

Text & Subtext

Text

We often use the word “text” to mean “written words.” But in media literacy, “text” has a very different meaning. The text of any piece of media is what you actually see and/or hear. It can include written or spoken words, pictures, graphics, moving images, sounds, and the arrangement or sequence of all of these elements. Sometimes the text is called the “story” or “manifest text.” For most of us, the text of a piece of media is always the same.

Subtext

The “subtext” is your interpretation of a piece of media. It is sometimes called the “latent text.” The subtext is not actually heard or seen; it is the meaning we create from the text in our own minds. While media makers (especially advertisers) often create texts that suggest certain subtexts, each person creates their own subtext (interpretation) based on their previous experiences, knowledge, opinions, attitudes and values. Thus, the subtext of a piece of media will vary depending on the individual seeing/hearing it

Example

Magazine ad: “got milk?”



The text of this media message includes:

- An image of musician Sheryl Crow holding a guitar case and a glass of milk in a room with a lamp, bed, open door, etc. behind her.
- The logo “got milk?” and the words “Rock hard.”
- The short paragraph: “To keep the crowd on their feet, I keep my body in tune. With milk. Studies suggest that the nutrients in milk can play an important role in weight loss. So if you’re trying to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight, try drinking 24 ounces of lowfat or fat free milk every 24 hours as part of your reduced-calorie diet. To learn more, visit 2424milk.com. It’s a change that’ll do you good.”
- Another logo that reads “milk. your diet. Lose weight! 24 oz. 24 hours”
- A small image of Sheryl Crow’s album Wildflower.

Possible subtexts include:

- Sheryl Crow drinks milk.
- Sheryl Crow can only perform well by drinking milk.
- Sheryl Crow wants to sell her album.
- Milk renders great concerts.
- If you drink milk you will lose weight.
- Beautiful people drink milk.
- If you drink milk, you’ll be beautiful and famous, too.
- Sheryl Crow stays at cheap motels.
- Rock stars like ripped jeans