

## Using Popular Culture in Developmental Writing

*Using popular culture in my developmental writing course has prompted me to reconsider what it means to create successful developmental writing assignments. Having slipped into the questionable habit of assuming that removing complexity makes an assignment appropriate for developing writers, I pared down a fairly open-ended “media analysis” assignment to a more prescriptive “music analysis” assignment. As I limited their choices, however, students became less invested in the project. This article describes the (d)evolution of the media analysis assignment as it fell prey to my “simplicity” agenda and offers a few general conclusions about successful assignments—using popular culture and not—at the developmental level.*

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In the opening of her article in the premier issue of this journal, Huntsinger (2005) notes that personal experience essays are incredibly popular among writing instructors because we believe that students will feel confident and find success writing about themselves. I have made similar assumptions about having students write about popular culture, such as films, television, and music, that students like and know well. In his doctoral dissertation on the use of popular music in composition courses, Cox (1999) concurs, noting that many of the new popular culture readers for composition “deal with pop culture as a content area with the idea that if students are already comfortable and interested in the content, they can then concentrate on their writing skills without the difficulties of struggling with content” (p. 9). The notion that those of us using popular culture share with our colleagues teaching personal essays is that students’ familiarity with popular culture, like their familiarity with their own experience, will enhance their ability to work on their writing because they won’t have to struggle to understand the content.

Huntsinger (2005) argues, however, that a common problem with personal essay assignments is that “they do not always encourage students to enter into higher levels of college discourse” (p. 7); in fact, she asserts, quoting Brent and Felder (1992), they can have the effect

of encouraging students to engage in a “surface approach” (p. 43), a superficial interaction with the assignment and with their studies in general. Brent and Felder explain:

Many college teachers are frustrated by the tendency of most of their students to take a surface approach, meaning that they pursue their studies with a minimum of personal engagement, satisfied to memorize facts and problem-solution procedures without attempting to understand them. Only a small minority routinely adopt a deep approach--wherein they try to understand rather than just to memorize--delving into the meanings of lectures and readings, asking probing questions, voluntarily doing outside reading, and relating class material to material in other subjects and to their own experience (p. 43).

I have found a similar effect with my popular culture analysis assignments, despite my intentions of creating assignments that encourage deeply engaged student responses. Cox (1999) shares this view as well, arguing that, “pop culture is used as a subject for writing, but seldom is it used as a subject of rhetorical analysis that could provide students with a basic understanding of rhetoric and communication” (p. 9). In my experience, students are quite comfortable with the descriptive element in popular culture and the narrative element in personal essays, but they are less comfortable with the analytical/interpretive component of the assignment. Examining the papers resulting from various permutations of my media analysis assignments over the years, I have come to believe that success in creating popular culture analysis assignments for developmental students comes, at least in part, from focusing on visual media, encouraging student ownership, engaging in communal analysis, and enhancing student pleasure. This discussion of the evolution of my media analysis assignment may offer insights for teachers hoping to elicit more critical thinking from personal narrative assignments as well.

I first used a popular media analysis assignment in the late 1980s when my colleagues in the English Department at The University of Toledo (UT) and I had students analyze what we called the “hidden messages” in magazine advertisements. The assignment had its origins in the movement within composition—and perhaps most English Departments in general—toward rhetorical theory, recognizing that “rhetoric” was everywhere, and that advertisers used techniques of persuasion that could be exposed, analyzed, and discussed. That original Composition I media analysis assignment focused on the persuasive strategies in ads,

usually in some form of comparison of rhetorical methods of appeal. Since it generally produced interesting papers and offered, at least I thought, a fairly compelling educational experience for students, I have continued to use a version of the media analysis assignment somewhat consistently. I've modified it over the years from its original agenda to fit various Composition II contexts and, most recently, for my SKLS 0990 Academic Writing class, UT's developmental pre-Composition I course.

Editors of contemporary popular culture-based composition textbooks affirm my experience, or at least my memory of the growth of the use of pop culture assignments in composition. In *Common Culture: Reading and Writing about American Popular Culture*, Petracca and Sorapure (2001) note that popular culture has "become accepted as a legitimate object of academic discourse" (p. xii) only in the last decade, with the emergence of the field of cultural studies. In their preface to the third edition of *Signs of Life in the USA*, Maasik and Solomon (2000) discuss the appearance of their very popular text when, as they tell it, popular culture was "embroiled in the 'culture wars' of the early 1990s as it struggled for 'academic legitimacy'" (p. v). Interestingly, the editors of both texts discuss how examining popular culture will encourage students to do what the editors see as the central mission of their courses: "critical thinking." Petracca and Sorapure state, "...such courses are especially appealing for students and effective in improving their critical thinking, reading, and writing skills....we don't have to 'sell' the subject matter of the course and can concentrate on the task at hand—namely, teaching students to think critically and to write clear and effective prose" (p. xi), and "by reading, thinking, and writing about material they find inherently interesting, students develop their critical and analytical skills—skills which are, of course, crucial to their successes in college" (p. xi). Maasik and Solomon maintain that their "semiotic method has helped instructors lead their students to analyze critically the popular cultural phenomena that they enjoy writing about and so learn the critical thinking and writing skills that their composition classes are designed to impart" (p. vi).

It's clear, then, that the agenda in using popular culture assignments is often similar to the agenda for using personal experience assignments: we want our students to engage in critical thinking about their experiences or the media they consume in the hopes that they will improve their critical/analytical thinking skills, and that they will be able to translate the use of those skills to other tasks they will encounter in

their academic experience as writers and beyond. However, as I consider how I've revamped my Composition media analysis assignment to meet the circumstances of the developmental writing classroom, I must echo Huntsinger's (2005) and Cox's (1999) assessments: The task hasn't yielded the type of critical thinking I was seeking. No matter how I framed the assignment or pushed my students toward more complex analysis of their chosen media, they were consistently more preoccupied with description, which is a very worthwhile skill but a less sophisticated one than analysis and interpretation. They were not engaging the kinds of questions about themes, messages, audience, and implications that I hoped they would, which means I was not teaching them to apply critical thinking tools to the media, let alone encouraging them to use those skills beyond our classroom.

The media analysis assignment evolved from the Composition I version focused on print ads to a more open-ended one for Composition II students, allowing them complete autonomy in the topic of their analysis. About ten years ago, I was regularly teaching a Composition II course on "Women in Society" and having the students do an analysis of any media of their choice looking for messages about gender embedded in advertisements, films, books, etc. When I began teaching in the Developmental Writing Program five years ago, I brought the media analysis assignment with me, changing little about the Composition II prompt except the amount of in-class idea generating and workshopping. The prompt (see Appendix A for complete prompt) began with general commentary about media and media analysis. It reminded students that all media contains values, ideas, definitions, philosophies, etc., and that they had models to follow, in the form of the material we'd already looked at in homework and in-class activities that critiqued gender in advertising, music videos, and films. This prompt attempted to help students narrow the assignment by giving them a multitude of ideas for possible ways they could break down the task, such as themes, messages, audience, techniques, etc. My hope was that these elaborate and multi-focused directions would give the students a variety of approaches from which to attempt the task. I thought the variety would serve to help the students utilize what they'd been learning about how to break a paper down into manageable parts, which in turn, would help them construct a thesis that somehow contained and focused those parts. The prompt included four different concrete "possibilities" for how students could attack the assignment, which gave somewhat more focused examples of

what the paper might look like in a given scenario, such as looking for “countercultural” messages about masculinity in a film, for example.

While I think most Composition II students enjoyed the variety of options and possible foci, many of the Academic Writing students seemed to find this assignment frustrating and confusing. Even with encouragement and prompting, many of them had difficulty picking a piece of media to analyze and they often seemed uncomfortable with the assignment even after selecting a work they liked and knew well. It occurred to me that perhaps it was the variety and open-endedness that troubled them, so I thought it might be more effective to just give a simple, straightforward prompt ordering them to “do this particular kind of analysis with this particular kind of cultural item.” Initially I resisted the urge to change the prompt because I liked it and wanted my assignments to be as much like advanced composition assignments as possible. However, after grading a batch or two of essays using the open-ended prompt and finding the papers frustratingly descriptive rather than analytical, I capitulated and revised the prompt to a more narrow version concentrating on music analysis.

The narrowed assignment (see Appendix B) focused on music and asked students to pick one song and explain its message. With my new emphasis on simplicity, consistency, and clarity, no exceptions or alterations were allowed—one song, one simple thesis explaining the song, period. Analyze a film? No. Analyze and compare two songs? No. Analyze two photographs of your favorite NBA star? No. Readers are perhaps not shocked to learn that the revised prompt seemed to stifle student analysis and interpretation even more. Sadly, I was surprised when the resulting papers still did not yield the kind and depth of analysis and interpretation I was hoping for in the essays because I truly thought that simplifying the directions, limiting the choices, narrowing the focus, and insisting on a uniform kind of project would provide the groundwork for better critical thinking. (You are free to wonder why). The following introduction, reproduced with permission, is from one of the better writers I’ve encountered in Academic Writing. Reading it, one can see that, even though she deeply connects with the material, the thesis statement is predominantly descriptive, analytical only in that it breaks the song into general topics. Despite its success, the thesis lacks the higher-level analytical components such as synthesis and evaluation that I was hoping for, but did not adequately write into the assignment:

*The song “Coal Miner’s Daughter” by Loretta Lynn is a very old*

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*song but one I am sure many people can relate to even today. This song brings back a lot of childhood memories to me and other people raised in large families. These memories are sometimes hurtful to me because my parents are both deceased, and this song reminds me of being home again. Some of these memories are good and some are not so good. "Coal Miner's Daughter" offers insight about struggling families everywhere who have very little money but a lot of love, daddies who work long hours, family members who work hard, and mommies who never complain about their struggles.*

This paragraph does many things well; in fact, I was very pleased with the development of this writer's genuine authorial voice. I also liked her attempt to identify the structure of the essay in her thesis. However, her thesis statement is predominantly descriptive. The student does an excellent job of describing the nature of the struggles, but is less clear, here in the introduction and in the body of the paper, about what insights the song actually offers. Most of the papers, like this one, were good general descriptions of the individual pieces of media, and, to the extent that they broke their songs down into parts—often corresponding to the verses—the papers were analytical; however, they did not demonstrate much higher-level analytical thinking about meaning, context, and implications, which I believe are exactly the kinds of thinking we most want our students to engage in and which they will be expected to perform at the upper levels of their academic experience.

However, it's now clear that the problem was more in the "simplified" prompt than in the students' unwillingness to analyze; its restrictions made the more abstract, critical, and analytical gestures I wanted nearly impossible. Asking students to look at a song in isolation from its genre, the artist's other works, songs about similar topics, etc., left them with little room to move other than description, paraphrase, or summary, and, not surprisingly, that is exactly what most of them did. Last spring, on the advice of a veteran colleague, I returned to an assignment more akin to the original advertising analysis prompt, once again asking students to compare two ads for a similar product from a single magazine. The revised assignment (see Appendix C) produced significantly better papers than the music analysis prompt. The part of the papers focused on description became incredibly concrete, with measurements of relative size of images and text, inventive descriptions of colors and poses, and a wide array of specific information about backgrounds, fonts, layouts, etc. Unlike their experiences reading and listening to song lyrics, the print

ads provided prolonged opportunity for visual analysis, and the longer they looked, the more they saw. Although the song lyrics were, of course, also available to students, most seemed hard-pressed to do more than provide an “in your own words” gloss on the content of the lyrics.

The visual assignment also seemed to provide more opportunity for students to learn from and utilize strategies used by their peers. When one person made a point of discussing the background photos in her ads, the other students took the opportunity to review their own ads to see if that element might be worthy of some attention in their papers. Audience analysis was also collaborative. We had class discussions inquiring into how we might determine a target audience for a magazine, something that students invariably knew, but they needed help understanding how to locate and articulate evidence to support their assumptions. We practiced on sample magazines brought into class, and then we worked on their magazines in small groups. These discussions and shared in-class experiences led to fairly elaborate paragraphs in their essays that took into account target readers, values of the communities from which these potential readers might emerge, and surprisingly sophisticated discussions of how such magazines might also participate in stereotyping readers by such narrow demographic approaches.

The discussions of audience led most of the writers to engage in fairly difficult analytical questions about the visual and verbal rhetorical strategies of the advertisers. In their papers, students talked about “images” and “attitudes” projected by the ads and how those attitudes might impact potential consumers. Even when the analysis felt “stupid” to the student because the ad’s message was superficial, e.g., “If you use this brand of surfboard, you will attract girls as pretty as the ones in this ad,” the student’s discussion usually offered both concrete description and evaluative commentary. In fact, a majority of the students were able to identify and explain at least the more obvious of the visual and textual rhetorical strategies employed by the advertisers, and some went well beyond the obvious in their discussions. The following introductory paragraph, though far from perfect, is representative of what I view as the kind of solid critical engagement, in both description and analysis, that I wanted the assignment to produce:

*Advertisers today are at an all time peak for catching attention. Advertisers go to the extreme and back to catch an audience’s attention in order for someone to buy products. Video game ads have great pictures and graphics of the game for a consumer to choose their ideal*

*games. Two video game ads out of a men's magazine both have stunning graphics to sell their product; one game is "The Matrix" from the highly viewed movie, "The Matrix Revolution," and the other game is called "Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30." One of the ads targets adults, which is "Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30," and "The Matrix" targets teens. They both rely on appeal to gamers and adventurous people to sell their games, though both focus on violence and war to promote each game.*

In addition to describing what's in the ads, the student has to make the leap (albeit in this case, not a large one) to discussing how the ads reach their audience, in this case through violence and war.

Another student used her descriptive skills on two advertisements for migraine medicine and then offered a comparative assessment of the ads' appeals to humor:

*Relpax's asteroid falling on a woman in the middle of the office is funnier compared to Imitrex's animated creature nailing a nail into a woman's head. Relpax and Imitrex both target women as their audience, but Relpax's asteroid falling on a lady in the middle of the office is funnier than an animated creature pounding a nail into a woman's head because asteroids don't usually fall in the middle of the day and especially not in the middle of the office. If that was ever to happen it would probably cause some kind of commotion. Also it's funnier because the title and picture relate to getting knocked out. The idea is that the pain of a migraine can make people feel like an asteroid knocked them out. Relpax's light blue speckled background immediately draws more attention than Imitrex's white background, especially since that color is soothing and relaxing; it also gives a lively and refreshing feeling to it. Most women, when they sit to read a magazine do it at a time when they are looking to relax after a busy time in their day or week. The third comparison is the advertisements' attention getters. Relpax (Not Many Things Knock You Out Like a Migraine) is funnier because a migraine can't be seen so it's silly to picture it knocking someone out. Even though Imitrex's (Headache? OR Migraine?) is a good attention getter, there is nothing humorous about it. Compared to Imitrex, Relpax is the most humorous advertisement.*

Although both paragraphs have problems, I think it is fair to say that the students are engaging in a level of critical thinking that they



were not in the purely descriptive music analysis papers. Interpreting why a certain appeal might work for a particular audience involves more abstract and complex cognitive processes than pure description, and, I think, better supports our efforts to facilitate students obtaining and using critical thinking skills that they can apply across a spectrum of academic and nonacademic circumstances. Overall, I was pleased with the quality of work and with student investment in the papers. Quality of discussion, group analysis, peer critique, and final editing were all of substantially better quality than for my rigid “music only” papers of earlier semesters.

In revamping this assignment for developing writers, I saw my challenge as simplifying and providing more structure for the students to rely on as they made their way through it. In revising it, I removed choices, thinking that a narrower prompt would make it easier for students to enter the assignment. However, upon further reflection about the consequences of my adjustment, I’ve drawn some different conclusions about what makes a successful developmental writing assignment, particularly one using pop culture. Clearly, simplifying an assignment does not necessarily take care of making it appropriate for the developmental student. It’s worthwhile to note also that since I started teaching developmental writing exclusively, I see myself making similar kinds of restrictive moves in many areas of my pedagogic life. I am much more willing to define the terms of a paper, prescribe a thesis (or narrow it to two options), and require a particular structure for an essay than I have ever been. In fact, I fear that I may be more concerned about structure, order and general “discipline” than I ever was as a Composition II instructor. I’m not at all sure that such focus ultimately benefits students. In fact, I’m fairly certain that it doesn’t. Furthermore, assignments that restrict student choices and options seem to create an environment encouraging lack of ownership in which students are more likely to produce superficial work. I am certain that any assignment done superficially is much less effective, meaningful, and challenging than one done by engaged, interested students.

One of the conclusions I’ve drawn about using popular culture assignments in the developmental writing context is that students are more successful analyzing visual than auditory media, and even better at still images. Perhaps it is the in-depth looking possible on a still image that enables students to do more than describe what is in the picture. It may be that students are more willing to engage in critical analysis of visual

images than audio ones because, from the network news to the Internet, they may feel more influenced by visual rhetorical manipulation. To the extent that their previous teachers have been sensitized to the need for critical examination of web pages and other visual media, students may come to a visual critique assignment with a heightened awareness of the need to approach it from a critical thinking perspective. Whatever the reason, in my experience students seem to have more critical analysis to offer about still ads, both descriptively and interpretively, than they do about music, television, or films.

In addition to tapping into students' visual analysis skills, successful developmental writing assignments—about popular culture, personal experience, or other topics—encourage student autonomy in whatever measure appropriate to the assignment and to students' skills and abilities. In the case of the advertising analysis task, allowing students to choose the type of magazine and the type of ads they examined facilitated their investment in the assignment. Often students picked ads about products that they liked or used themselves, such as motorcycles, video games, makeup, or cell phones. They also used magazines that they read, which lead to some interesting realizations about what advertisers think about people of their generation's (or community such as "fantasy lovers" or "hip hop listeners") values and preoccupations. Given that my developmental courses have had a tendency to get quite prescriptive, despite my best intentions, having the students choose the ads they analyze is perhaps a nice balance between the prescriptive "pick one and only one song" approach and the "no holds barred" approach with which I started. Though I'm certain I will continue to tinker with the assignment, I am equally certain that I will continue to try to preserve some freedom of choice for the students, even if the assignment remains limited to advertising.

Cooperative analysis enterprises such as "practice" audience identification exercises, sharing and critiquing introductions and thesis statements, and, ultimately, exchanging analytical strategies are also important to successful developmental writing assignments because they help build a sense of community and enhance students' critiquing skills. I brought in sample ads upon which we participated in collaborative practice analysis, building experience and skill from which students were able to move to the analytical work required on their own and each others' ads. All of these collaborative activities helped make the advertising analysis assignment more successful than the music assignment. I'm

not sure what it was about the ads that made discussing, breaking down, and sharing them in community easier than with music, but the resulting effect on me has been a renewed attention to designing assignments that facilitate productive group analysis discussions as part of the writing process. Many of my students are very negative about “peer critiques,” claiming that they are “a waste of time” or “impossible; I don’t know anything, how can I critique someone else?” They have also, historically, been concerned about “offending” other students with their critiques. It may be that looking at someone else’s ad, as opposed to someone else’s paper, frees students up to offer critical commentary and analysis. Whatever the reason, I see visual analysis assignments as very welcoming to genuine peer engagement and facilitative of advanced critical dialogue.

I also remain committed to the media analysis assignment because students do appear to enjoy it, which is another quality I believe is essential in successful developmental writing assignments. My mostly traditional-aged students regularly report that they are willing to give a lot more energy and attention to an assignment if they like or have an interest in it. They frequently complain when a reading or task seems removed from their experience or interests. Once they get over choosing the topic, most of them report that they like looking closely at an advertisement and thinking about its influence on its target audience. As noted earlier, because the ads they pick are about products they use from magazines that they read, they have a natural curiosity about how advertisers are attempting to manipulate or influence them. They sometimes report after this assignment that, “They can’t turn it off.” They even bring in examples of egregious advertising to discuss with the class after we’ve moved on to other topics. Of course there’s the added benefit that the assignment almost completely frees me from the complaint of, “This topic sucks; it doesn’t have anything to do with me, and I don’t have anything to say about it.”

In *Signs of Life in the USA*, Maasik and Solomon (2000) raise the specter of the “striking . . . power of popular culture to shape our lives” (p. v) as reason that “learning to think and write critically about popular culture is even more important today than it was when [they] published the first edition of [their] book” (p. vi). As most of us know, the American media, which has a large impact on our students’ time, interests, and money, is controlled by a relatively small group of conglomerates that is primarily interested in continuing their economic success by getting people to consume, not critique, their products. In fact, I think it would be fair to say

that such businesses encourage uncritical consumption and are not at all interested in audiences developing the kinds of critical thinking skills that might enable us to more aggressively critique, mobilize against, analyze, and in other ways subvert this powerful system. Because our students are heavily influenced by the media produced by the dominant culture, we have an even greater obligation to help them learn to use critical thinking tools on the media and perhaps at the same time, introduce them to the joy and value in creative resistance. Completing the advertising analysis assignment well, students typically enjoy themselves, become better collaborators, enhance their sense of investment and ownership, and develop an awareness of themselves as critical thinkers. If there is an “aha” moment related to themselves as consumers vs. citizens, particularly as empowered citizens whose consumer choices have political implications, then the assignment has achieved something well beyond its “make them better writers and analyzers” agenda.

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