

LESSON PLAN

What Do Hallowe'en Costumes Say?

This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.



LEVEL: Grades K-5

DURATION: 2-3 class periods

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Teaching Tolerance is a Web project of the U.S. based Southern Poverty Law Center

The lesson was adapted with permission from [Teaching Tolerance](#), a Web project of the U.S. based Southern Poverty Law Center. Teaching Tolerance provides educators with free educational materials that promote respect for differences and appreciation of diversity.

Overview

This activity, adaptable across grades, is designed to help students look critically at the Hallowe'en costumes marketed to them. In schools where Hallowe'en is observed, the activity can be used to develop guidelines for acceptable holiday garb.

Learning Outcomes

Big ideas/key concepts: Students will learn the understand that...

- Media are constructions: Costumes are media works
- Media have social and political implications: Media works send messages about topics like diversity, gender, identity, and law
- Each medium has a unique aesthetic form: Costumes communicate meaning through colour, image, and associations such as tie-ins with history, culture or other media
- Audiences negotiate meaning: Different people respond differently to the same media text (e.g. costumes)

Key questions:

- What messages can costumes send?
- What questions should we ask before choosing a costume?
- How can we decide if a costume is appropriate?

Essential knowledge: Students will learn...

- Media representation: Different costumes are marketed to different groups of people
- Media health: How we feel can be affected by how we're represented in media

Performance tasks: Students will be able to use costumes in a conscious and responsible way, understand how genres influence how works are made and experienced, and engage with issues of stereotyping and representation in media

Preparation and Materials

Prepare to project or distribute the following handouts:

- *Halloween Costumes: Tie-ins to Teen Content*
- *Halloween Costumes: Boys and Girls*
- *Halloween Costumes: Culture and History*
- *Halloween Costume Outline*

If you are conducting the *Viewing a Costume Catalogue* activity, ensure that you have internet access and either enough internet-connected devices for students to use or a digital projector or whiteboard

Procedure

Ask students to describe Halloween costumes they have worn in the past, or ones they plan to wear this year.

Now ask: "What can a Halloween costume say?"

Students will likely be unsure how to answer or skeptical that a costume can "say" anything. Point out that costumes are a kind of media, that were *constructed* by people who made *choices* while making them. Those choices send messages like what's good or bad, what's important or unimportant, and who is included or left out.

Now ask students:

- How do they decide what costumes to wear? What do they think about? Who helps them decide?
- Do they mostly wear home-made or store-bought costumes? Where do they (or their parents) buy store-bought costumes?
- How do they think the people who make store-bought costumes decide which costumes to make? How often do they make costumes based on other media? How often do they make characters based on other things kids like such as fairy tales, animals, et cetera?

LOOKING AT HALLOWE'EN COSTUMES

Now project or distribute *Halloween Costumes: Tie-Ins to Teen Content* and ask if they recognize the character and where it's from. If nobody does, tell them this is "Meowscles," a character from the video game *Fortnite*. Point out that *Fortnite* is rated "T," which means only kids 13 and over should play it. Does offering this costume in kids' sizes suggest that it's okay for younger kids to play *Fortnite*? Why or why not?

Project or distribute *Halloween Costumes: Boys and Girls* and ask:

- What do you notice about these costumes?
- How are they costumes different?
- Why do you think the "Camo Trooper" costume only offered to boys, and the "Pop Singer" only offered to girls?
- What does that say about what boys and girls like, or are expected to like?
- Write the word *stereotype* on the board and ask students if they know what it means. Make sure they understand that a stereotype is an image or picture of a kind of person that makes it seem like they are all the same: all girls wear pink, all boys want to be tough, and so on.

Project or distribute *Halloween Costumes: Culture and History* and ask students if they know what a "ninja" is. Make sure they understand that ninjas do not just come from media: they were a kind of spy and soldier during the "warring states" period in Japan (roughly the 15th to 17th centuries CE) that later became very popular in Japanese media such as kabuki theatre.

Ask students:

- How might a person who is Japanese feel about someone who is not Japanese wearing a ninja costume? Why?
- Have students consider the phrase "My culture is not a costume." Remind them that while your culture is a big part of who you are, a costume is something you can buy, put on and take off again. Do those sound the same?
- Can students think of something from their culture or history that they would not want other people to wear as a costume?

(Note: Students do not have to come to a definite answer to any of these questions; it is enough that they become aware of them. If you have students who are Indigenous or are members of racially or culturally diverse groups, do not call on them specifically during this discussion, but let them choose whether or not to contribute to each question.)

BROWSING HALLOWE'EN COSTUMES

(For older students) Divide the class into groups and have students visit the site Halloween Costumes (<https://www.halloweencostumes.ca/kids-costumes.html>)

Tell them to browse the site and consider:

- What kinds of costumes come from other media (movies, games, etc.)? How many are connected to media aimed at teens or adults?
- Which costumes are tied to specific cultures? (Suggest they look at the “International” category.) What cultures are represented? (You may need to help students identify the cultures represented by different costumes.) Pick one culture and ask: If all you knew about this culture was these costumes, what would you think about it?
- Which costumes are aimed at both boys and girls? Which are only aimed at boys, or only aimed at girls? If all you knew about boys and girls was what you learned from these costumes, what would you think about how they are similar or different?

Have students share their findings with the class.

CHOOSING HALLOWE'EN COSTUMES: WHAT DO THEY SAY?

Distribute the handout *Halloween Costume Outline* and have students draw a costume. It can be a costume they have worn in the past, one they plan to wear, one they have seen someone else wear, or one they saw in the catalogue. (Make sure they understand it doesn't matter how well they draw it.)

Now have them pass the costume to another student. Have that student write down what they think this costume “says”:

- What does it say about the person wearing it—who they are, what they like?
- What might it say about boys or girls?
- If it is connected to history or culture, what might it say about that?

As a class, write a letter to parents and guardians sharing what the class learned and asking for their support. Send copies of the letter home with students.

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WHAT DO HALLOWE'EN COSTUMES SAY?

Hallowe'en Costumes: Tie-Ins to Teen Content

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WHAT DO HALLOWE'EN COSTUMES SAY?

Hallowe'en Costumes: Boys and Girls

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WHAT DO HALLOWE'EN COSTUMES SAY?

Halloween Costumes: Culture and History

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WHAT DO HALLOWE'EN COSTUMES SAY?

Halloween Costume Outline

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