

# Interpreting Political Cartoons

Welcome to the world of cartoons and, more specifically, to the wonderful world of political cartoons. You may be most familiar with other kinds of cartoons including comic strips such as “Peanuts,” animated cartoons such as “Bugs Bunny,” and comic books such as “Superman.” These types of cartoons usually seek to entertain their audience through the combined use of fantasy and humor. Political cartoons also entertain, often using stronger devices. They are sometimes **cynical** (scornful skepticism or negativity) and/or **satirical** (using wit to convey insults or scorn). They frequently rely on **stereotypes** (oversimplified opinions, conceptions or images) to address political issues. Political cartoons generally are thought-provoking and strive to educate the viewer about a current issue. Political cartoons have proved a powerful vehicle for swaying public opinion and criticizing or praising political figures. A picture is worth a thousand words and for centuries political cartoonists have used this sometimes devastating medium to cut the powerful and proud down to size.

Here are various elements seen in political cartoons:

## Caricatures

A caricature is a drawing that exaggerates personal characteristics to make the picture more humorous and the characters immediately recognizable.

## Symbols

Cartoonists also rely heavily on symbols to clarify the cartoon’s deeper meaning. A symbol is something that stands for or represents something else.

## Labels

A label is a word or an icon (small image) used for identification.

## Captions

A caption is a short description or title accompanying an illustration in a printed text.

Look for the above elements in the following cartoon:



Tom Toles, Pulitzer prize winning cartoonist for the *Washington Post*, uses most of the elements listed above. Toles exaggerates the physical features of President Barack Obama in order to make him recognizable. He emphasizes his large ears and his narrow, long face. He uses the elephant (a traditional symbol attributed to one of the early successful cartoonists Thomas Nast) to represent the Republican Party. Lastly, Toles uses the caption "Distracted Driving" to describe and add meaning to the cartoon.