

# **Understanding the Language of Fear and Suspense through Scary Clown Commercials**

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## **Grades 6-10**

This lesson examines the language of fear and suspense in commercial video texts, but could also be included as a preface to a larger multimodal unit that explores the construction of suspense through the printed word (e.g., short stories and poems) and other mediums such as the moving image.

### **Learning Goals:**

#### **To identify, understand, and apply:**

The meaning/s of suspense and how it makes stories exciting for its audiences.

The elements that construct suspense in film & advertising.

The economic decision-making that influences media audiences and their consumption decisions.

The shifting images and social meanings of clowns.

### **Media Literacy Key Concepts\*:**

Media construct versions of reality (#2)

Audiences negotiate meaning (#3)

Media have economic implications (#4)

Media communicate values messages. (#5)

Media communicate political and social messages (#6)

\*This lesson focuses solely on Media Literacy Key Concepts 2 and 3.  
The optional extension focuses on Key Concepts 4, 5 and 6.

### **English Curriculum Expectations (Grade 9, Ontario):**

A2.4 evaluate the use of the various forms, conventions, and techniques of digital and media texts, consider the impact on the audience, and apply this understanding when analyzing and creating texts

A2.5 demonstrate an understanding of the interrelationships between the form, message, and context of texts, the intended and unintended audience, and the purpose for production

C1.4 evaluate how images, graphics, and visual design create, communicate, and contribute to meaning in a variety of texts

C1.5 identify various elements of style in texts, including voice, word choice, word patterns, and sentence structure, and analyze how each element helps create meaning and is appropriate for the text form and genre

C3.2 make local and global inferences, using explicit and implicit evidence, to explain and support their interpretations about various complex texts

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### **Minds On:**

Brainstorm with the class a definition of suspense and what makes something suspenseful. Students may mention the *tone* of a story, the use of *darkness*, *erie sounds*, etc.

Sample questions:

Do you think people like to be scared? Why or why not?

What do people like about scary shows? Is there a difference between scary shows and real scary experiences?

What scary media experience stands out for you? Why do you think you remember it?

What images and sounds resonated with you?

Why might scary movies/shows/stories be so popular?

### **Action:**

Discuss with students the elements of suspense in film and their effectiveness.

Use the *StudioBinder* content (at your discretion) to explain various aspects of suspense:

- Preview the *StudioBinder* clips and assess their suitability for your students.
- StudioBinder links:
  - Video: <https://tinyurl.com/2p9nvaxd>
  - Intro to suspense (read): <https://shorturl.at/1Q91P>

Use the PowerPoint: "Suspense Scary Clown Commercial". The notes will help with directions and talking points.

Listen to the embedded soundtrack from the Burger King commercial and predict what it will be about.

Watch the commercial (suggested: 3 times with some prompts) - See Notes in the PowerPoint)

Discuss with students the possible intended audience/s and the purpose of the commercial. Explain that the campaign had an added piece in which the first 500 people to show up at Burger King dressed as a clown on a set date would receive a free Whopper.

Sample discussion questions:

- Who benefits from this campaign?
- Who might be negatively affected by the campaign, and what might be the economic consequences?
- The commercial was aired in October: how might the commercial's design relate to its airing date?

### **Extension 1 (Key Concept 6: Media communicate political and social messages)**

Discuss with students the idea of a "creepy" clown.

Brainstorming:

What comes to mind when you think of clowns?

How can clowns be scary? *[It's a contradiction. Students could try to unpack the phenomenon, as there is much easily-accessible online material.]*

Why might some people think clowns are "creepy"?

What is the history of clowns? Present day society often associates clowns with birthday parties and positive celebrations BUT the historical idea of a clown is very different. Here are two articles that discuss this history: ([Clown Sightings: How Clowns Got a Scary, Creepy Reputation | TIME](#) and [The Psychology Behind the Creepy Clown Phenomenon | Psychology Today](#)). The class might read through one of the articles to determine how audiences' perceptions of clowns have changed over time.

### **Extension 2 (Key Concept 5: Media communicate values messages) )**

The commercial aired in October 2017. September 8<sup>th</sup> 2017 was the premiere of the remake of Stephen King's *It*.

Post the official poster for *It* on the board and discuss its various "creepy" elements:

- What visuals in the poster suggest that the film may not be light-hearted and comedic?
- What do you feel is the intended message of this poster's visual design? Explain with examples.

Show the poster for the Burger King campaign:

What are some similarities and differences between the two posters?

How might Burger King be using *It* to drum up its own business?

What details tell you this?

What is the impact of the similarities? (If a person were unfamiliar with *It*, how might that affect the meaning of the Burger King poster? How might this influence the business at Burger King?)

Teachers should aim for a natural transition from *representation* to *marketing* (economic implications). The scary clown visual is a key marketing technique to building the Burger King brand, while the link to *It* is a demonstration of cross-branding.

Teachers might choose from the following questions:

- How do the two products lend themselves to the same branding technique? How might they be "symbiotic"? How was this sold to the public?
- Who profits?
- To what degree was this successful?
- How can you tell?
- Where might we see other examples of this "cross-branding" today?

Depending on its suitability for your class, you could show the official trailer for *It* ([IT - Official Teaser Trailer](#)) and compare it to the Burger King commercial. Inquiry questions:

- What role do you think the 'hype' of *It* played in the design of the BK commercial?
- Why might Burger King have drawn on the hype of the *It* campaign?
- How might the BK commercial compare to the trailer of *It*?
- What impact might the BK campaign have had on Burger King's competitors? On the success of *It*?

## **Consolidation:**

Use one of the following activities:

1. Have students suggest how 2 existing “products” today might be successfully co-marketed to improve each other. They can choose two of their favourite products/brands and identify the overlapping values and elements that would benefit by a symbiotic relationship. It might be a simple, written activity such as suggesting how 2 existing 'products' today might be successfully co-marketed to improve each. The activity might be an exit ticket or further extended to include a sketch or description of a sample cross-marketing campaign.
2. Have students suggest an improvement to the Burger King Clown campaign. Explain how their idea would be an improvement, and the differences between their proposed changes and the original campaign. As an extension, students might provide rough sketches on a storyboard to demonstrate their proposed changes.