

Political Cartoon Defined

A **political cartoon** is a cartoon that makes a point about a political issue or event. You can find them in any daily newspaper, but they won't be in the comics section. Instead, look on the editorial pages – they're right next to the editorial columns, and across from the opinion essays. You can also find them in newsmagazines and on political Web sites.

Political cartoons can be very funny, especially if you understand the issue that they're commenting on. Their main purpose, though, is not to amuse you but to **persuade** you. Keep in mind, political cartoons always represent points of view that can be challenged. A good political cartoon makes you think about current events, but it also tries to sway your opinion toward the cartoonist's point of view. The best political cartoonist can change your mind on an issue without you even realizing how he or she did it. They reveal cultural assumptions, prevailing moods, even real insights about events and trends. They can be used as evidence of all these things.

Cartoonists' Persuasive Techniques

Cartoonists use several methods, or techniques, to get their point across. Not every cartoon includes all of these techniques, but most political cartoons include at least a few. Some of the techniques cartoonists use the most are:

- ▶ **SYMBOLISM:** Cartoonists use simple objects, or **symbols**, to stand for larger concepts or ideas. For example, a dollar sign may stand for the entire economy. An octopus may stand for a powerful corporation with "tentacles" controlling many other institutions.
- ▶ **EXAGGERATION:** Sometimes cartoonists overdo, or **exaggerate**, the physical characteristics of people or things in order to make a point. Changes or exaggerations in size, shape, emotions or gestures often add extra meaning to the symbols the cartoon includes. A caricature is an exaggerated or distorted drawing of an individual highlighting what the artist sees as most unique about the individual.
- ▶ **LABELING:** Cartoonists often **label** objects or people to make it clear exactly what they stand for.
- ▶ **ANALOGY/METAPHOR:** An **analogy** is a comparison between two unlike things. By comparing a complex issue or situation with a more familiar one, cartoonists can help their readers see it in a different light. Metaphors are like symbols in that they describe one thing as something else entirely.
- ▶ **IRONY:** **Irony** is the difference between the ways things are and the way things should be, or the way things are expected to be. Cartoonists often use **irony** to express their opinion on an issue. It is well suited to political cartoons, which often seek to mock something and show how false, unfair or dangerous it is. Irony always entails a contradiction. Often, an amusing image undercuts and reverses the meaning of the words in a caption. Sometimes, however, the image alone conveys the double meaning.