

em. To interpret an individual sign, then, you must determine the
ral system to which it belongs.

gs have both **denotative** meanings (what they *are*) and **connota-**
meanings (what they *suggest as signs*); semiotics moves beyond the
tative surface to the connotative significance.

ving at the connotative significance of a sign involves both **abduc-**
(a search for the most likely explanation or interpretation) and **over-**
mination (the multiple causes behind a cultural phenomenon).

t we call social “reality” is a human construct, the product of cultural
ologies or value systems that intervene between our minds and the
d we experience. Such cultural myths reflect the values and ideologi-
terests of their builders, not the laws of nature or logic.

our first principle could be more succinctly phrased, “Behavior is
ful,” and our second, “Everything is connected,” while our third
“Don’t take things at face value.” More simply, always ask yourself,
r you are interpreting something, “What’s going on here?” In short,
everything. And one more reminder: Signs are like weather vanes,
t in response to invisible historical winds. We invite you now to start
it the weather.

WRITING ABOUT POPULAR CULTURE

Throughout this book, you will find readings on popular culture that you can use as models for your own writing or as subjects to which you may respond, assignments for writing critical essays on popular culture, and advice to help you analyze a wide variety of cultural phenomena. As you approach these readings and assignments, you may find it helpful to review the following suggestions for writing critical essays—whether on popular culture or on any subject—as well as some examples of student essays written in response to assignments based on *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* Mastering the skills summarized and exemplified here should enable you to write the kinds of papers you will be assigned throughout your college career.

As you prepare to write a critical essay on popular culture, remember that you are already an expert in your subject. After all, simply by actively participating in everyday life, you have accumulated a vast store of knowledge about what makes our culture tick. Just think of all you know about movies, or the thousands upon thousands of ads you’ve seen, or the many unwritten “rules” governing courtship behavior among your circle of friends. Your very expertise in popular culture, ironically, may create a challenge simply because you may take your knowledge for granted. It might not seem that your knowledge can “count” as material for a college-level assignment, and it might not even occur to you to use it in an essay. You should certainly draw on your own knowledge, but to write a strong essay, you need to do more than just go along with the “flow” of your subject as you live it; instead, you need to consider it from a critical distance.

Using Active Reading Strategies

The first step in developing a strong essay about any topic happens well before you sit down to write: You need to make sure you understand accurately the reading selections that your instructor has assigned. You want to engage in *active reading*—that is, you want to get more than just the “drift” of a passage. Skimming a selection may give you a rough idea of the author’s point, but your understanding of it is also likely to be partial, superficial, or even downright wrong. And that’s not a solid start to writing a good paper!

Active reading techniques can help you understand the nuances of how an author constructs his or her argument accurately and precisely. You should question, summarize, agree with, and/or refute the author’s claims. In other words, try to have a kind of *conversation* with the author. Studies have shown that such interactive learning simply works better than passive learning; if you read actively, you’ll gain knowledge at a higher rate and retain it longer. With any reading selection, it can be helpful to read at least twice: first, to gain a general sense of the author’s ideas and, second, to study more specifically how those ideas work together to form an argument. To do this, you can use some formal discovery techniques, or what are called *heuristics*. One of the most famous heuristics is the journalist’s “five Ws and an H”: who, what, where, when, why, and how. By asking these questions, a reporter can quickly unearth the essential details of a breaking story and draft a clear account of it. For your purposes, you can apply the following questions to reading selections you will discuss in your own essays.

Active Reading Questions

- What is the *author’s primary argument*? Can you identify a *thesis statement*, or is the thesis implied?
- What *key terms* are fundamental to that argument? If you are not familiar with the fundamental vocabulary of the selection, be sure to check a dictionary or encyclopedia for the word’s meaning.
- What *evidence* does the author provide to support the argument? Is it relevant and specific? Does the author cite reliable, authoritative sources?
- What *underlying assumptions* shape the author’s position? Does the author consider alternative points of view (counterarguments)?

- What *style and tone* does the author adopt?
- What is the *genre* of the piece? You need to identify what kind of writing you are responding to, because different kinds have different purposes and goals. A personal narrative, for instance, expresses the writer’s experiences and beliefs, but you shouldn’t expect it to present a complete argument supported by documentation.
- Who is the *intended readership* of this selection, and does it affect the author’s reasoning or evidence?

As you read, write *annotations*, or notes, in your book. Doing so will help you both remember and analyze what you read. A pencil is probably the best memory aid ever invented. No one, not even the most experienced and perceptive reader, remembers everything—and let’s face it, not everything that you read is worth remembering. Writing annotations as you read will lead you back to important points. And annotating helps you start analyzing a reading—long before you start writing an essay—rather than uncritically accepting what’s on the page. If you are using an electronic version of this text, you can do the same with the highlight and annotate tools available in most e-readers.

There’s yet another reason to annotate what you read: You can use the material you’ve identified as the starting point for your journal notes and essays, and since it doesn’t take long to circle a word or jot a note in the margin, you can save a great deal of time in the long run. We suggest that you *not* use a highlighter. While using a highlighter is better than using nothing—it can at least help you mark key points—writing *words* in your book goes much further in helping you analyze what you read. We’ve seen entire pages bathed in fluorescent-yellow highlighter, and that’s of doubtful use in identifying the important stuff. Of course, if you simply can’t bring yourself to mark up your book, write on sticky notes instead and put those in the margins.

So as you read, circle key words, note transitions between ideas, jot definitions of unfamiliar terms (you can probably guess their meaning from the context or look them up later), underline phrases or terms to research on a search engine such as Google, write short summaries of important points, or simply note where you’re confused or lost with a question mark or a *huh?* In fact, figuring out exactly what parts you do and don’t understand is one of the best ways to tackle a difficult reading. Frequently, the confusing bits turn out to be the most interesting—and sometimes the most important. Responding to what you read *as you read* will help you become a more active reader—and will ultimately help you become a stronger writer.

Signs of Life in the U.S.A. frequently asks you to respond to a reading selection in a *journal* or *reading log*, sometimes directly and sometimes

ndirectly, as in suggestions that you write a letter to the author of a selection. In doing so, you're taking a first step in articulating your response to the issues and to the author's presentation of them. In asking you to keep a journal or a reading log, your instructor will probably be less concerned with your writing style than with your comprehension of assigned readings and your thoughtful responses to them. Let's say you're asked to write your response to Jessica Hagedorn's "Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck" in Chapter 4. You should first think through exactly what Hagedorn is saying—what her point is—by asking the questions listed on pages 22–23 and by reviewing your annotations. Then consider how you feel about her essay. If you agree with Hagedorn's contention that films perpetuate outmoded stereotypes of Asian women, why do you feel that way? Can you think of films Hagedorn does not mention that reflect the gendered patterns she observes? Or do you know of films that represent Asian female characters positively? Suppose you're irritated by Hagedorn's argument: Again, why do you feel that way? Your aim in jotting all this down is not to produce a draft of an essay. It's to play with your own ideas, see where they lead, and even just help you decide what your ideas are in the first place.

Prewriting Strategies

Before you start writing, you'll find it useful to spend some time generating your ideas freely and openly: Your goal at this point is to develop as many ideas as possible, even ones that you might not actually use in your essay. Writing instructors call this process *prewriting*, and it's a step you should take when writing on any subject in any class, not just in your writing class. This textbook includes many suggestions for how you can develop your ideas; even if your instructor doesn't require you to use all of them, you can try them on your own.

These strategies will work when you are asked to respond to a particular reading or image. Sometimes, though, you may be asked to write about a more general subject. Your instructor may ask you to brainstorm ideas or to reewrite in response to an issue. You can use both strategies in your journal or on your own as you start working on an essay. *Brainstorming* is simply amassing as many relevant (and even some irrelevant) ideas as possible. Let's say your instructor asks you to brainstorm a list of popular toys used by girls and boys in preparation for an essay about the gendered designs of children's toys. Try to list your thoughts freely, jotting down whatever comes to mind. Don't censor yourself at this point. That is, don't worry if something is really a game rather than a toy, or if both boys and girls play with it, or if it is really an adult toy. Later on you can throw out ideas that don't fit. What you'll be left with is a rich list of examples that you can then study and analyze. *Prewriting* works much the same way and is particularly useful when you're not sure how you feel about an issue. Sit down and just start writing or typing, and don't stop until you've written for at least ten or fifteen minutes. Let

your ideas wander around your subject, working associatively, following their own path. As with brainstorming, you may produce some irrelevant ideas, but you may also arrive at a sharper picture of your beliefs.

If your instructor asks you to create your own topic, you might wonder, "Where should I start?" Suppose you need to analyze an aspect of the film industry but can't decide on a focus. Here, the Internet might help. You could explore a resource such as filmsite.org, a site divided into categories such as History, Genres, and Reviews. These categories can lead you to more specific links, such as "Film History by Decade" and "Film Reviews by Decade." With so many to choose from, you're bound to find something that interests you. In effect, you can go online to engage in *electronic brainstorming* about your topic.

One cautionary note: When going online to brainstorm, be sure to *evaluate the appropriateness of your sources* (see p. 60). Many sites are commercial and are therefore intended more to sell a product or image than to provide reliable information. In addition, since anyone with the technological know-how can set up a Web site, some sites amount to little more than personal expression and need to be evaluated for their reliability, accuracy, and authenticity. Scrutinize the sites you use carefully: Is the author an authority in the field? Does the site identify the author, at least by name and e-mail address? (Be wary of fully anonymous sites.) Does the site contain interesting and relevant links? If you find an advocacy site, one that openly advances a special interest, does the site's bias interfere with the accuracy of its information? Asking such questions can help ensure that your electronic brainstorming is fruitful and productive. If you are unsure of the validity of a site, you might want to check with your instructor.

You can also strengthen your argument if you consider the *history* of your subject. You might think this requires a lot of library research, but research may not be necessary if you are already familiar with the social and cultural history of your topic. If you know, for instance, that the baggy pants so popular among teens until recently were once ubiquitous among street-gang members, you know an important historical detail that goes a long way toward explaining their significance. Depending on your assignment, you might want to expand on your own historical knowledge and collect additional data about your topic, perhaps through surveys and interviews. If you're analyzing gendered patterns of courtship rituals, for instance, you could interview some people from different age groups, as well as both genders, to get a sense of how such patterns have evolved over time. The material you gather through such interviews will be raw data, and you'll want to do more than just "dump" the information into your essay. Instead, see this material as an original body of evidence that you'll sort through (you probably won't use every scrap of information), study, and interpret in its own right.


Not all prewriting activities need be solitary, of course. In fact, *Signs of Life* includes lots of suggestions that ask you to work with other students, either in your class or across campus. We suggest such *group work* because much academic work is collaborative and collegial. A scientist conducting research, for instance, often works with a team; in addition, he or she may

present preliminary findings at colloquia or conferences and may call or e-mail a colleague at another school to try out some ideas. There's no reason you can't benefit from the social nature of academic thinking as well. But be aware that such in-class group work is by no means "busywork." The goal, rather, is to help you develop and shape your understanding of the issues and your attitudes toward them. If you're asked to study with three classmates how a product is packaged, for instance, you're starting to test Thomas Hine's thesis in "What's in a Package" (Chapter 1), seeing how it applies or doesn't apply and benefiting from your peers' insights. By discussing the package with your peers, you are articulating, perhaps for the first time, what it might mean and so are taking the first step toward writing a more formal analysis (especially if you receive feedback and comments from your class). Similarly, if you stage an in-class debate over whether multitasking is "healthy" or dangerous, you're amassing a storehouse of arguments, counterarguments, and evidence to consider when you write your own essay that either supports or refutes S. Craig Watkins's argument in "Fast Entertainment and Multitasking in an Always-On World" (Chapter 5). As with other prewriting strategies, you may not directly use every idea generated in conversation with your classmates, but that's OK. You should find yourself better able to sort through and articulate the ideas that you do find valuable.

Developing Strong Arguments about Popular Culture

We expect that students will write many different sorts of papers in response to the selections in this book. You may write personal experience narratives, semiotic analyses, opinion pieces, research papers, and many others. We'd like to focus here on writing analytic essays because the experience of analyzing popular culture may seem different from that of analyzing other subjects. Occasionally we've had students who feel reluctant to analyze popular culture because they think that analysis requires them to trash their subject, and they don't want to write a "negative" essay about what may be their favorite film or TV program. Or a few students may feel uncertain because "it's all subjective." Since most people have opinions about popular culture, they say, how can any one essay be stronger than another?

While these concerns are understandable, they needn't be an obstacle to writing a strong analytic paper — whether on popular culture or any other topic. To avoid overt subjectivity, you should begin by setting aside your own personal tastes when writing an analysis, not because your preferences are unimportant, but because you need to be aware of your own attitudes and observations about your topic. An analysis of, say, *The Big Bang Theory* is not

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the same as a paper that explains “why I like (or dislike) this TV program.” Instead, an analysis would explain how it works, what cultural beliefs and viewpoints underlie it, what its significance is, and so forth. And such a paper would not necessarily be positive or negative; it would seek to explain *how* the elements of the show work together to have a particular effect on its audience. If your instructor asks you to write a critical analysis or a critical argument, he or she is requesting neither a hit job nor a celebration of your topic.

For most of your college essays, you will probably be asked to make sure that your paper has a clear *thesis*. A thesis statement lays out the argument you intend to make and provides a scope for your essay. If you think of your thesis as a road map that your paper will follow, you might find that it is easier to structure your paper. A thesis for an essay on popular culture should follow the usual guidelines for any academic essay: It should make a debatable, interesting assertion (as opposed to a statement of fact or a truism); it should be demonstrable through the presentation of specific evidence; it should have a clear focus and scope; and it should spark your readers’ interest. Additionally, a strong thesis statement will help you overcome any anxieties you might have about writing a strong analysis, because a good thesis statement, rather than merely offering a simple opinion on your topic, also explains how you came to hold that opinion. The thesis statements in the sample papers that begin on page 34 are annotated to help you see how they function in academic writing.

When your paper has a strong thesis, subjectivity becomes even less of a problem. That’s because your analysis should be grounded in concrete demonstration. You’re not simply presenting a personal opinion about your subject; rather, you’re presenting a central insight about its significance, and you need to demonstrate it with logical, specific evidence. It’s that evidence that will take your essay out of the category of being “merely subjective.” You should start with your own opinion, but you will want to add to it lots of support that shows the legitimacy of that opinion. Does that sound familiar? It should, because that’s what you need to do in any analytic essay, no matter what your subject matter happens to be.

When writing about popular culture, students sometimes wonder what sort of evidence they should use to support their points. Your instructor will probably give you guidelines for each assignment, but we’ll provide some suggestions here. Start with your subject itself. You’ll find it’s useful to view your subject—whether it’s an ad, a film, or anything else—as a text that you can “read” closely. That’s what you would do if you were asked to analyze a poem: You would read it carefully, studying individual words, images, rhythm, and so forth, and those details would support whatever claims you wanted to make about the poem. Read your pop culture subject with the same care. If your instructor asks you to analyze a television series, you should look at the details: What actors appear in the series, and what are their roles? What “story” does the program tell about its characters and the world in which they live? Is there anything missing from this world that you

would expect to find? What are the *connotative* meanings behind the surface signs? Your answers to such questions could form the basis for the evidence that your essay needs.

Conducting a Semiotic Analysis

In an essay focused on a semiotic analysis, you can probe a wider range of questions about your subject that can yield even more specific evidence and arguments. You can start with some basic questions that we ask throughout the Chapter Introductions in this book, and which we summarize in the list below. Now let's apply these questions to an example, the TV series *House*, still popular and significant, even though it is now in reruns.

DENOTATIVE MEANINGS

What is a simple, literal description of your subject? You need to make sure you understand this before looking for "deeper meanings," because if you misunderstand the factual status of your subject, you will probably get derailed in your analysis. In the case of *House*, we find a story of a medical genius who, though he is his hospital's most successful diagnostician, is also

Questions for Conducting a Semiotic Analysis

- What is the **denotative** meaning of your subject? In other words, determine a factual definition of exactly what it is.
- What is your topic's **connotative** significance? To determine that, situate your subject in a system of related signs.
- What **associated** signs belong to that system?
- What **differences** do you see in those signs?
- What **abductive** explanation do you have for your observations? What is the most likely explanation for the patterns that you see?

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rude, nasty, and practically dysfunctional in his personal life, suffering from an addiction to Vicodin and almost constant depression. The plots of *House* tend to exemplify the series's slogan, "Everybody lies," and often depict House's patients or their families as liars with dark secrets that they are concealing and that House eventually uncovers. Clearly, if we were to misidentify *House* as a documentary, we'd misconstrue it as a scathing political exposé of the U.S. medical system—but that doesn't feel right. *House* is no exposé.

CONNOTATIVE MEANINGS AND A SYSTEM OF RELATED SIGNS

After determining your subject's denotation, you must locate your subject within a larger system in order to determine its connotative meaning. Recall that a system is the network of related signs to which your topic belongs and that identifying the system helps to reveal its significance. This may sound hard to do, but it is through identifying a system that you can draw on your own vast knowledge of popular culture. So, in our analysis of *House*, we need to move from our denotative understanding of the series to its connotative significance. In order to make this move, we need to identify a system of related signs. In the case of *House*, this entails identifying programs with which it is similar. In other words, to what genre of television programming does *House* belong? What conventions, goals, and motifs do shows in this genre share? What is the history of the genre? *House*, of course, belongs to the medical drama genre, which is distinct from, say, situation comedy, even though *House* does have certain comic elements that would allow us to classify it as a medical *dramedy*. The history of TV medical drama includes such programs as *Dr. Kildare* and *Ben Casey* in the 1960s; *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, and *Quincy, M.E.*, in the 1970s; *St. Elsewhere* and *ER* in the 1980s and beyond; and *Grey's Anatomy* and *Nip/Tuck* in recent years. All these programs can be associated with *House* and testify to the enduring popularity of the genre. (Indeed, long before television, an old joke had it that the most certain formula to follow in writing a best seller was to write a book about Abraham Lincoln's doctor's dog.)

DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE SYSTEM

But while the associations between these television series demonstrate a popular interest in doctors and medical stories, there is still a striking difference to consider, a kind of dividing line marked by the series *St. Elsewhere*. Until *St. Elsewhere*, the main character in a medical series was a benevolent healer whose own personal life beyond the hospital was generally not a part of the story line (there were exceptions: Dr. Kildare once had a patient with whom he fell in love; Ben Casey had a somewhat edgy nature; and Jack Klugman's *Quincy*—a forensic pathologist whose mystery-solving abilities anticipate those of Gregory House—had plenty of attitude). But all in all, the physician protagonists of the earlier series maintained a general

profile of almost superhuman benevolence; they were “official heroes,” in Robert B. Ray’s terms (see “The Thematic Paradigm,” p. 450), caring for the innocent victims of disease.

St. Elsewhere changed that, and from that program onward (especially as developed by *ER*), the flaws in the lives and personalities of the main characters, the doctors, became much more prominent. The doctors were, in short, much more humanized—a shift in characterization that has led to the caustic, sometimes dysfunctional and lawbreaking, *Dr. House*.

ABDUCTIVE EXPLANATIONS

At this point, we are ready to start interpreting, seeking abductive explanations for the shift. We can begin with the construction of another system, this time looking at the larger context of other television genres. If we look at this system, we can find in situation comedies, crime series, Westerns, and many other genres a shift similar to the one in the history of medical dramas. The difference between the family sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s and those of the 1980s and beyond is well known, taking us from the happy families of the Cleavers and the Nelsons to the dysfunctional Bundys and Griffins. Similarly, it is a long way from Dick Tracy and *Dragnet*’s Joe Friday to the callous cops of *The Wire*. And it is a long way from *Gunsmoke* to *Justified*. Many other such differences could be mentioned, but we’ll move on to our abductive interpretation.

The post-*St. Elsewhere* medical drama reflects a broader trend in American entertainment away from squeaky-clean television protagonists to more “realistically” flawed ones, heroes who definitely have feet of clay. This trend reflects a cultural shift whose beginning can be found in the cultural revolution of the 1960s, when American mass culture began a long process of disillusionment. After the Vietnam War and Watergate, increasingly cynical Americans were no longer predisposed to believe in absolute human perfection, preferring a more “realistic” depiction of human beings with all their flaws visible.

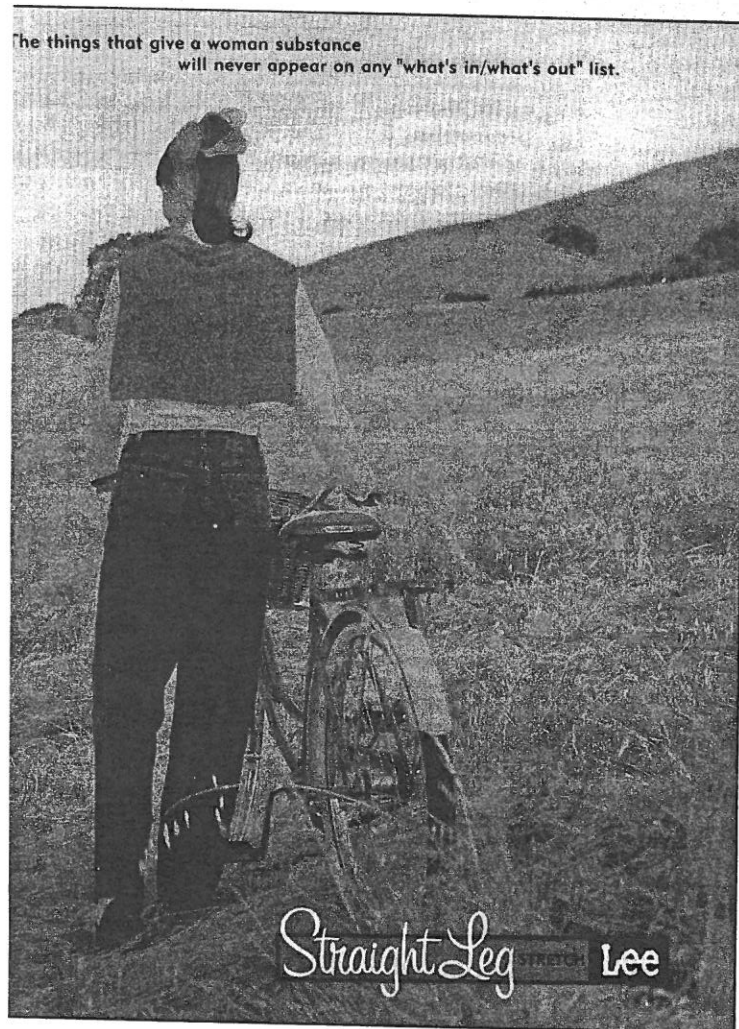
Thus, we can now see *House* as part of a larger cultural trend in which the once-cherished, even revered, figure of the physician has been pulled off the pedestal and brought to earth along with everyone else. Heroes are still heroes (after all, Gregory House is just plain smarter than anyone else around him), but they are more like ordinary folks. They misbehave, get cranky, break rules. Even the victims of misfortune (patients in a medical drama) have been degraded, appearing no longer as the objects of our sympathy but as flawed people with dark secrets. *Everybody lies*. No one is innocent. To the disillusioned, *House*, with its all-too-human hero and cast, is an entertaining, if cynical, vision of the way things are—or at least of the way that large numbers of viewers think they are. Doctors (and cops, families, cowboys, and everyone else) have warts too, and, as a sort of anti-Marcus Welby, Gregory House entertains his audience by not being afraid to show his flaws to the world.

Reading Visual Images Actively

Signs of Life in the U.S.A. includes many visual images, in many cases with accompanying questions for analysis. In analyzing images, you will develop the ability to identify specific telling details and evidence—a talent useful no matter what your subject matter may be. Because the semiotic method lends itself especially well to visual analysis, it is an excellent means for honing this ability. Here are some questions to consider as you look at images.

Questions for Analyzing Images

- What is the **appearance of the image**? Is it black and white? Color? Glossy? Consider how the form in which the image is expressed affects its message. If an image is composed of primary colors, does it look fun and lively, for instance?
- What **kind of image** is it? Is it abstract, does it represent an actual person or place, or is it a combination of the two? If people are represented, who are they?
- Who is the intended **audience** for the image? Is it an artistic photograph or a commercial work, such as an advertisement? If it is an ad, to what kind of person is it directed? Where is the ad placed? If it is in a magazine, consider the audience for the publication.
- What **emotions** does the image convey? Overall, is it serious, sad, funny? Is that expression of emotion, in your opinion, intentional? What emotional associations do you have with the image?
- If the image includes more than one element, what is the most prominent element in the **composition**? A particular section? A logo? Any writing? A person or group of people? A product? How does each part contribute to the whole?
- Where does the image's **layout** lead your eye? Are you drawn to any specific part? What is the order in which you look at the various parts? Does any particular section immediately jump out?
- Does the image include **text**? If so, how do the image and the text relate to one another?
- Does the image call for a **response**? For instance, does it suggest that you purchase a product? If so, what claims does it make?



The Advertising Archive

To see how we can apply these questions, let's look at a sample analysis of an advertisement for Lee jeans (see image on p. 32).

Appearance: Although this image is reproduced here in black and white, it originally appeared in color. The colors are muted, however, almost sepia-toned, and thus suggest an old-fashioned look.

Kind of image: This is a fairly realistic image, with a patina of rural nostalgia. A solitary woman, probably in her twenties or thirties, but perhaps older, is set against an empty natural expanse. She has a traditional hairstyle evocative of the 1950s or early 1960s and leads an old-fashioned bicycle with a wicker basket attached.

Audience: The intended audience for this jeans ad is most likely a woman in her late twenties or older. We see only the model's back, so she is faceless. That allows the viewer to project herself into the scene, and the nostalgic look suggests that the viewer could imagine herself at a younger time in her life. Note that the product is "stretch" jeans. There's no suggestion here, although it is often made in ads for other brands, that the jeans will enhance a woman's sexual appeal; rather, the claim is that the jeans are practical—and will fit a body beyond the teen years. Note the sensible hairstyle and shoes. For an interesting contrast, you might compare this ad to one for Diesel jeans.

Emotion: The woman's body language suggests individuality and determination; she's literally "going it alone." She's neither posing for nor aware of the viewer, suggesting that "what you see is what you get." And, perhaps, she doesn't particularly care what you think.

Composition and layout: The layout of the ad is carefully designed to lead your eye: The hill slopes down from top right toward middle left, and the bike draws your eye from bottom right to mid-left, with both lines converging on the product, the jeans. For easy readability, the text is included at the top against the blank sky.

Text: The message, "The things that give a woman substance will never appear on any 'what's in/what's out' list," suggests that Lee jeans are a product for women who aren't interested in following trends, but rather want a good, old-fashioned value—"substance," not frivolity.

Response: The manufacturer of Lee jeans would prefer, naturally, that the viewer of the ad buy the product. The viewer would identify with the woman wearing the jeans in the advertisement and be convinced that these practical (if not particularly cutting-edge) jeans would be a good purchase.

In sum, most fashion ads stress the friends (and often, mates) you will attract if you buy the product, but this ad presents “a road not taken,” suggesting the American ideology of marching to the beat of a different drummer, the kind of old-fashioned individualism that brings to mind Robert Frost and Henry David Thoreau. The pastoral surroundings and the “old painting” effect echo artists such as Andrew Wyeth and Norman Rockwell. All these impressions connote lasting American values (rural, solid, middle American) that are meant to be associated with anti-trendiness and enduring qualities, such as individualism and practicality. And these impressions suggest the advertisers carefully and effectively kept the ad’s semiotic messages in mind as they designed it.

Reading Essays about Popular Culture

In your writing course, it’s likely that your instructor will ask you to work in groups with other students, perhaps reviewing each other’s rough drafts. You’ll find many benefits to this activity. Not only will you receive more feedback on your own in-progress work, but you will see other students’ ideas and approaches to an assignment and develop an ability to evaluate academic writing. For the same reasons, we’re including three sample student essays that satisfy assignments about popular culture. You may agree or disagree with the authors’ views, and you might have responded to the assigned topics differently; that’s fine. We’ve selected these essays because they differ in style, focus, and purpose and thus suggest different approaches to their assignments—approaches that might help you as you write your own essays about popular culture. We’ve annotated the essays to point out various argumentative, organizational, and rhetorical strategies. As you read the essays and the annotations, ask why the authors chose these strategies and how you might incorporate some of the same strategies into your own writing.

Essay 1

In this essay, Amy Lin of UCLA argues that the Barbie doll, and all its associated products and marketing, essentially is a means for engendering a consumerist ethos in young girls who are the toy’s fans. To do so, Lin relies on a range of sources, including articles in *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*, academic and journalistic sources, and a corporate Web site that presents the panoply of Barbie products. Notice that Lin does not treat toysrus.com as a source of unbiased information about the products (that would amount to taking promotional material at face value); rather, she analyzes the Web site as evidence for her larger argument about consumerism. As you read Lin’s essay, study how she uses her sources and integrates them into her own discussion.

Barbie: Queen of Dolls and Consumerism

In my closet, a plastic bag contains five Barbie dolls. A cardboard box beside my nightstand holds yet another, and one more box contains a Ken doll. Under my bed we find my Barbies' traveling walk-in closet, equipped with a light-up vanity and foldout chair and desk. We also find Doctor Barbie along with the baby, sticker Band-Aids, and sounding stethoscope with which she came. Under my sister's bed are their furniture set, including sofas, loveseats, flower vases, and a coffee table. A Tupperware container holds Ken's pants, dress shirts, and special boots (whose spurs make patterns when rolled in ink) in addition to Barbie's excess clothing that did not fit in the walk-in closet. In a corner of my living room sits the special holiday edition Barbie, outfitted in a gown, fur stole, and holly headband.

These plastic relics prove that, as a young girl, I, like many other females, fell into the waiting arms of the Mattel Corporation. Constantly feeding the public with newer, shinier toys, the Barbie enterprise illustrates America's propensity for consumerism. Upon close examination, Barbie products foster materialism in young females through both their overwhelmingly large selection and their ability to create a financially carefree world for children, sending the message that excessive consumption is acceptable. This consequently perpetuates the misassumption that "the American economy [is] an endlessly fertile continent whose boundaries never need be reached" (Shames 81) among the American youth.

Search the term "Barbie" at toysrus.com, and you will receive 286 items in return — more than enough to create a blur of pinkish-purple as you scroll down the Web page. The Barbie enterprise clearly embraces "the observation that 'no natural boundary seems to be set to the efforts of man'" (Shames 78). In other words, humankind is, in all ways, ambitious; people will keep creating, buying, and selling with the belief that these opportunities will always be available. This perfectly describes the mentality of those behind Barbie products, as new, but unnecessary, Barbie merchandise is put on shelves at an exorbitant rate. At toysrus.com, for example, a variety of four different mermaids, eleven fairies, and two "merfairies" — products from the "Fairytopia-Mermaidia" line — find their place among the search results (*Toys*). Instead of inventing

Amy's introduction is a visual anecdote that illustrates her argument about consumption.

Amy articulates her thesis and refers to Laurence Shames's article as a context.

The corporate Web site is used not as a source of objective information but as evidence to support the thesis.

a more original or educational product, Mattel merges the mermaid world with the fairy world into "Fairytoria-Mermaidia," demonstrating the company's lack of innovation and care for its young consumers' development. Thus the corporation's main motivation reveals itself: profit. Another prime example found among the search results is the "Barbie: 12 Dancing Princesses Horse Carriage" (Toys), a more recent product in the Barbie family. The carriage, "in its original form, . . . can seat six princess dolls but . . . can expand to hold all 12 dolls at once" (Toys). The dolls, of course, do not come with it, forcing the child to buy at least one for the carriage to even be of any use. But that child will see the glorious picture of the carriage filled with all twelve dolls (which are inevitably on the box), and she will want to buy the remaining eleven. In addition, the product description states that the carriage "is inspired by the upcoming DVD release, Barbie in *The 12 Dancing Princesses*" (Toys). Essentially, one Mattel creation inspires another, meaning that the DVD's sole purpose is to give Mattel an excuse to create and market more useless merchandise.

Much of this, however, may have to do with branding, a strategy manufacturers utilize that ultimately results in "consumers transfer[ring] a favorable or unfavorable image from one product to others from the same brand" (Neuhaus and Taylor 419). In accordance with this strategy, all Barbie products must maintain a certain similarity so as not to "confuse potential customers . . . and thereby reduce demand for the products" (Sappington and Wernerfelt 280). This explains the redundancy found in much of Mattel's Barbie merchandise, since the sudden manufacturing of a radically different product could encourage the migration of consumers to another brand. But given that Barbie has become "the alpha doll" (Talbot 74) for girls in today's popular culture, young female consumers clearly associate only good things with Barbie. And who can blame them? Barbie has become a tradition handed down from mother to daughter or a rite of passage that most girls go through. In this way, excessive consumption and the effects of branding are handed down as well, as Barbie dolls are essentially their physical manifestations.

With a company as driven to produce and sell products as Mattel, consumers can expect to find increasingly ridiculous items on toy store shelves. One such product found at toysrus.com is "Barbie and Tanner" (Toys), Tanner being Barbie's dog. The doll and

Amy moves to the larger marketing context.

dog come with brown pellets that function both as dog food and dog waste, a "special magnetic scooper[,] and trash can" (Toys). Upon telling any post-Barbie-phase female about this product, she will surely look amazed and ask, "Are you kidding me?" Unfortunately, Tanner's movable "mouth, ears, head and tail" (Toys) and "soft[,] . . . fuzzy" coat will most likely blind children to the product's absurdity, instead enchanting them into purchasing the product. Another particularly hilarious item is the "Barbie Collector Platinum Label Pink Grapefruit Obsession" (Toys). The doll wears a "pink, charmeuse mermaid gown with deep pink chiffon wedges sewn into the flared skirt and adorned with deep pink bands that end in bows under the bust and at the hip" (Toys). And "as a . . . special surprise, [the] doll's head is scented with the striking aroma of pink grapefruit" (Toys). Finally, the doll is described as "an ideal tribute to [the] delightful [grapefruit] flavor" (Toys). The consumer will find it difficult to keep a straight face as he or she reads through the description, as it essentially describes a doll dedicated to a scent. The doll's randomness shows Mattel's desperation for coming out with new products. Eager to make profit, Barbie's designers, it seems, make dolls according to whatever whim that happens to cross their minds.

In the quest to make profit by spreading the consumerist mindset, Barbie products even manage to commodify culture. Nowadays, Barbie dolls come in a variety of ethnicities. Take, for example, the "Diwali Festival Doll" from the "Barbie Dolls of the World" (Toys) line. Except for the traditional Indian apparel and dark hair, however, the doll could easily be mistaken for Caucasian. And what about Barbie's multiracial doll friends? They are reduced to mere accessories—disposable and only supplementary to Barbie, the truly important figure. Therefore, despite Mattel's attempts at identifying with a larger group of girls, an undeniable "aura of blondness still [clings] to the Mattel doll" (Talbot 82) because its attempts aim more toward creating a larger customer base than anything else.

But enough of dolls. Mattel has grown so large that it can expand its products beyond Barbie's mini-world. Consumers can easily find Barbie brand tennis shoes, rain boots, slippers, bicycles, and helmets. Many of Barbie's non-doll products even reflect the various fads among America's youth, such as video games, skateboards, scooters, guitars, and dance mats (in accordance with the

The paragraph includes a rich array of concrete, specific detail.

Amy develops her argument by considering the cultural and ethnic angle.

A quick, short transition moves the reader to a broader consideration of Mattel's promotion of materialism.

Amy allows for a counter-argument but then refutes it.

popularity of the game, Dance Dance Revolution). Anne Parducci, Mattel's senior VP of Barbie Marketing, claims Mattel does this because it "want[s] to make sure . . . [it] capture[s] girls in the many ways they are spending their time now and in the future," that it "want[s] Barbie to represent a lifestyle brand for girls, not just a brand of toys" (Edut). This phenomenon, however, can simply be seen as Mattel trying to "infiltrat[e] girls' lives everywhere they go" (Edut). Either way, Mattel's actions allow materialism to develop at an early age, especially since it makes the latest "it" items more accessible to children. Those behind Barbie figure that if children are going to buy into the latest trends anyway, they might as well buy them from Mattel.

Since Barbie products promote the attitude of keeping up with society's crazes, they create a carefree fantasy world for children, obscuring the fact that Mattel's motivation is making money. The company knows that if it enchants children, those children will in turn convince their parents to buy the products for them. The company also knows that commercials are its best opportunities to do this. One recent Mattel commercial advertises the "Let's Dance Genevieve" doll, a doll also inspired by *The 12 Dancing Princesses* DVD that interacts with its owner in three ways: the doll "can dance to music for the girl," "teach the girl dance moves by demonstrating and using speech prompts," and "follow along with the girl's dance moves using special bracelets and a shoe accessory" (*Toys*). Girls dressed in ballerina attire give overly joyous reactions to the doll's behaviors, making the doll seem remarkably advanced when, really, the doll can only raise its arms and legs. In addition, computer graphic scenes from the movie run seamlessly into scenes of the girls playing with the doll, and one of these girls is even transposed onto a clip of the movie. This blurs the lines of reality and fantasy, encouraging young viewers to think that if they own the doll, they, too, can feel like "dancing princesses," that somehow the doll can transport its owner into a fairy-tale world. In actuality, young females will likely tire of the doll within weeks. The commercial even resorts to flattery, describing the doll and its owner as "two beautiful dancers." Finally, the commercial ends with inspirational lyrics, singing, "You can shine." This sort of "vaguely girl-positive" advertising only "wrap[s] the Mattel message — buy our products

now!" (Edut). Together, all these advertising elements add up to a highly desirable product among young girls.

Barbie undoubtedly increases the materialistic tendencies in children, specifically females, Barbie's target audience. After all, since "Barbie dolls need new clothes and accessories more often than boys' action figures do," "young girls learn . . . very early" to "assume consumer roles" (Katz). Interestingly, "Barbie was an early rebel against the domesticity that dominated the lives of baby-boom mothers," as she shows no "car[e] for babies or children" or "visible ties to parents" (Cross 773). But ironically, instead of "[teaching] girls to shed [such] female stereotypes," Barbie simply created a new stereotype for females — the shopaholic persona — because "she prompted [young girls] to associate the freedom of being an adult with carefree consumption" (Cross 774). So the overall effect of Barbie's presence in children's lives is increased expectations for material possessions. Or, in other words, Barbie products cause "catalog-induced anxiety," a condition that can occur "from [viewing] catalogs themselves or from other forms of public exposure of the lives of the rich or celebrated, . . . mak[ing] what a typical person possesses seem paltry, even if the person is one of the many . . . living well by objective standards" (Easterbrook 404, 405). Given that Barbie is a fictitious character, Mattel can make her as beautiful, hip, and rich as it pleases. But what happens when little girls begin comparing their lives to that of Barbie? They think, "If Barbie gets to have such amenities, so should I." And toys like the "Barbie Hot Tub Party Bus" (*Target*) do not help the situation. The product description reads that the bus contains "all the comforts of home like a flat screen TV, dinette table, and beds" (*Target*). Children will inevitably expect these luxuries that, for Barbie, are merely givens in her doll utopia, causing discontent when they discover they cannot have everything they want. It may even reach the point where, "as . . . more material things become available and fail to" satisfy children, "material abundance . . . [can] have the perverse effect of instilling unhappiness — because it will never be possible to have everything that economics can create" (Easterbrook 402).

For my long-forgotten Barbie dolls, as for those of many older females, the dream house has stopped growing. In fact, the house has been demolished, leaving my dolls homeless. But this does not

References to Gary Cross's article buttress the essay's argument.

Amy invokes Gregg Easterbrook as she explores the long-term implications of Mattel's promotion of consumerism.

Amy signals closure by coming full circle, returning to her opening anecdote.

By considering men's consumer habits and male dolls, Amy ends with a refreshing twist.

mean that women have escaped the effects of years of Barbie play as they have temporarily escaped the clutches of Mattel. (I say temporarily because even if a woman has outgrown Barbie, Mattel will suck her back in through her daughters, nieces, goddaughters, and granddaughters.) Since Barbie preaches the admissibility of hyperconsumption to females at a young age, women, unsurprisingly, "engage in an estimated 80% of all consumer spending" (Katz). Women, conditioned from all those trips to the toy store, looking for the perfect party dress for Barbie or the perfect convertible to take her to that party, still find themselves doing this—just on a larger scale—in shopping malls. But perhaps men's consumerism is catching up. The recent "proliferation of metrosexuals" signals a rise in "straight young men whose fashion and grooming tastes have crossed over into areas once reserved for feminine consumption" (St. John 177, 174). Mattel, too, takes part in this phenomenon through the "reintroduc[tion] [of] the Ken doll," which now possesses a "new metrosexual look" (Talbot 79). Well, one thing is certain: Mattel continues its expansive construction on Barbie's ever-costly dream mansion, and knows that millions of little girls will do the same.

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Essay 2

Exemplifying a semiotic approach, Rose Sorooshian, a student at California State University, Northridge, explores the social and cultural conditions that led *The Walking Dead* to become one of America's most popular TV programs. The show became a hit not *despite* the difficult economic times in which it aired, she concludes, but *because* of those troubled times. Here, Sorooshian provides a fine reading of how a television program can be an articulate and potent sign of its time.

The Walking 99 Percent: An Analysis of *The Walking Dead* in the Context of the 2008 Recession

People have lost their homes and their jobs, and their standards of living are falling. People are fighting to survive, and these catastrophic events are not their fault. Yet somehow these events are affecting people more than they could possibly have imagined. This description could be the premise of the popular television show *The Walking Dead*, based on the series of graphic novels by the same name. Set in Georgia, the show follows Sheriff Rick Grimes, his wife, and their son, as well as a group of other survivors as they struggle to stay alive and maintain their humanity in the midst of a zombie apocalypse. However, this description also matches a real-life disaster that began in the United States in 2008 known as the Great Recession. A report from a Pew Research Center Survey describes the recent recession: