDE), leader of the Bolsheviks, staged a coup and took control of the government. There were 5 years of war until

his people gained total control, but it was Lenin and his successors who would rule the newfound Soviet Union. (20-22 minutes)

Now let's take a look at one text that responded to this:

Explain what this is. – news article about the October revolution.

Knowing that, what do you expect the purpose of the article to be? (to inform)

Do you expect positive, negative, or neutral language about the revolution?

SLIDE: Photo-essay about Bolshevik takeover. – from Chicago Tribune.

Let's just start with the headline. How would you describe the language here?

(positive, negative, neutral)

Some neutral language – “Petrograd, the scene of revolution.”

The pictures also seem relatively descriptive.

But what about the term “extremist”? (Would you want to be called an extremist?)

What are some other contexts where you hear the word “extremist”?)

Take a look at this other Tribune headline:

SLIDE: “History of Maximalist Rise led by Lenine, Pro-German.”

How would you describe this language?

The word “maximalist”?

The word “pro-German”? (if necessary, expand upon WWI context. Note that Lenin wasn't necessarily “pro-German,” he was mostly anti-war, which in this context entailed surrender to the Germans.)

So OK, even though we do expect journalism to be neutral, in this particular case, it's pretty clear the Trib reporter has his own perspective. Makes sense, given the context. (30-32 minutes)

Now let's take a look at some texts written by people on the other side – people who supported the Russian Revolution and Lenin.

SLIDE: Red Dawn Pamphlet

This is a pamphlet – how does this differ from a newspaper article?

Before we look at the text: What kind of agenda does this image suggest?

(Red sun – looks promising; crowd of happy people faces it; “dawn” is a positive image)

Now let's look at a paragraph from the text (Invite student to read it aloud)

SLIDE:

“Out of the bloody mist . . . there marches, upright and unafraid, rebellious Labor, and the hope of the ages, the Industrial State, approaches realization as at this hour the fighting proletariat of Russia, the herald of a new world, presses its victory to completion and binds and consolidates its 175,000,000 people into a cohesive unit of Industrial Democracy.

And if it can be, as it is possible, that, by outer intrigue and inner treachery, the brave workers of Russia now under the Bolsheviks, valiantly fighting these dark forces, are betrayed, beaten and go down heroically in seas of blood as did Ennus,

Spartacus and the Communards, yet the world of Labor will have profited and - success or failure - their brave attempt, their magnificent spirit and bold deeds shall live forever and their story shall be told 'in lands remote and accents yet unknown'." (35 minutes)

Now, time for a group project –

Divide classroom into groups of 3-5 students, asking them to list positive words and negative language. Sometimes, this is obvious, other times, more subtle.

[5 minutes for work]

OK, what have you guys found? (list words on either side of board)

What can you conclude about the tone of this pamphlet? (Very polemical, very pro-Bolshevik, against capitalism, against "inner treachery")

What would you imagine this pamphlet is trying to accomplish? Would it work for you? (50 minutes)

[DEPENDING ON SKILL LEVEL OF STUDENTS, CAN EXPAND PREVIOUS LESSON, or USE THIS ADVANCED TIME VALVE EXERCISE]

Now let's try to do the same kind of analysis with a different, more subtle pamphlet. Before we begin, a little addendum – Lenin died in 1924, leaving some confusion about who would take his place. Two of the most important followers, Trotsky and Stalin [MAKE SLIDE], had an especially heated conflict about this. In the Soviet Union, Stalin ultimately won out and became the leader of the USSR. Trotsky, on the other hand, was exiled, and ended up in 1940 with an ax in his head in Mexico (thanks to Stalin's henchmen). But Trotsky had – still has – a body of loyal followers (sometimes they're called Trotskyists/ Trotskyites).

This pamphlet is by one of them:

SLIDE

We all know that the authentic leaders of the revolution, Lenin, Trotsky, conceived of it not as an end in itself, but as a first step, the first stage, in the world revolution which alone could complete what had been started in the Soviet Union. The conditions objectively were already mature in 1917, '18 and '19, for such a world revolution, beginning in Europe. What was lacking was the leadership, the party, without which the workers cannot succeed. The leadership of the old party, the Social-Democrats, who had betrayed the workers under the test of war, supported the bourgeoisie in their counter-revolutionary fight against the workers in the period following the war. The young and hastily organized Communist parties, which had been formed in European countries in response to the example of the Russian revolution, were as yet too weak and too young, too inexperienced, for their historic task.

...

Here on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary, as we celebrate the living revolution, we can still express the confident hope that the funeral of the Russian revolution, which so many renegades and traitors are announcing, will not merely be postponed, but will never take place."

Now, time for a group project –

Divide classroom into groups of 3-5 students, asking them to list positive words and negative language. This time, also look out for turns of phrase that show who's "in" and who's "out." How does this author (James Cannon) attempt to put the reader in one group and outside another?

[5 minutes for work]

OK, what have you guys found? Who's in? Who is Cannon secretly excluding?

What language does this do for him?

What would you imagine this pamphlet is trying to accomplish? Would it work for you? (65 minutes)

TIME VALVE OVER

Now, let's try to apply this practice to our own writing. Time for an individual exercise.

Think of an issue – any issue – you feel strongly about. It could be your vote for president, the legalization of marijuana, your favorite musician, whatever.

Got an issue in mind? Now brainstorm words you can use to describe that candidate, policy position, or musician. Divide them into "positive" and "negative" columns in your notebook. [give students 3 minutes]

(67 minutes)

Done? Now spend a couple minutes writing up two headlines: One that uses language that *supports* your position, and another using language that subtly *opposes* your position – think of the "Extremist" headline from before.

(70 minutes)

If time permits, have students write a short paragraph on the topic.

Ask students if anyone would like to share their headline

(75 minutes)

Conclusion: Today, we've talked about how word choice gives subtle hints about bias in the texts we read – newspapers, magazines, even textbooks. These are skills that are hugely important for determining where to consider taking an author's

claims with a grain of salt. More importantly, you've learned a secret weapon for your own writing: simply by setting the terms of your argument, you win half the battle of convincing your readers.