

FROM THE CREATORS OF FACING THE GIANTS

FIREPROOF

MEDIA LITERACY GUIDE

by Sue Summers

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What is media literacy?

Media literacy is a composite of skills and knowledge needed to question, analyze, interpret, and evaluate media messages. It is the application of critical thinking to the messages of mass media that saturate our culture.

To become a successful student, responsible citizen, productive worker, or competent and conscientious consumer, an individual must develop expertise in dealing with the increasingly sophisticated information and entertainment media. Information is often delivered on a multi-sensory level to affect thinking, feelings, and behavior.

Today's information and entertainment technologies communicate to us through a powerful combination of words, images, and sounds. Consequently, we need to develop a wider set of literacy skills so we can both comprehend the messages we receive and effectively design and distribute our own messages. Being literate in a media age requires critical thinking skills that empower us as we make decisions in the classroom, the living room, the shopping center, the workplace, the boardroom, the voting booth, and also on the Internet.

It is important to note that, while media literacy does raise critical questions about the impact of media and technology, it is not an anti-media movement. Rather, it allows concerned individuals and organizations, including parents, educators, churches, health care providers, and citizen and consumer groups, to seek a more enlightened way of understanding our media environment.

There are four steps to becoming media literate: awareness, analysis, reflection, and action.

Awareness The first step to becoming media literate is an increased awareness of the messages of the media. This awareness can be developed in teenagers, for example, through activities in which they learn to recognize the communication methods that are being utilized in the culture around them.

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Analysis This step involves “deconstruction” - the identification and investigation of all parts of a message. Some of the components are the text, images, backgrounds, and props. At this level, teenagers are taught that media messages do not just happen, but that each message is carefully designed, usually with a specific agenda.

Reflection In this step the viewer, listener, or reader identifies the opinions, attitudes, and beliefs within the message and compares them to his or her own ideas. These skills can be developed, for example, by visiting a website and considering the various ideas that are presented.

Action This final step focuses on what will be done with the message. Perhaps the message causes anger and instigates a letter-writing campaign. Or it could highlight the need to obey the speed limit and causes a driver to slow down. At this level, the teenagers have completed the first three steps toward media literacy. Now it is time for them to take appropriate action, such as writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper or the church’s website about a topic that has captured their interest.

Note:

In this guide, the focus will be on analyzing the movie, *FIREPROOF*. We will base the analysis on five essential questions. These questions comprise the foundation for a book published in 2005 by Linworth Publishing entitled, *Get Them Thinking!* (See the resource section for information about books and websites on media literacy.) The five questions are the focus because they cause teenagers (and adults) to investigate the content and format of media messages, the role of mass media in our culture, and the impact of those messages. This process breaks the discipline of media literacy into manageable topics that relate to all media messages.

The five essential questions in this media literacy guide are:

- Who created the message?
- What is the message?
- How was the message delivered?
- What is the impact of the message on me?
- What is the impact of the message on society?

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Before you see this movie, discuss the following:

- What does the word, “*fireproof*” mean? What things come to mind when you hear this word?
- When you think of fires, what memories or stories of fires come to mind? Are they terrifying? Why?
- Think about some personal relationships that are important to you. Are they “*fireproof*”?

After you see this movie:

Now that you have viewed the movie, it is time to think about it. So, let’s get started!

Essential question #1: Who created the message?

The focus of this question is to determine a) the author or creator of the message; b) the purpose the author/creator had in mind; c) the point of view in the message; d) the author/creator’s intended audience for the message; and e) the format the author/creator selected.

a) *Who is the author or creator of the message?*

In the movie, *FIREPROOF*, the answer to this question is very different from the answers for many movies seen in theaters. *FIREPROOF* is the third feature film from Sherwood Pictures, who also created *FACING THE GIANTS* and *FLYWHEEL*. This is the moviemaking ministry of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia. This church has taken on the call to create theater-quality movies to touch the world for Christ. The acting parts in *FIREPROOF* are played by volunteers from the Sherwood Baptist Church. The only exception is the lead role played by Kirk Cameron, who said,

“There was a spirit of unity and service on *FACING THE GIANTS* that came from people volunteering their time and talents. I wanted to be a part of that with this movie. They offered me a fee, but I said I’d rather you made a donation to a non-profit camp that my wife and I run in Georgia, Camp Firefly. So, Sherwood made a donation to the camp and I offered my time for free. It’s a camp we’ve been doing for eighteen years for terminally and seriously ill children and their families so they can get away for a while and rejuvenate their family relationships and to meet other families.”

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On the website, the press release from March 9, 2008, states:

Welcome to *FIREPROOF*, an action-packed love story that will have audiences laughing, crying, and on the edge of their seats as they are drawn into the world of a firefighter, his wife... and a marriage worth rescuing. *FIREPROOF* is the third movie from Sherwood Pictures, the hope-filled, heartfelt moviemaking ministry of Sherwood Baptist Church that continues to touch the world from Albany, Georgia.

Before you continue, take time to visit the website at www.fireproofthemovie.com and investigate the various components of this site.

Most movies in theaters today are created in Hollywood by companies who wish to grow their profits. In the case of *FIREPROOF*, over 1000 volunteers worked on this movie, and profit was not a consideration.

Consider these discussion starters:

- How does knowing who created the movie make a difference as you watch it?
- When you learned that the actors all volunteered their time and talents, did this make a difference regarding your interest in seeing the movie?

b) What is the purpose the author/creator had in mind?

To answer this question requires some speculation about the motives of Sherwood Baptist Church. Every media message has a purpose - an objective, a reason - for investing the required time, talent, and resources it takes to complete it.

Discuss:

- Why do you think Sherwood Baptist Church would make a movie to be shown in movie theaters?
- Why do you think a church body would feel compelled to create a movie on marriage?
- Can a movie change a viewer's perspective and understanding? Give examples of movies that had a definite positive or negative impact on you.

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c) What is the point of view in the message?

Every message has a point of view – either blatant or subtle. Sherwood Baptist Church had a definite point of view regarding marriage and relationships.

Discuss:

- What is the primary point of view in this movie regarding marriage? Discuss your thoughts about this point of view. If it is biblical, locate scriptures to support the movie's point of view.
- There are numerous other characters in this movie besides the husband and wife. How did the points of view of the various characters support the main message? List all the main characters and discuss their individual points of view about marriage.
- Do you think the creators used the various characters' ideas effectively to support the movie's point of view?
- Are the points of view offered in this movie blatant or subtle? Explain your thoughts.

d) Who is the author/creator's intended audience for the message?

The creator of every message has a target audience in mind.

Answer these questions:

- Who was the intended audience for this movie? Think about who was in the theater when you watched the movie. Who was not the intended audience for this movie?
- How might an appropriate target audience respond to this message? List ways this movie could impact audience members.

e) Why did the author/creator select this format for the message?

There are many ways to send a message. Movies in theaters today are created primarily for entertainment. Churches, for the most part, use other communication vehicles to distribute their messages. Think about the format used for *FIREPROOF*.

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Discuss:

- What are the advantages of making a full-length movie to share the Christian message about marriage? What are the disadvantages?
- What would be different if this movie had been made and placed on DVD for distribution, as opposed to being distributed in movie theaters?
- Does this movie have a different “feel” from other movies you have seen? Explain your response.

Essential question #2: What is the message?

Think about the theme or overarching idea of this movie. Although there is a complex plot and many subplots within the movie, there is a central message.

Answer these questions:

- The movie is about the marriage relationship. Write a two sentence summary of the marriage relationship, and then share it with others in your group. Did everyone have the same thoughts? Relate these summaries to the movie’s main message.
- Locate scriptures about marriage and list them on a separate piece of paper. Would these be beneficial to people who are planning to wed? What could you do to help get these scriptures into the hands and hearts of those people?
- Pretend you are the movie reviewer for the local newspaper. What statements would you make about the main message of the movie?
- Is the movie’s message more important now than in past times? Discuss answers.
- Consider the movie’s location, the main characters’ occupations, the friends and relatives of the main characters, and other components of this movie. Would you change anything to make the message clearer?
- Sometimes we reduce the message of a speech, a TV program, a book, or a movie down to one sound bite. A sound bite is a short quote that sums up the essence of the message. Consider this quote from *FIREPROOF*:

Caleb says to the rookie fireman, “You never leave your partner, especially in a fire.” He repeats this line to Catherine at the end of the movie. Discuss the importance of the timing of this statement.

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Essential question #3: How was the message delivered?

There are unlimited ways to tell a tale about marriage, and decisions were made along the way that impacted how the message was delivered. This movie was created for distribution in mainstream movie theaters. In this question, it is vital to analyze several factors: the genre (fiction), the obvious - and also the understated - relationships in the story, strategies that were used to capture the viewers' attention, and the use of humor.

Think about these questions:

- Is there any other medium of communication that could have reached so many people? Discuss your ideas.
- Why do you think the creators of this movie chose to focus on a couple who had no children?
- Why was the main character a firefighter?
- What surprising information did you learn about the parents of the firefighter?
- Was this movie believable? Were the various components - location, costuming, script, images/visuals, music, actors, etc. - appropriate in order to get the message to the audience?
- Go to the movie's website and listen to excerpts from the music that accompanied this film. What are your reactions?
- Locate the lyrics of the songs: "Slow Fade" by Casting Crowns and "Love is Not a Fight" by Warren Barfield. (Go to youtube.com.) Think about the lyrics of the songs. How do the lyrics of the songs support this movie's message?
- Create lyrics for a song that would support the main message of this movie. Share your lyrics with others. You may use music from another song or create original music for your lyrics. Tape or perform the song to share the message with others in your church or community.

Essential question #4: What is the impact of the message on me?

Living in a culture that is under a ceaseless bombardment of media messages presents a struggle to

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constantly sort and evaluate their worth and relevance. Not all messages are equal in their merit to us as individuals. Some are worthy of analysis and some are not. There is no way to spend the time necessary to evaluate every media message. Part of the process of becoming a critical thinker is to decide which messages are necessary to remember and which ones can be dismissed.

Once certain messages are selected – those that seem to have content of value – they must be assessed regarding impact and significance. The trick is to make the effort to comprehend and analyze, and then to react.

What is the impact of the message on me? This is a profound and complicated question. Not every message must have an impact. In fact, most messages are flushed away almost as quickly as they are seen, heard, or read. There are some, however, that stay with us, that are important enough for us to think about and evaluate, and others that can actually have life-changing implications.

To interpret media messages as complex as those in *FIREPROOF*, important questions must be answered:

- What is the message?
- How will I interpret this message?
- Is this significant to my thinking or my life?

The more young people question, the more they think. This is a goal of media literacy.

In the movie, *FIREPROOF*, there is much to consider.

Discuss these questions:

- Is this movie realistic? Can you relate to it? Give examples from your life about relationships with serious problems.
- What basic tenets of Christianity were evident in this movie? How are they important to you?
- How did the “love dare” that Caleb’s dad gave him affect you?
- How has the marriage relationship in general been influenced by the standards of the present culture or of the world? Discuss your personal beliefs about marriage.

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- Did Caleb and Catherine have appropriate reasons for wanting to end their marriage? Were the reasons good enough? Have you witnessed marriages that have ended for similar reasons? Share your thoughts.
- Michael, Caleb's coworker, tells Caleb that "putting on the ring when saying your wedding vows means you've made a covenant – a life-long commitment." Discuss the importance of this statement.
- Michael also discussed the meaning of *fireproof*. "*Fireproof* doesn't mean that a fire will never come, but that when it comes, you'll be able to withstand it." How does his definition apply to the marriage relationship?
- As you think about this movie, what are the lasting impressions that will stay with you? Did this movie make you reconsider the purpose and the significance of marriage?
- Write a one or two sentence belief statement about marriage. Share this with others in the group. Compile everyone's thoughts into one statement upon which the group agrees.
- Locate and list scriptures about marriage that support the group's statement.
- Create a poster with your new belief statement and the scriptures. Share this with others.

Essential question #5: What is the impact of the message on society?

The mass media has become so intertwined with various aspects of our culture that it is often difficult to separate the media from the culture itself. The goal of media literacy studies is for people to become critical thinkers about the media. The more we examine the various media sources and the role the mass media plays in our lives and in our culture, the more sophisticated we will become in our thinking.

It is imperative that all of us become able to step back and analyze, question, interpret, and evaluate the messages that inundate our culture. As healthy skeptics, we learn to draw conclusions, make inferences, predict consequences, and judge worth while we continue to function in the culture. The purpose of media literacy is not to create cynics or pessimists, but to empower everyone to live in the culture while constantly examining it.

FIREPROOF is a good example of how a media message can alter the direction of society.

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Answer these questions in the group:

- What conclusions can you draw about the people who were in the theater when you watched *FIREPROOF*? Who is most likely to attend this movie? How might viewers be affected by it?
- What predictions can you make about Caleb and Catherine? What do you think their future will look like?
- How does knowing Jesus Christ as your personal savior make a difference in your relationships? How can this decision affect others in our culture? Can marriage become more meaningful in the United States? How could this change happen?
- Thinking back about this movie, how do you feel about the members of Sherwood Baptist Church? Write a letter or e-mail to the church expressing your thoughts.

Final thoughts

The concepts shared in this guide can be applied to all messages of the mass media – Christian or secular. Save the five essential questions to use with other media, such as television programs, books, cartoons, DVDs, newspaper articles, websites, etc.

Finally, consider the term “Selah,” which is frequently found in the Psalms. Selah means to pause and reflect. It is an exhortation from God for the thoughtful reflection and weighing of what we have just read (or heard, or seen). That’s what media literacy is really all about. Take time to pause, reflect, and think about the messages that fill our culture.

FIREPROOF has been a vehicle to touch lives – possibly yours! Be sure to tell others about this movie and this guide.

Resources

Books by Sue Summers, www.MediaAlert.org

Media Alert! 200 Activities to Create Media-Savvy Kids

Get Them Thinking! Use Media Literacy to Prepare Students for State Assessments

Changing the World through Media Education

Resources by non-profit organization, PRIIME TIME TODAY, www.primett.org

“Sitcom Sleuths,” a media literacy board game

The EYE Spy Program, a media literacy coloring book

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Resources by Answers in Genesis, www.answersingenesis.org
Remote Control by Carl Kerby

Book by Ted Baehr and Pat Boone, www.movieguide.org
The Culture-Wise Family

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www.fireproofthemovie.com

Media Literacy Ministry of AMFM
www.amfmonline.com/media_literacy.asp

Media Alert! Organization
www.MediaAlert.org

PRIME TIME TODAY (Parents Responsibly Involved In Media Education & Teens Involved In Media Education)
www.primett.org
“Media Smart for Parents” by Cable in the Classroom
www.ciconline.org/mediasmartparents
PBS “Don’t Buy it! Get Media Smart!”
<http://pbskids.org/dontbuyit>

National Institute on Media and the Family
www.mediafamily.org

Christian Social Network
www.dailychristianlife.org

Movie Guide
www.movieguide.org

Plugged In (Focus on the Family)
www.pluggedinonline.com

Focus on the Family
www.focusonthefamily.com

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