

Catalyst Type: Environmental Print

Environmental print is the print that surrounds us as we go through the day: the store banners, work notices, traffic signs, etc. that are placed to catch our attention and influence our behavior. Within these texts are embedded all sorts of norms and assumptions about how our culture functions and about how we are supposed to participate. Using environmental print as catalyst material allows us to step back and look more closely at the messages around us; to problematize the everyday.

The following example illustrates this kind of deconstruction of a simple rental posting. Straightforward on its surface, this notice carries unstated assumptions and important implications for new and old tenants that are explored through the accompanying discussion questions.

The Neighborhood Where We Work

by Deepa Rao

[Reprinted from Issue 17: Housing and Home, September 2003]

Yesterday, as I was walking over the bridge to work, I saw this sign:



I gave the information to my coworker because she's an artist and needs a studio space to live and work in. When she called the number from the ad, here's what she found out about the apartment:

- It is 400 square feet.
- Heat and hot water are included.
- It's near public transportation.
- It costs 1,400 dollars a month to rent!

Today, when my coworker told me what she had discovered, we both grumbled about gentrification and then, sadly, went back to work.



Contextualized Vocabulary Building

1. Based on the story, guess what the word “gentrification” means. Do you have a similar word in your first language, if your first language isn’t English? Do you know of another word in English that means the same thing?
2. Look up the word in the dictionary, and notice the root of the word. What is its root? Does that help you remember what the word means?

Discussion Questions

1. Who is the apartment “reasonable” for? Who is it big enough for?
2. Is gentrification something that affects the area where you live?
3. What are the signs that a neighborhood is changing?

Follow Up

- Write about the changes you see in your neighborhood, or about the changes you would like to see.
 - Interview students in your program about housing. Decide on the questions you want to ask, such as: where they live now, whether their rents have gone up in the last year, etc. Then analyze the data and share it with the class and program.
 - Interview a speaker from a tenants’ rights organization about what tenants can do to stay in their communities.
-

Deepa Rao coordinates the New England ABE-to-College Transition Project, a project of the New England Literacy Resource Center.