TSSM
Creating VCE Success

Media
Teach Yourself Series
Topic 1: Narrative: Characteristics, Construction, Codes and Conventions to convey meaning Units 1, 2, 3

Contents

Narrative: Characteristics, Construction, Codes and Conventions to convey meaning

The analysis of meaning within media products is a fundamental skill for all students of VCE Media. Alongside Media Production, the reading and understanding of already existing Media products helps students become critical thinkers and evaluators of Media products, and will assist them in the development of their own work.
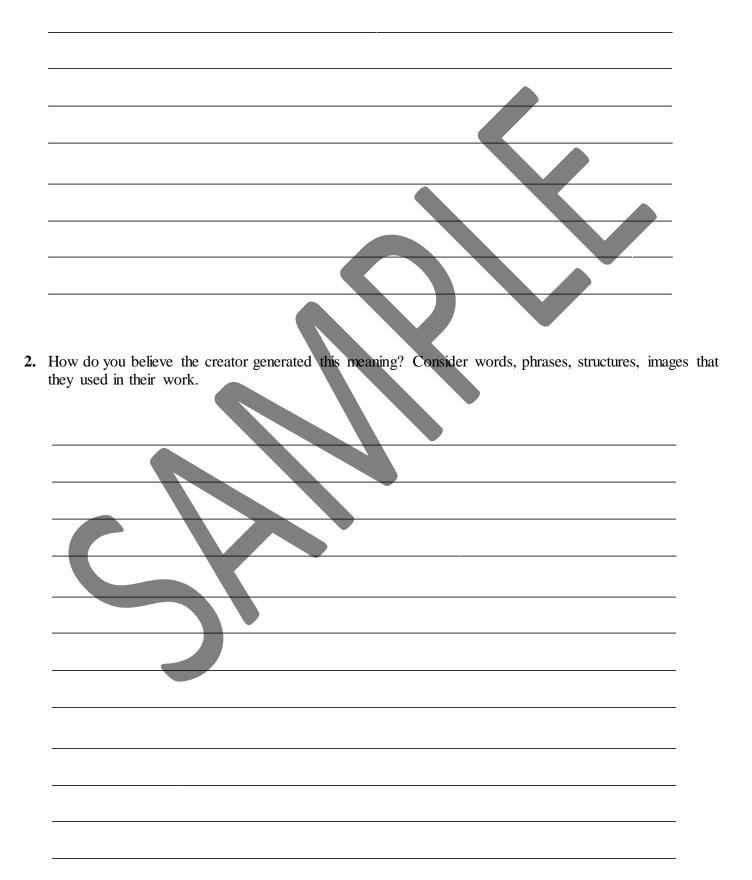
Like in other art forms, media creators aim to instill meaning, messages and ideas within their products. Whether a television series or twitter message, there is a necessity when creating content within these products and forms to ensure a message of some sort can be delivered and understood by the intended audience. Therefore, the connection between creator and audience is strong when discussing meaning within media products. Even more so, how creators engage audiences to help communicate meaning is an area that media students must be able to work with. There are many complex ways media creators aim to communicate meaning to their audience. Think of this as a toolbox with various means and methods of instilling ideas and messages to audiences throughout their products.

Media Narratives and audiences
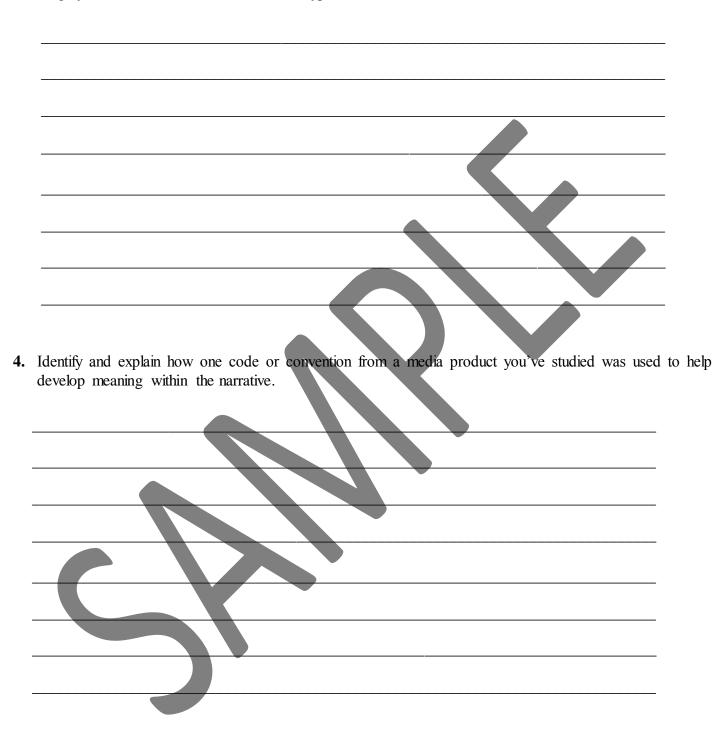
As it appears in Units 1, 2 and 3

Narrative is the fundamental building block of storytelling in Media. Think of narrative as the ways in which a story progresses from beginning to end, with conflicts along the way. Narratives have existed in the world for generations – the telling of stories, often with a message or meaning embedded within it. As children we experienced storytelling in the form of picture books – clear character development, storyline and even a moral at the end of the story. Ghost stories and fables are built on enticing the audience through various tools, tricks and techniques to contain the audience's attention as well as set off an emotional reaction within them. Narratives in Media products are built very much the same way as narratives in written literature – a process of choosing the correct tools and procedures to entice the audience into the story and help them connect with it. Where written literature will use words, phrases, sentences and imagery, media narratives have images, text, sound, links, gifs and/or a combination of these, crafted in a manner the audience understands, to portray its messages. Narratives, whether media or literature, are designed to help communicate meaning and instill ideas, thoughts and values into its audience. Most media creators of narratives often have a particular perspective or point of view they aim to communicate, and will use the concept of a narrative to do this.

As part of your studies in Media, it is essential to have a firm grasp on how narratives are crafted for specific audiences, and the meanings generated from these. Even more so, it is important to be aware of the role of the audience in constructing and interpreting media narratives – who is the intended audience, what do they know and expect of the narrative being consumed? How might this impact on the meanings being created or generated? Narratives are built with an audience in mind – their background, lifestyle, likes and dislikes help a creator mould a specific narrative together which hopefully will entice them into engaging with and reading the narrative.

Review Questions

1. Explain a storyline from a book or film you've recently seen and what the creator intended for the audience to understand (about a topic, theme, issue in the world?)

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2. How do you believe the creator generated this meaning? Consider words, phrases, structures, images that they used in their work.

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3. Who was the intended audience of one media narrative you consumed this year? Explain the ways the creator shaped their work to help this audience connect with the narrative (consider storyline type, use of imagery, codes, conventions, use of stereotypes).

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4. Identify and explain how one code or convention from a media product you've studied was used to help develop meaning within the narrative.

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The Language and tools of Media Narratives: Codes, Denotation and Connotation

As it appears in Units 1 and 2

Like written literature narratives, media narratives have their own language and 'toolkit' to help construct and access the meaning within them. This language is shared and understood by the media creators and audiences across media forms. Film, television, radio, magazines, advertisements, the internet all share a common understanding of this language. In many cases the language is form specific (for instance, visual media such as film will have a specific language that is different from audio media – yet they also share some similarities). It is through the audience's regular consumption of these media forms that they come to understand what certain words, phrases, images, etc. 'mean' and the ideas and meanings behind them. For media creators, the act of them consuming media on a regular basis also gives them the insight into what sort of language or 'tools' are necessary to create works for audiences.

Media codes are the official term for the tools that media creators use when constructing meaning within media products. The term code originates from the idea of a 'code' being a means of communication of an idea (think of Morse code – it is a language designed to be understood by certain audiences). Media codes function as a communication tool because within each of them is a meaning attached that the audience has learnt and understood, over time, as a result of exposure to the code across all media forms and the use of the code within society. The audience learns the codes of media narratives in very much the same way as they learn their first language – through constant exposure and placing the code in context when deciphering meaning.

Media codes are divided into two main areas – *technical codes* and *symbolic codes*.

Technical codes are technologies, then when used in a certain way, help to communicate a certain meaning. These can include:

- Camera use – how is the camera being used? – at a high angle (looking down), low angle (looking up), used to focus on intimate detail (extreme close up). Depending on what camera position is chosen, there will certain meanings attached to these, which are context specific (meaning it depends on what action is occurring in the shot that will help determine meaning).
- Lighting – what type of lighting is being used and what is it doing? Shadows? Bright light? Low key light? Light is a very common code that specific film genres, such as horror may use to help create fear and unease in the audience.
- Sound – what music can you hear? What are the qualities of the sound? Music and soundtracks in themselves have meanings and messages, and when applied to a visual medium, can further develop that meaning within the images themselves.
- Editing – how has content been manipulated? Why has some content been manipulated to look differently than the original? Again, think of the meanings aimed to be generated from this choice.
- Text – what choice of text type is being used? What words or phrases are written? What might be the reason for this? Consider intended meanings.
- Setting – where does the action take place? What might this setting imply about the characters who inhabit it?

Symbolic codes are often symbols, or images or objects, that can be understood which also instill ideas and thoughts. Unlike technical codes, symbolic codes are not necessarily just media related tools, but are often used and understood within societies and cultures overall as a code of communication. Examples can be:

- Colour – we grow up with the knowledge that colours have a meaning behind them (black is evil, red is romance). These qualities of a meaning are also utilised within media products to help develop meaning about characters, storylines, ideologies.
- Props – certain objects as they appear in a film, for instance a gun, can be a code which means 'danger', 'power', 'or authority'. The meaning an audience will give the prop will be entirely dependent on the context of the production (i.e. – its genre) and also what the audience thinks and believes about the prop.

What is important to understand is that technical and symbolic codes can fit into either category. For instance, sound is a technical aspect of a media narrative, but it also has a symbolic quality to it.

The ways in which an audience develops these meanings is all culturally dependent. We are not born with the knowledge that a high angle means a character is powerless, so, then, how do we learn this?

Every culture and society in every part of the world has codes operating within them to help the process of communication. The types of codes usually remain the same, but the meanings attached to them change between cultures. For instance, while in western society, the colour white is a code for purity, in eastern cultures, white often symbolises death, unhappiness and misfortune. This knowledge is learnt over time by people who live within that culture. The media narratives within that society, also a means of communication, will take these codes on board when creating media products so the audience clearly understand the ideas occurring within them.

Codes can be thought of in two distinct ways when discussing how meaning is created within them – *denotation and connotation.*

Denotation refers to the literal look of a code – for instance 'white' simply is 'white' – no attached meaning, just literally 'white'. This is a very simplistic look at a code and does not offer much in terms of meaning making.

Connotation is about attaching an associated meaning to a code (as listed with the white means purity, or white means unhappiness example). In most cases when analysing codes for meaning in media products, you are fixing a connotative meaning to a code. This is usually the most important analysis you need to perform, and to do it correctly you need to ensure you understand the general meaning behind the code. You may bring your own cultural interpretation to the code, or you may choose to research the code's intended meaning from the society it originated from – you can then have fun deciphering multiple meanings that can be possibly generated from just one code!

The impact of media codes on audiences is also context dependent. Media creators must ensure they have a firm grasp of their audience, and especially their knowledge and connection with media codes. Codes, and the ways they are manipulated will affect different audiences in different ways. For instance, a filmmaker would need to choose and manipulate music codes carefully when trying to engage and capture meaning for an audience of 30 year olds compared to an audience of children. Children read and interpret music in certain ways as do adults. Adults would most likely not respond well to a film designed for them if it contained music codes that children typically engage with. In this respect, it is fundamental that the concept of audience is always considered when using media codes to create products, or when analysing for meaning. It is very important to analyse meaning of codes in the context of the intended audience, not simply audiences in general.

Review Questions

5. How has one artist you've researched, or whose products you've consumed, manipulated a code in their works?

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6. Give an example of what you believe the intended meaning is behind this code in the context of the production.

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7. Give an example of a connotative meaning of a code. Are you bringing you own cultural interpretation to this meaning, or another cultural interpretation?

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As it appears in Unit 3

Like in units 1 and 2, your study of media codes is fundamental to your analysis of media products and how meaning is created. A major change in Unit 3, is you now need to link the study of codes and meaning making with the creation of ideologies within media narratives.

Like any other study of meaning within a narrative, the study of ideologies (beliefs, perspectives, points of view within a product) is fundamental. Media narratives are designed to instill and demonstrate ideologies of the society that the product is created in – so we ask ourselves - how does an artist visually or aurally demonstrate such an abstract concept to the audience? Whether it is ideologies on gender, race, technology or politics, media creators must also use the tools of the media creator to help bring these ideologies to life for the audience. The use of a specific code, with a certain meaning attached to it can help a creator comment on an ideology. For instance, a film may be aiming to represent ideologies on gender in which it is believed that men and women are equal. To visualise this for the audience, the camera use on male and female characters may be equal and neutral in terms of the types of shot sizes used, or female characters may wear the same clothing and costume as male characters.

Analysing ideologies and how they're created within media narratives in Unit 3 means having a clear understanding of the meanings attached to media codes in general, but more so, understanding their meaning from the viewpoint of the society that created the media product – how would they as a society usually use the code, and what meaning would they fix to it? In this way, you are clearly understanding the intention of the creator and what their thoughts are about the ideology within the product.

8. How has one code been manipulated in one media narrative you've studied this year?

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9. What ideological meaning can be fixed to the use of a code from another media product you've studied this year?

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The Rules of Media product creation and meaning making: Conventions

As it appears in Units 1, 2 and 3

Like media codes, media conventions are an established and fundamental part of media narrative construction and meaning making. Where media codes provide the means of communication through language features, conventions have another role to play in this important process of meaning making.

Media conventions (from the word 'conventional') are the rules or pattern of structure applied to different media forms and products. Think of the concept of a horror film, you will know if you're a regular consumer of this media that they always have a villain and victim style set of characters, they also always have the good triumphing over evil in the narrative's conclusion. They also have a three act structure in which problems are established in the narrative's opening, and by the resolution, all order has been restored. These patterns of character development and storyline progression are typical examples of conventions, as they have been applied across all horror films. This regular pattern use clearly aims to help structure a media product, but more so, provides the means of helping an audience interpret what is happening because they've 'seen it before'. Examples of conventions that are applied to most media forms can include:

- Character types (horror film, science fiction, comedy style character types)
- Story principles (most modern day Hollywood film narratives have a clear pattern of having an opening, development and resolution sequence to structure the storyline)
- Generic storyline structure (all genres of film, television, photography have a very clear storyline type that frames their stories)
- Point of view – all media narratives contain a particular perspective or point of view which the audience will see or connect with
- Time structure – whether narratives are presented in linear (chronological) or non linear order (out of order/flashbacks) or with compression and expansion, they must all have a pattern of time for the story. Most modern day narratives are told in either linear or non linear order.
- Cause and effect – the chain of events that connect story events. A general rule of thumb for any narrative is that one event in a narrative is usually the impetus for another event to occur later in the narrative. It is through this manner of creating 'causes' which have 'effects' that helps the logicality and structure of a narrative progress forward.

Conventions are clearly at the heart of the framing of a narrative – they contribute to their overall structure. Even more important to know is that conventions only exist with codes to create them. For instance, the time structure of a film can be implied through many codes, such as the way the film is edited, through to the types of lighting used in scenes to imply flashbacks. An important skill is being able to articulate how codes are used in certain ways to create media conventions.

Review Questions

10. Outline an example of a media convention from a media product you've studied this year

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11. Explain the function of the convention in the context of a narrative you've studied this year (what was its intended purpose for your narrative?)

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12. Explain how the convention was created through the use of media codes.

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Media Genre, Codes and conventions
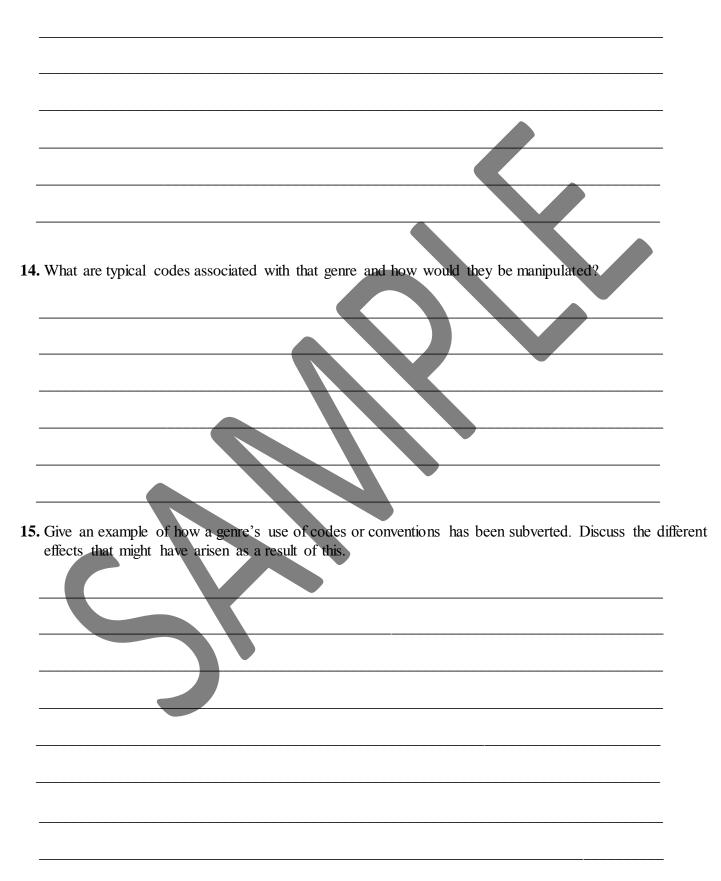
As it appears in Units 1, 2 and 3

To best understand the application of codes and conventions to create meaning, it is worthwhile to analyse genre. Genres can be best understood as 'categories' of media products – whether horror film, food photography or fashion magazine, they are categories that contain very specific character types, storylines, content and information that distinguish them from other categories. Genres are designed to help audiences predict and understand what will appear in a product.

All genres will also contain very specific uses of media codes and conventions to further help develop these 'predicted patterns' of content, storylines, character features. As described previously, media codes used in a specific way will develop certain meanings and communicate certain information. When applied to genres, media codes can further aid in developing intended meaning that the genre would commonly do. For instance, sports photography usually aims to create the idea that sports are fast and energetic, with perhaps a lot of injuries. To showcase this, sports photography will always use a lot of mid shots to show players in intense action, or in positions of injury. The use of this code across all sports photography helps the audience make sense of what sports photography is all about. This is distinct from food photography, which will always use close ups as a code to showcase the flavour, taste or colour of the food in the image.

Audiences usually expect to see these codes applied as appropriate to specific genres. If they do, usually good audience engagement with the product will occur, which is followed by meaning making. However, there will be occasions when creators choose to subvert the codes (not follow them) that belong to a specific genre. This can have a positive effect of surprising the audience and allowing a new avenue of engagement, or it could have the opposite effect, especially if an audience member relies heavily on preconceived genre expectations.

Like codes, media conventions are also applied to genres in specific ways to structure that product in a generic way that the audience understands. For instance, a horror film will have a very generic storyline in which the opening sequence introduces main characters, but also a problem for the characters to face. The narrative's development will follow the trouble for the victim and how they are under attack from an external force, then the resolution usually sees the victim winning over the villain, with good triumphing over evil. Other genres will also have storylines applied to them that fit that genre's model. Audiences quickly learn these conventions from constant exposure to them in genres, and thus quickly learn what to expect in those genres. This is where the magic of the meaning making occurs.

Review Questions

13. Outline an example of a genre that you've studied this year, including the expectations of the audience for that genre.

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14. What are typical codes associated with that genre and how would they be manipulated?

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15. Give an example of how a genre's use of codes or conventions has been subverted. Discuss the different effects that might have arisen as a result of this.

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Media narrative characteristics and construction

As it appears in Unit 3

All media narratives, whilst sharing common features such as the use of codes and conventions, are also unique in many ways. As media students, it is important to feel comfortable discussing how your narratives have been especially created as a unique product to entice the audience. All media narratives go through a rigorous process of production, whereby outside elements such as ideologies can impact on the content of a product, or internal institutional factors can impact on the ways your narratives are told. There are many complex factors that can shape the construction of a narrative, and these can be referred to as the 'characteristics' of the narrative.

It is important for you to have a firm grasp on what characterises your narrative, as distinct from other narratives within that same form. For instance, there may be certain features of the film '*The Dressmaker*' that distinguish it from other films of a similar genre, but also lend it to being similar to other films of that genre or category. To help you understand the best ways to analyse characteristics, use the following dot points to analyse the narrative:

- What is the specific **narrative structure** of the product? *(in a lot of cases, the three act structure for narratives is a dominant storytelling method)*
- What **specific media technologies** are used to produce the narrative *(consider the use of specific technologies used during production or post production – perhaps used to enhance as aspect of the story? Or to create something that cannot be created in real life? Green screen/GCI technologies?*
- The specifics of **distribution or exhibition** *(consider in what circumstances the narrative was released to the audience, was there something original/unique/interesting about these methods? For instance, was the release timed for a specific reason? Were there financial or social/cultural influences over the means of distribution or exhibition?)*

To do well with this area of Unit 3, you must conduct a lot of background research into your narratives – looking outside of the story and into various aspects of the narrative's production. Usually, consulting online sources from the creator, financers and/or production team can give you tremendous insight into factors that shape your narratives.

Solutions to Review Questions

1. A very simple outline of a narrative storyline, which should include the beginning, middle and end of the narrative with cause effect sequence is expected. This should take a few lines to write. Then you need to give an overview of the main message or idea the storyline intended to bring to the audience (such as a moral about life, society, etc).

2. Your answer needs to reference specific techniques of the product, so appropriate language use and technique use of literature or media products is expected. This could mean discussing the specific use of imagery in the novel, or the use of camera in a film. The examples must be specific to the medium under discussion and discuss how techniques were used/manipulated.

3. Intended audience must be discussed in terms of personal beliefs, background, personality, likes/dislikes, etc as opposed to simply age and gender. Then an analysis of a product needs to occur where you mention specific aspects of the narrative (such as character types, storyline, themes it deals with) and link this construction choice to the interests of the audience. There must be reference to the audience connecting with a certain aspect of the narrative based on how the narrative was constructed to engage them.

4. An analysis of meaning derived from a code or convention is expected here. Students need to ensure they fully understand the range of codes or conventions in operation for specific media forms, such as camera, lighting, acting, editing, sound, point of view, generic storyline. They must then comment on ways in which this code or convention was manipulated within a specific aspect of the production. This can then lead to an analysis of intended meaning.

5. There needs to be a specific reference to a media product, possibly a specific scene, as part of the discussion on code manipulation. Ensure you discuss how a code has been manipulated in context (such as the altering of light, camera, text). You must discuss the manipulation of the code in terms of how it functioned within a specific scene/aspect of a narrative – do not discuss the code in isolation.

6. An analysis of meaning is expected here. Firstly, you need to explain the intended meaning. Ensure you reference the product clearly in your answer. This should be followed up with reference to the code and how it is typically used to develop this meaning in other products of the same style/genre.

7. This answer is twofold. Ensure you first explain a particular code you are familiar with and how it's often used in a media product (i.e – use of low key/shadowy lighting). This needs to be followed up with the connotation of the code in whatever context the student chooses. You should then ensure you discuss whether this connotation is of your own interpretation or that of another culture. Perhaps backing this up with the use of the code in another context would make the answer stronger.

8. This is a simple question which requires the student to be familiar with the range of codes that function within their media narratives. Ensure these are addressed correctly by name (ie – camera, lighting, sound). Then an analysis of the technique must follow – addressing how the artist has manipulated the technique in a specific way. No analysis of meaning is intended – but the student must reference how the element was manipulated in a specific scene or aspect of the narrative.

9. The student must first explain, with reference to a media narrative, ideologies that are present in the narrative. Then they must explain how a specific media code was used/manipulated within an aspect of the narrative. The student then needs to address connotative meaning in terms of ideology – they need to explain how the code is symbolic of a certain ideology/ideological belief that they raised at the start of the answer. It is important in this answer to give some context to the ideologies within a product, then analyse how codes are used to create that meaning.

10. An outline means giving a general description (one or two sentences). Identifying a convention is not enough. Students should be outlining what the convention is, what media form it belongs to, and its function in a narrative.

11. Taking from the question above (i.e – what the convention's function is), the student must place this function in context of their narrative. This means giving an example of the convention's use within a specific aspect of the narrative and explaining how its working within a specific narrative to achieve a specific purpose. Just explaining its function overall without context of the narrative is not enough. Students must always reference specific aspects of their narrative when discussing codes, conventions and their purposes.

12. There needs to be a clear analysis here of how the convention was crafted. Explicit reference to specific codes, including how they were manipulated is expected. There needs to be a clear reference point with the student discussing the convention in operation throughout the narrative (ie – an example of it in the narrative, and how this example is made clear to the audience through the use of specific media codes). For instance, if the student was discussing the convention of character, they could reference how the character is wearing certain costuming, or has certain colours applied to them, or is lit a certain way. All of this information must be context specific within a narrative.

13. Outlining an example of a genre means outlining some typical examples of the storyline of the genre, character types and anything else that helps to categorise that genre. Audience expectations need to be explicitly addressed, including what the audience would expect to see, hear, understand as a result of interacting with that genre. Reference to a media product that fits that genre would also be useful to back up the analysis you are making of the genre.

14. The discussion here should focus on specific types of codes used in a certain genre that are different to other genres – for instance, use of camera and sound for horror film as opposed to sound and costume for musicals. The student should be quite discerning in their identification of particular codes that suit a certain genre. Students then need to address the typical ways these are manipulated in ways consistent with other products of that genre. Ie – horror films use shadows and low key lighting.