

## A sign of the times

by Karen Richardson

**Level:** Pre-intermediate to intermediate

**Aim:** Students discuss language used in signs, considering function and register.

**Time needed:** 60 minutes (approx)

**Materials:** PDFs of sign images (provided) / your own selection of sign images.

### Overview

This approximately 60 minute lesson is written for a general-English group at pre-intermediate to intermediate level. However, it can easily be adapted to suit the level and type of group you are teaching.

### Preparation

Print out a selection of signs. Use either the signs on the PDFs provided, or make your own sign collection. Make good quality colour prints and laminate them (if possible) so that you can use them in future lessons. Cut them out and place them in the middle of the classroom table. Allow the students a few minutes to look through them before you start the activities.

### Activity 1

Ask students to arrange the signs into groups.

#### Grouping suggestions:

- Warnings
- Suggestions
- Offers
- Information
- Rules
- Advice
  
- Old/new/modern
- Ordinary/unusual
- Private/official
- Homemade/professionally-made
- Imaginative/fact-giving

### Activity 2

Ask students to think about the type of language used in the signs. Is it:

- longhand?
- telegram style (if so, what words would you need to insert to make complete sentences?)?
- British English/American English/other?

Is the style of language: *polite/demanding/prescriptive/apologetic...*?

Is there any new or interesting vocabulary?

### Activity 3

#### What, why and where?

Ask students:

- *Where might you see them? (country, place)*
- *What are they about?*
- *Is there an odd one out?*
- *Which of the signs are necessary/superfluous?*

### Activity 4

#### Emotions and effectiveness

Ask students: *Which sign is the most visually appealing?*

Ask each student to choose one sign and tell the class what it is he/she likes about it.

Ask students:

- *How do the individual signs make you feel?*
- *Do any provoke a strong reaction/emotion in you?*
- *Which one is most memorable?*
- *What makes a sign effective?*
- *Which signs are easiest (for foreigners) to understand?*
- *How could you improve the least effective signs?*

### Discussion

Ask students:

- *Have you seen any interesting signs recently?*
- *Have you ever come across a memorable sign?*

Use the signs as springboards into conversation. For example, use the yellow Florida sign to talk about dress code. Encourage students to talk about places that have a dress code, and about times when they or someone else felt inappropriately dressed. Or use the bridge tolls sign (East Sussex) to talk about motorway tolls and the cost of travel, or the Brighton pier sign (East Sussex) to talk about holidays, the seaside or fairgrounds (note the helter skelter in the background).

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### Follow on activities

**Note:** These will depend on the age and language level of your students.

1. Make (humorous, directive, prescriptive) signs for your class/school.
2. Arrange for students to go out in groups. They make notes on any interesting signs they find and then come back to the class and compare notes.

Alternatively give this as individual homework: *Next week be prepared to talk about a sign you saw between the lessons. To help you explain and describe it, take a photo or make a sketch of it.*

3. Use magazines as inspiration to write/make your own signs. For example, an image in an advert for an alcoholic drink could be cut out, crossed through and given the words: *No alcohol allowed*. Or, students could cut out words from magazines and make these into a text for a sign. They could then draw an image to complete the sign.

4. Ask students: *Can you think of any famous signs?* For example, the letters that spell HOLLYWOOD on the hillside in Los Angeles.

5. Ask students to do some research on the Internet. Who can find the funniest or most bizarre sign?

6. Ask students to take photos of signs in your town. Print them out and make a collage or poster. Ask: *How would you explain these signs to a foreign visitor?*