

A. Walsh
21W.730: Expository Writing

**ESSAY #1: WRITING FOCUS: CLOSE READING
ANALYZING AMERICAN CONSUMER CULTURE: ADVERTISEMENTS AS
VISUAL TEXTS**

Submit: TWO copies with cover letter (see handout to follow)..

Draft Due Date: Fri 2/23

Revision Due Date: Tues. 3/6

Introduction:

At first glance, commercial advertising appears to be the simplest form of American mass media. The purpose and function of ads seem straightforward in targeting specific consumer groups, such as children, young women and middle-aged men, to buy products such as toys, cosmetics, and automobiles. Yet, on closer analysis, one can "read" advertisements as representing not only products and services, but also values and ideals. Ads often picture a dream-world of wish-fulfillment, a world grounded in assumptions of who consumers are and who they wish to be. Through this essay, you will have the opportunity to analyze the multiple ways in which ads associate products with particular dreams, values or cultural ideals.

Essay Assignment: (Approx. 3-4 pgs., typed, double-spaced)

In this essay assignment, you will choose one contemporary American magazine advertisement as representative of a larger pattern of cultural meaning. Through a close reading of this print advertisement, analyze the multiple ways in which it both markets a product (or product line) and represents ideals and values (e.g. of beauty, masculinity or femininity, age, social class or status, family, home, nation).

Strategies:

Selecting An Ad:

In selecting a particular ad, think carefully about which patterns of meaning engage you most deeply. In the context of this assignment, a "pattern" can be defined as a common theme/set of symbols (e.g. patriotism, environmental awareness),

type of image (e.g. rugged masculinity, wise old age) or mini-narrative (idealized family outings).

After identifying the pattern of ads that most deeply engages you, choose the one ad that best exemplifies this pattern. For close reading, the most productive ads include both photographic imagery and copy and often open up to multiple or conflicting interpretations.

Analyzing the Advertisement as Text:

Closely interpreting or "reading" visual images (such as photographs, paintings, and films) requires a different set of skills than analyzing a printed text. For this essay, you will need to think carefully and critically about the visual language of photography, and to interpret the various ways in which photographic images and printed copy interact in the advertisement. (See "Reading Print Advertisements: A Guide".)

Structure:

The challenges of this essay are twofold. First, you need to frame your analysis of an ad as representative of a type of contemporary commercial advertising. (This point addresses motive: why would a reader want to understand this pattern of ad more fully? What does this ad represent in American culture that has significance?) Second, you will need to decide how you will weave together an analysis of the various elements of this ad in a graceful, complex and interesting way. Your interpretation may be unifying, if you argue that the major elements of the ad combine to produce a singular meaning. Or you may interpret the advertisement as contradictory, expressing competing meanings within the visual text. The strength of your essay depends on the textual evidence that you present to support your argument.