

What Is a Billboard?

Second course, First grading period, Week 3

You want to grab listeners' attention and keep them from switching the dial. Often at the top of the hour, people are ready to reach for that knob. Stop them with a well-produced billboard. Billboards are concise statements of coming attractions in the programs following the newscast. Writing billboards provides an exercise in summarizing what's coming up.



Enduring Understanding

Billboards provide a service to the public that informs them of what to expect in programming. Billboards may keep people interested in staying tuned.



Essential Question

What should go into a billboard and how do you prepare a good one: copy, audio teases and music?



Objectives and Outcome

- Students will learn what makes a good billboard.
- Students will produce billboards efficiently.



Suggested Time

One week



Resources and Material

Audio examples of billboards on radio and TV
Audio projects the students have already produced



Procedure

1. If the 1965 Highway Beautification Act did not remove billboards in your area, go take a look at them. Those massive commercial displays along America's highways or advertising panels painted on buildings can convey much information fast. Begin class by asking students about them. How many students can describe them and know the products being advertised?

Perhaps your students are aware of the Calvin Klein billboards in Times Square, the Chick-fil-A signboards with 3-dimensional cows painting the billboards with slogans such as "frenz dont let frenz eat beef," or some of the other memorable billboards dotting America. If you are lucky, a trail of one of the classics of the past is still visible near your community. Burma Shave advertised on small, strategically spaced billboards that were often memorized because of their humor and rhyme. Comparable to them are billboards in North and South Carolina leading the way and inviting motorists to South of the Border.

Some billboards have raised eyebrows and concern among some about visual pollution, propriety or safety of other motorists on the highway as drivers try to see every detail of the illustration and divert their attention from their driving.

You might also relate highway billboards to the posters that line your hallways promoting school events and sales.

What is the purpose of highway billboards and hallway posters? They are meant to catch an individual's attention, provide information and leave a favorable or memorable impression — even cause people to exit to make a purchase or to decide to attend an event.

2. There is an audio version of these billboards. Listen to pre-selected examples of audio billboards. Tell students that these are called “billboards” in radio broadcasting. How do they fill a function similar to highway billboards?

What do most of these billboards have in common? Have the class generate a description list together. The list should include words such as “fast-paced,” “punchy,” “bare bones,” “leaves an impression,” “goes for the jugular,” and “gives bullets of news.”

Analyze them by discussing the order of stories, the hot tape used, the writing style, and its appeal or lack of appeal.

3. Distribute three wire copy stories, scripts of radio reports or newspaper news articles to groups of students. Each group must write a billboard line for each story. After they review lines written by the group members place the lines in an order to form the billboard.

4. Have each group read their billboards to the class. Do not read a billboard a second time; a first impression is essential to capture the listener's attention. Vote on which billboard most effectively keeps them tuned to hear the full story.

5. Have students select a piece of tape to tease a piece that was written and produced by a classmate. Use of work from previous projects will facilitate this step. Can they hear a completed story and find the angle, actuality or sound to emphasize? On deadline? Work in groups using a piece that no one in the group produced. All billboards should be no more than a minute and no one piece should be teased for more than 20 seconds total including copy and tape.

Discuss the results. Some questions to consider include:

- Did the billboard capture the listener's attention through use of sound, actuality or enticing copy?
- Did the billboard in any way mislead listeners about the selection's content?
- Did it hype something that was just a small portion of the whole or incidental to the report's main subject?

6. Now that students have an understanding of the purpose of a billboard, its content and time constraints, each student is to produce a billboard. Using the audio material they produced in the previous course (found in their portfolios on CD or in the workstation's audio files), from their three-minute newscast, 13-minute news program and their individual music reviews, students then choose short clips of hot tape and write copy that promotes the piece. Students may select appropriate music to run under their work. Listen to the billboard. If there isn't enough enthusiasm in the voice, record again and punch it up!

Meeting the time requirement is essential — all billboards must be no more than a minute and no one piece should be teased for more than 20 seconds total including copy and tape.

7. After the students have written and produced their billboards, have the class critique them. Select the best three and analyze why they are the best.



Homework

Students must listen to and review two billboards every night for a week. In the next term, students will be learning to recognize, write and produce a promo. You may wish to distinguish them now or just be sure to emphasize where the billboard is placed in a show's rundown.

They can listen to programs such as NPR's Morning Edition on the Web. Programs do not have to be heard live. In fact something pre-recorded will allow students to listen again and again so they can list the subjects the billboard covered. They should comment on the order, the stories promoted and the style of writing including word choice; and brainstorm about what they liked and what they didn't. You might have them record billboard phrases that "tickled" the ear. Be very specific.

Students should NOT be listening to the same shows every evening. TV is an acceptable alternative. The style is very similar. News shows, music shows, sports ... all are fair game. Just make sure students critique a variety of billboards to keep sharpening their skills.



Assessment

You might give class participation credit for the first attempts at writing a billboard.

Evaluation of the last billboard that each student writes and produces alone, should include answers to these questions:

- Does the student show an understanding of the purpose, content and structure of a billboard?
- Has the student stayed within the time limits?
- Is there an element of the billboard that catches the listener's attention?
- Is the student demonstrating technical skill in producing the billboard? This is the beginning of the second course so one could also evaluate what editing and production skills the student has retained and what skills might require review.

This is a skill that takes time to master. Have students continue to write billboards on and off from now on. They can do it as extra credit on a slow night when they have no other homework to complete.



Academic Content Standards

Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (Standard 4, NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts)

Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information). (Standard 12, NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts)

National

Understand the principles, processes, and products associated with arts and communication media (McREL, Standard 1, Arts & Communication Career)



Industry Standards and Expectations

Define the terminology associated with journalism. (Performance Element, Pathway KS Statement: Demonstrate writing processes used for various journalism media. States' Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)

Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts. (Standard 6, NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts)

Demonstrate promoting productions. (Performance Element, Pathway KS Statement: Demonstrate the ability to deliver a broadcast production. States' Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)

Apply knowledge of equipment and skills related to audio production. (Pathway KS Statement: Audio and Video Technology and Film, States' Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)

The SkillsUSA Championships Technical Committee selected the following competencies as essential and to be demonstrated through their radio competition project:

- Demonstrate knowledge of audio production technology, safety procedures and trade terminology,
- Plan radio/audio production,
- Perform audio recordings and editing operations,
- Perform audio mixing, and
- Complete script.

Billboard Vocabulary

Billboards The first minute of each hour of many TV and radio programs begins with hosts mentioning some of the items to be heard in that hour. These previews of upcoming attractions are the **billboards**. They are also called **opens**.

Billboards are made up of copy you write ... quick information about pieces coming up in the show including the news headlines you plan to cover. Often the copy you write can be taken from a brief description of the piece that will air. That description is called the **lines**. Most billboards also include audio called **teases**.

Most billboards take no more than one minute and contain information about at least three items coming up on the show.

Lines Lines are short descriptions of the pieces you are working on. It is essential that the facts and pronunciations in the lines be accurate and up-to-date. You can use these lines to help craft what you write in billboards.

Tease A short actuality that previews the story. A good tease serves as a “hook” that makes the listener eager to hear more. Billboard teases should be catchy — the whole point is to make the listener stay tuned. They should reflect a portion of what’s in the upcoming report.

Original source with editing changes: National Public Radio, Intern Edition.