



# The ABCs of Rhetoric and Terministic Screens

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## Overview

This lesson explores how our personal values and beliefs shape how we interpret and respond to messages. Through a hands-on activity involving photographs, students will learn how different filters can change their perception of an object. Following this, students will discover 2 frameworks for analysis (the ABC model and Kenneth Burke's idea of terministic screens) that will help them understand how a person's values and beliefs shape their interpretation. After this lesson, students will be able to better recognize their own terministic screens and interact more civilly in conversation.



## Essential Questions

- What is the purpose of rhetoric?
- What's the value of rhetoric for civil discourse?
- How can rhetoric be a bridge that connects people with diverse viewpoints?

## Materials

- Journal
- Whiteboard or chart paper
- Script of neutral phrases for terministic screen practice
- A collection of copyright-free photos
- Headline pairings

## Learning Objectives

- Understand how our values and beliefs impact how we communicate with others
- Explain why the ABC model and the idea of terministic screens are helpful for engaging in civil discourse
- Analyze headlines to determine the ABCs that inform a person's beliefs

## Warm-Up

### STEP 1

Give students several images to choose from. These could be from a site like [Unsplash](#) or a set of chosen photos that you have curated for your class.

### STEP 2

Ask students to copy/paste their chosen photo onto a document. Then, ask students to create 3 or more versions of their photo using a free online photo filter such as Canva.

When students have finished this, they should have four photos of the same scene, person, or object with varying filters. For example, a student's collection might look like this:

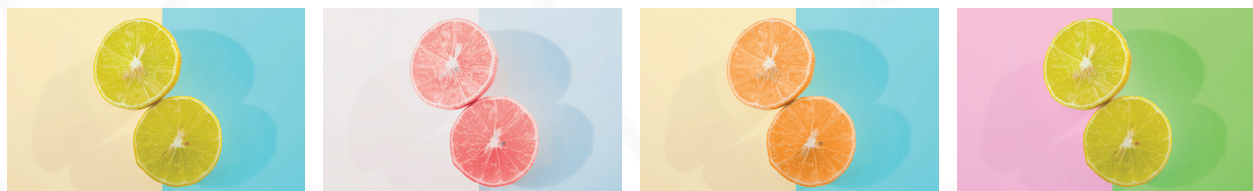


PHOTO 1 (ORIGINAL)

PHOTO 2

PHOTO 3

PHOTO 4

### **STEP 3**

Ask students to share one of their filtered photos with another student. Then, in the same pairs, share the original photo.

### **STEP 4**

Have students respond to the following questions on a sheet of notebook paper or in a journal entry.

- What was your interpretation of the scene, object, or person when you saw the filtered photo?
- How did your interpretation change when you saw the original photo?
- In what ways might the filtered photos you or your partner created mirror our language?

### **DEBRIEF**

As a whole group, discuss students' responses to the journaling questions. Use the discussion to help students have a concrete understanding of the term "filter."

## **Part 1: The ABCs of Rhetoric**

### **ASK**

Show this quote from [Francis Bacon](#) on the board and ask students if they can recall the quotation from the previous lesson. Then, ask if their understanding of this quotation has changed based on what we have learned so far about rhetoric.

"The duty and office of Rhetoric is to apply Reason to Imagination for the better moving of the will."

—FRANCIS BACON

### **SAY**

This quote connects to foundational principles of how we see and process the world, which, in turn, shapes how we act. We all have values and beliefs that shape our perceptions and influence our experiences. Albert Ellis explained this in his ABC model, which stands for the following:

"A" stands for the "activating event."

"B" stands for the "person's beliefs (about the activating event)."

"C" stands for the "consequences of this belief."

Transition to the next activity by telling students that they are going to practice applying the ABC model to the rhetorical message of various headlines.

## MODEL

Show students the following headlines.

- "School's Phone-Free Lunch Period Creates Space for Real Connection"
- "New Policy Forces Students to Surrender Phones During Social Time"

Show students how the ABC framework would be applied to these headlines using the questions above.

ABC Analysis:

- A (Activating event):
  - School implements phone-free lunch period
- B (Beliefs):
  - Interacting without phones is vital for creating meaningful connections with others
  - Phone use is a valid way of connecting and involves personal freedom
- C (Consequences):
  - Support for "unplugged" initiatives that encourage social interaction
  - Resistance to perceived loss of freedom and top-down control over personal devices

## PRACTICE

Pair students and give them a set of 2 headlines (they do not have to be real) that imply 2 different interpretations of the same event. Some examples are:

- Headline Pair 1
  - "Updated Dress Code Promotes Inclusive Learning Environment"
  - "Strict New Rules Limit Student Self-Expression"
- Headline Pair 2
  - "Later Start Time Allows Teens to Get Much-Needed Sleep"
  - "Schedule Change Disrupts After-School Activities and Family Routines"
- Headline Pair 3
  - "Student-Led Initiative Brings Local Food Options to Cafeteria"
  - "Costly Menu Changes Drive Up School Lunch Prices"
- Headline Pair 4
  - "Technology Enhances Educational Efficiency and Personalization"
  - "Technology Threatens Human Connection in Education"



- **Headline Pair 5**

- “AI Assistant Helps Teachers Provide Personalized Student Feedback”
- “Automated Grading System Reduces Teacher-Student Interaction”

Have students use the ABC framework to analyze each set of headlines. You may use the following questions to guide their thinking.

A (Activating event): What is the activating event?

B (Beliefs): What are the interpretations of the event?

C (Consequences): What are the resulting feelings and actions?

### **DEBRIEF**

When all students have completed their ABC analysis of each headline, ask several pairs to share their application of the ABC model to a couple of the headline pairs. Using the questions below, guide students toward a deeper understanding of the ways our beliefs shape the words we use.

- How do our beliefs (B) act as filters that affect what aspects of reality we notice and focus on?
- Why might different people looking at the same event (A) come to different conclusions (C)?
- How do the words we choose reflect AND shape our understanding of reality?

## **Part 2: Terministic Screens**

Connect the ABCs of rhetoric to the idea of terministic screens by explaining that the term “terministic screens” describes the filters that often shape how we speak and how we interpret the world around us. One can think of terministic screens as glasses we wear that are “colored” by a key value or belief.

For instance, let’s say someone asks you, “What time is it?” If the term or belief that colors your choice is “hate,” you may interpret that question as a veiled test of one’s ability to tell time. If your term of belief of choice is “love,” you may interpret the same question as proof that this person trusts you to give an accurate answer and/or an opportunity to help.

### **MODEL**

Tell students you will be modeling the next activity.

#### **STEP 1**

Write 1 of these phrases on the whiteboard or a piece of chart paper: “This should be good” or “What’s not to love?”

## **STEP 2**

Explain how each phrase could be said and interpreted differently depending on one's values/beliefs and terministic screens. For instance, if one's terministic screen is "hope," the phrase "This should be good" might be stated in an upbeat way and hold an optimistic meaning. However, if one's terministic screen is "cynicism," the same phrase might be stated and heard sarcastically.

## **EXPLORE**

### **STEP 1**

Pair students. Ask each pair to choose to be PERSON A or PERSON B.

### **STEP 2**

Give each student a value (or let them choose a value), such as love, hate, curiosity, caring, etc. Explain that their value is the terministic screen through which their character will see the world.

### **STEP 3**

Hand out 1 script to each person. Tell students that their chosen value is the perspective from which they will be reading their part of the script.

### **STEP 4**

Ask students to read the script (located at the end of this lesson) with a partner. If there is time, ask partners to read the opposite part of the script and choose a new value/belief and terministic screen to read from.

## **DEBRIEF**

After all pairs have engaged in the activity, debrief with students about the following questions:

- How did your chosen values/beliefs shape how you or your partner read the script?
- What does this exercise show you about the role of terministic screens in shaping our beliefs about ourselves and others?
- What does this exercise show you about the role one's values/beliefs might play in our ability to speak civilly with one another about challenging topics?

## **Closing the Lesson**

You can close the lesson by asking students to reflect on their learning for the day. In an exit ticket or a short journal entry, ask students to respond to the following questions:

- What do the letters A, B, and C stand for in the ABC model?
- What role do our beliefs play in the terministic screens we use to interpret the world around us?
- How do terministic screens affect our language use?

## Common Core State Standards

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1:** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.B:** Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision-making (e.g., informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views), clear goals and deadlines, and individual roles as needed.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D:** Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6:** Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.6:** Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

## Terministic Screen Activity Script

PERSON A: Hey.

PERSON B: Hi.

PERSON A: Haven't I seen you somewhere?

PERSON B: I don't know.

PERSON A: Are you serious?

PERSON B: Yes, I'm serious.

PERSON A: That's typical.

PERSON B: What's typical?

PERSON A: You're kidding, right?

PERSON B: Are you?

PERSON A: Why are you looking at me like that?

PERSON B: Why don't you tell me?

PERSON A: This is interesting.

PERSON B: It is?

PERSON A: Well, that figures.

PERSON B: I should have known.

PERSON A: How could you?

PERSON B: Are you serious?

PERSON A: Yes, I'm serious.

PERSON B: Whatever you say.

PERSON A: OK, bye.

PERSON B: Bye.