

Lesson Plan: Decoding the Secrets of WWII Propaganda

Subject: History, Media Literacy, Art

Target Learner: Ruby, a 13-year-old homeschool student with an interest in World War II.

Time Allotment: 60-90 minutes

Materials Needed

- Computer or tablet with internet access
 - Notebook or paper for notes
 - Pencils, colored pencils, markers, or other art supplies
 - Large sheet of paper for poster design (or digital design software)
 - Printer (optional, for printing worksheet/examples)
 - Propaganda Analysis Worksheet (template provided in lesson)
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Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Define propaganda and identify at least three common techniques used in WWII posters.
 - Analyze a historical WWII propaganda poster for its message, target audience, and techniques.
 - Design your own original propaganda-style poster for a modern, positive cause.
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Lesson Structure

I. Introduction (10 minutes)

Hook: The Power of Persuasion

Educator Script: "Hey Ruby, think about the last time you saw an ad online or a movie trailer that made you really want something. How did it convince you? Did it use exciting music, powerful words, or show people having a great time? What if you could use those same ideas to convince an entire country to go to war, save scrap metal, or keep a secret? That's exactly what governments did during World War II. They used powerful images and simple slogans in posters to shape how millions of people thought and acted. Today, we're going to become detectives and decode the secret messages hidden in these posters."

State Objectives

Educator Script: "By the time we're done, you'll be an expert at spotting propaganda techniques."

You'll be able to look at a real WWII poster and break down exactly how it works, and then you'll get to be the artist and designer by creating your own persuasive poster for a cause you care about."

II. Body (35-50 minutes)

Part 1: "I Do" - What is Propaganda? (10-15 minutes)

Educator Explains: "Propaganda is basically information—often biased or misleading—used to promote a particular political cause or point of view. During a war, it's a super important tool. Let's look at a few common tricks of the trade that poster artists used. These are like their secret weapons for convincing people."

Present and explain these 4 key techniques using simple, age-appropriate language:

- **Fear:** "This is a big one. The poster tries to scare people by showing a terrible thing that will happen if they don't do what the poster says. For example, a poster might show an enemy soldier threatening a family to make people feel that supporting the war is the only way to stay safe."
- **Bandwagon:** "This technique makes you feel like you'll be left out if you don't join in. It shows that 'everyone' is doing something—like buying war bonds or rationing food. It plays on our desire to be part of a team."
- **Name-Calling:** "This is exactly what it sounds like. The poster uses negative words or images to create hatred or dislike for the enemy. It makes the enemy seem less than human, so it's easier to fight against them."
- **Glittering Generalities:** "This is the opposite of name-calling. It uses vague but powerful 'feel-good' words that everyone agrees with, like 'Freedom,' 'Justice,' 'Victory,' or 'Honor.' It connects what the government wants you to do with a big, noble idea, but doesn't give any specifics."

Educator Models Analysis: Pull up the famous American poster "We Can Do It!" (often associated with Rosie the Riveter).

Educator Script (Thinking Aloud): "Okay, let's look at this one together. Who do I see? A strong, confident woman. What is she doing? Rolling up her sleeve, showing her muscle. What words are there? 'We Can Do It!' This feels really positive. I think this uses **Glittering Generalities**—the word 'We' makes it feel like a team effort, and 'Can Do It!' is a powerful, inspiring phrase. It's also a bit of **Bandwagon**, suggesting that all women can and should join the workforce to help the war. The goal here isn't to scare people, but to empower and inspire them to join the workforce."

Part 2: "We Do" - Guided Practice (10 minutes)

Educator Guides: "Now let's try one together." Pull up the British poster "Keep Calm and Carry On" or the American poster "Loose Lips Might Sink Ships."

Ask Ruby guiding questions to analyze the poster together:

- "First, what do you see? Describe the colors, images, and words."
 - "Who do you think this poster is for? Who is the target audience?" (Soldiers, factory workers, regular families?)
 - "What does the government want them to do or feel after seeing this poster?"
 - "Which of our propaganda techniques do you see at work here? Fear? Bandwagon? Something else?"
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- "Do you think this poster would have been effective? Why or why not?"

Part 3: "You Do" - Become the Analyst & Creator (15-25 minutes)

Educator Instructs: "Great job! Now it's your turn to be the lead detective and then the artist. First, you'll analyze a poster on your own. Then, you'll create one."

Step 1: Analysis. "Choose ONE poster from this list [provide links to 3-5 varied posters, e.g., a US war bond poster, a British 'Dig for Victory' poster, a German propaganda poster]. Use this simple analysis sheet to write down your findings."

Propaganda Analysis Worksheet

Poster Title/Description: _____

- 1. Observation:** What do you literally see? (Images, colors, text, symbols)
- 2. Audience:** Who was this poster meant for?
- 3. Message:** What is the main idea or action the poster is promoting?
- 4. Techniques:** What propaganda techniques are being used? (List at least one and explain how it's used).
- 5. Effectiveness:** Do you think it worked? Why or why not?

Step 2: Creation. "Now, you get to create your own poster! But instead of for a war, I want you to make a propaganda-style poster for a positive, modern-day cause you believe in. It could be about recycling, being kind to others, the importance of reading, or adopting shelter pets. Your choice!"

Success Criteria for Your Poster:

- It must have a clear, simple slogan (5-10 words).
- It must have a bold, central image.
- It must use at least ONE of the propaganda techniques we discussed (Fear, Bandwagon, Name-Calling, Glittering Generalities).
- It should be colorful and eye-catching.

III. Conclusion (10-15 minutes)

Share and Recap

Educator Invites Sharing: "Okay, amazing work! Now it's time for the big reveal. Let's see your poster. Tell me about it."

Have Ruby present her poster and answer these questions:

- "What cause did you choose?"
- "What slogan did you create?"
- "What propaganda technique did you use to make your message persuasive, and why did you choose that one?"

Reinforce Takeaways and Real-World Connection

Educator Summarizes: "You did an fantastic job today, both as a historian analyzing the past and as a creator making something new. What's really cool is that these techniques didn't disappear after WWII. We see them everywhere today—in political ads, commercials, social media campaigns, and even in

movie posters. Now that you know how to spot them, you have a superpower: you can better understand when someone is trying to persuade you, and you can decide for yourself if you agree with their message. That's a skill that's valuable for your entire life."

Assessment

- **Formative:** Observe Ruby's answers and participation during the "I Do" and "We Do" discussions to check for understanding of the core concepts.
 - **Summative:** The completed Propaganda Analysis Worksheet and the original poster she creates will serve as the final assessment. Evaluate them based on the success criteria provided in the "You Do" section.
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Differentiation and Adaptability

- **For Learners Needing More Support:** Provide sentence starters on the analysis worksheet (e.g., "The technique I see is ____ because the poster shows..."). Reduce the number of propaganda techniques to just two (e.g., Fear and Bandwagon). Provide a simple template for the poster design.
- **For Learners Needing a Challenge:** Have Ruby analyze two posters from opposing countries (e.g., USA vs. Japan) and write a short paragraph comparing their techniques and messages. For the creation part, challenge her to create a digital poster using a free tool like Canva, or to create a "counter-propaganda" poster that argues against an original WWII poster.
- **For a Classroom or Group Setting:** The "We Do" can be a "Think-Pair-Share" activity. The "You Do" analysis can be done in pairs. The poster creation can be a group project, followed by a gallery walk where students view and comment on each other's work.