Unit 3/Week 1

Title: *The Trouble with Television*

Suggested Time: 5 days (45 minutes per day)

Common Core ELA Standards: RI.8.1, RI.8.2, RI.8.3, RI.8.4, RI.8.6; W.8.2, W.8.4, W.8.9; SL.8.1; L.8.1, L.8.2, L.8.4

Teacher Instructions

**Preparing for Teaching**

1. Read the Big Ideas and Key Understandings and the Synopsis. Please do **not** read this to the students. This is a description for teachers about the big ideas and key understanding that students should take away **after** completing this task.

Big Ideas and Key Understandings

The very nature of television and television viewing is a threat to our language, literacy, imagination and our ability to comprehend and deal with complex issues.

Synopsis

In “The Trouble With Television,” former broadcast journalist Robert MacNeil presents a persuasive case that television has a negative effect on American society. He cites statistical evidence about the average amount of hours spent watching television and the feeding of information in short bursts to support his argument that television viewing undermines Americans ability to think critically or handle complex issues in their lives.

1. Read the entire selection, keeping in mind the Big Ideas and Key Understandings.
2. Re-read the text while noting the stopping points for the Text Dependent Questions and teaching Tier II/academic vocabulary.

**During Teaching**

1. Teach/reengage the idea that the author is writing an argument using evidence to support his claim.
2. Students read the entire selection independently; give them a guide or something to look for: difficult vocabulary, identifying images, or sensory detail, etc.
3. Teacher reads the text aloud while students follow along or students take turns reading aloud to each other.
4. Students and teacher re-read the text while stopping to respond to and discuss the questions, continually returning to the text. A variety of methods can be used to structure the reading and discussion (i.e., whole class discussion, think-pair-share, independent written response, group work, etc.)

Text Dependent Questions

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| **Text-dependent Questions** | **Evidence-based Answers** |
| According to the author, how much television will young people watch by the age of 20? How many hours for each decade a person lives after the age of 20? | The author states that by the age of 20 a young person will have watched at least 20,000 hours of television. After age 20, a person can add 10,000 for each decade he or she lives. |
| What does the author believe a person could learn in the amount of time he or she spends watching television? Why does he feel this is important? | According to the author, it takes 5,000 hours to get a bachelor’s degree in college. So in 10,000 hours a person could learn enough to be an astronomer or engineer or could learn several languages. The author believes this is important because watching television keeps people from accomplishing these things. |
| The author presents his view of the main trouble with television. What is that trouble? | The author presents his argument that “the trouble with television is that it discourages concentration.” |
| Why is it important to the author that people pay attention to this problem? | The author thinks people should pay attention to this problem because he believes that interesting activities and learning take “consistently applied effort.” If people lose their ability to concentrate, they will not be able to accomplish these things and it will threaten society’s growth. |
| The author stated, “Television’s variety becomes a narcotic, not a stimulus.” What does the author mean by this statement? | By this, he means that the constant change from one thing to the next begins to become an addiction like a drug. Instead of the variety making people want to learn more about something, it just makes them jump from one thing to the next. |
| What does the author point out as “prime motive of most television programming?” | The author points out that the “prime motive of television” is to capture the audience’s attention, or keep everyone watching. To do that, he says programmers make sure everything is very brief and quick so people won’t get bored and stop watching. |
| Why does MacNeil believe television’s format have a negative impact on news programs? | MacNeil believes television’s brief communication formats have a negative impact on news programs because this “results in inefficient communication.” Since all news items are very short, people find news “boring and dismissible.” So they don’t pay attention to news unless it shows something violent. |
| What does the author mean when he says television’s appeal is “decivilizing?” | When MacNeil uses the term “decivilizing” he means that since the very nature of television’s format is harming our civilization or society. |
| When the author uses the words “causal assumptions”, what does he mean by this phrase? What are the impacts of “casual assumptions” that television cultivates?  According to the author, what are the impacts of causal assumptions that television cultivates? | The term “causal assumptions” means that because of the format television takes, it causes people to make certain assumptions or form certain beliefs.  According to the author, television causes people to believe that complex or difficult things are to be avoided, that television’s stimulation can be substituted for thinking and that it is not important to be articulate. |
| Anachronism means someone or something that seems to belong to the past. What does the author mean by the phrase “verbal precision is an anachronism?” Why does he think this is important? | The phrase “verbal precision is an anachronism” means that speaking precisely or clearly has become old fashioned or no longer necessary to our society. He believes this is important because it people are not communicating clearly with each other. |
| What evidence does MacNeil provide to support his belief that “there is a crisis of literacy” in the United States? | To support his claim that there is a literacy crisis, MacNeil provides evidence that “some 20 million Americans are ‘functionally illiterate’”. This means they can’t read or write well enough to accomplish ordinary tasks like read instructions. |
| What connection does the author see between the United States’ literacy crisis and television? | Although the author doesn’t believe television has caused the literacy crisis, he believes television “contributes and is an influence.” |
| What does MacNeil believe about the changes in the structures of our modern society? | MacNeil believes that society structures such as family organization, the economy and the country’s place in the world have become more complex. |
| Why does MacNeil believe that television isn’t a good communication instrument to address those changes in society? | According to the author, because our society has become more complex, television doesn’t communicate well enough to provide us with ideas and information. He believes this because television “sells neat resolutions to human problems” instead of offering ideas that would help us handle the complex world we face. |
| To the author, how does the thirty-second commercial symbolize the disconnect between society’s changes and television? | To the author, commercials are a symbol of the neat resolutions to human problems that he describes. According to him, commercials present “tiny drama[s]” that show people finding happiness in buying the right products. |
| Why does MacNeil mean by “trivial fare” and why does he believe this is such a problem? | By “trivial fare,” MacNeil means programs and information that is unimportant. He believes this is a problem because this unimportant television programming is affecting the way we think and communicate, causing our communication to become trivial as well. |

Tier II/Academic Vocabulary

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|  | **These words require less time to learn**  (They are concrete or describe an object/event/  process/characteristic that is familiar to students) | **These words require more time to learn**  (They are abstract, have multiple meanings, are a part  of a word family, or are likely to appear again in future texts) |
| **Meaning can be learned from context** | Concentration  Instant gratification  Diverts  Span  Allotted | Statistical  Medium  Stimulation/Stimulus  Constructive  Coherence  Dismissible  Illiterate/Literate  Humanity  Skeptically |
| **Meaning needs to be provided** | Enhances  Usurps  Decivilizing  Functionally | Passively  Pervading  Causal assumptions  Inalienable  Trivial |

Culminating Writing Task

* Prompt:
  + *In “The Trouble With Television”, Robert MacNeil presents his viewpoint on television. What is the author’s opinion of television? How does he think television influences our society? What evidence does he provide to support his opinions? Write two or three paragraphs describing his views. Include direct quotations and citations of evidence from the text to support your ideas.*
* Teacher Instructions:

1. Students identify their writing task from the prompt provided.
2. Students will complete an evidence chart as a pre-writing activity. Teachers should guide students in gathering and using any relevant notes they compiled while reading and answering the text-dependent questions earlier. Some students will need a good deal of help gathering this evidence, especially if this process is new.

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| ***Evidence***  ***Quote or paraphrase*** | ***Elaboration / explanation of how this evidence supports ideas or argument*** |
| On page 558, the author states that by the age of 20 a young person will have watched at least 20,000 of television. After age 20, a person can add 10,000 for each decade he or she lives. | These statistics support the author’s claim that people are spending too many hours watching television. |
| It takes 5,000 hours to get a bachelor’s degree in college. So in 10,000 a person could learn enough to be an astronomer or engineer or could learn several languages. | The author offers these statistics to show how watching television keeps people from accomplishing these things. |
| “television’s variety becomes a narcotic, not a stimulus.” | By this the author means that instead of stimulating our minds, television is acting like a drug. |
| “The trouble with television is that it discourages concentration.” | This idea is the author’s main argument about what is most harmful about watching television. |
| The “prime motive of television” is to capture the audience’s attention, or keep everyone watching. | This means that television programming is filled with easy, fast-paced bits of information so people will not have to think too hard about what they are watching. |
| Television’s brief communication format “results in inefficient communication.” | By inefficient communication he means that people are not getting quality information and ideas are not being fully communicated to the audience. |
| “there is a crisis of literacy” | This is the main reason the author is not happy about television. He feels that there is a connection between the literacy problems in our country and television. |
| ‘30 million adult Americans are “functionally illiterate” and cannot read or write well enough to answer a want ad or understand the instructions on a medicine bottle.’ | The author presents these statistics to back up his argument about the literacy crisis in our country. |
| Commercials present “tiny drama[s]” that show people finding happiness in buying the right products. | This shows that the author feels the format of commercials give people the wrong idea about how to find happiness in their lives. |
| “I think this society is being force fed with trivial fare, and I fear that the effects on our habits of mind…are only dimly perceived” | With these words, the author is expressing his fear that people are ignoring how television is affecting our society. |

1. Once students have completed the evidence chart, they should look back at the writing prompt in order to remind themselves what kind of response they are writing (i.e. expository, analytical, argumentative) and think about the evidence they found. (Depending on the grade/reading level, teachers may want to review students’ evidence charts in some way to ensure accuracy.) From here, students should develop a specific thesis statement. This could be done independently, with a partner, small group, or the entire class. Consider directing students to the following sites to learn more about thesis statements: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/01/ OR http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/ thesis\_statement.shtml.
2. Students compose a rough draft. With regard to grade level and student ability, teachers should decide how much scaffolding they will provide during this process (i.e. modeling, showing example pieces, sharing work as students go).
3. Students complete final draft.

* Sample Answer

In the essay, “The Trouble With Television,” Robert MacNeil presents his viewpoint that watching television has a harmful effect on people and our society. In his opinion, the biggest trouble with television is that “it discourages concentration.” To support his position about the negative impact of television, the author provides statistics about how much television people watch and what those same people could accomplish if they stopped spending so much time on television. According to MacNeil, by the age of 20 a young person will have watched at least 20,000 of television. After age 20, a person can add 10,000 for each decade he or she lives. At the same time, it would take a person 5,000 hours to get a bachelor’s degree in college. So in the 10,000 hours a person spends watching television, that same person could learn enough to be an astronomer or engineer or could learn several languages. The author believes these statistics are important because watching television keeps people from accomplishing these more valuable activities.

The author also argues, “television’s variety becomes a narcotic, not a stimulus.” By this he means that television acts as more of a drug that keeps people from working hard, rather than as something that makes them succeed. He also claims that the “prime motive of television” is to capture the audience’s attention, or keep everyone watching. To do that, he says programmers make sure everything is very brief and quick so people won’t get bored and stop watching. MacNeil provides two examples of this quick and easy programming: nightly news programs show only fast paced snippets of news items and thirty-second commercials present the way to happiness through buying the right products.

Finally, the author believes that the trivial nature of television is affecting the way we think and communicate, causing our communication to become trivial as well. He presents the argument that there is a “crisis of literacy”. According to him, “30 million adult Americans are ‘functionally illiterate’ and cannot read or write well enough to answer a want ad or understand the instructions on a medicine bottle.” He thinks that television is contributing to this problem. It is just this kind of influence that he concerns him. He states, “I think this society is being force fed with trivial fare, and I fear that the effects on our habits of mind…are only dimly perceived.” It is our unawareness of television’s influence that he believes is so damaging to our society.

Additional Tasks

Visit the Take the Challenge Website: <http://www.takethechallengenow.net/index.html>

* Under the Lessons Link, find the middle school eighth grade lessons. Under English/Language Arts there are two lessons. Choose one of the following to complete:
  + Lesson 1: Media and Me Journal: <http://www.takethechallengenow.net/lessons/MiddleSchool/8%20TTC%20Binder%20PDF/ELA/8th%20ELA%20Lesson%201.pdf>
    - Sample student response: Addressing media violence in our society is a big challenge. What do you believe is possible? What can you do?

In my opinion, media violence is a real problem for children. I think that young people are becoming so used to images of violence in media that they feel violence is an acceptable part of society. I believe we need to find a way to lessen the amount of violence that children view in movies, on television and especially in video games. Programmers need to be made accountable for the violence they use to hook children in.

* Lesson 2: Television Turn-off Research Project (Persuasive Style Report):

<http://www.takethechallengenow.net/lessons/MiddleSchool/8%20TTC%20Binder%20PDF/ELA/8th%20ELA%20LESSON%202.pdf>

* Sample student response: According to research conducted by Nickelodeon television station, children spend up to 35 hours a week watching television. (<http://entertainment.time.com/2013/11/20/fyi-parents-your-kids-watch-a-full-time-jobs-worth-of-tv-each-week/>). This means that those children are missing out on time they could be spending playing or talking with their parents. I believe this is a terrible problem in our country.