

A Thesis-Driven Paper Requiring Research (from Ryan Wepler)

In 8-10 typed, double-spaced pages (12 point font), perform a narrowly focused and thoroughly researched analysis of some facet of culture that normalizes individuals into gender identities. In addition to explaining how the cultural example you have chosen contributes to the formation of gender, your paper should describe the specific characteristics it contributes to our overall notions of gender categories. Your topic should allow you to explore ground that is significantly different from what you have explored in your previous papers. Though it is not required, you are encouraged to take an evaluative stance toward your cultural example. Rather than simply saying that the example possesses either positive or negative social consequences, I would urge you to discuss how the example might be liberated from a rigid gender category in a way that, for example, the connotation of pink as feminized and weak is shattered by its use as the color of female power on the v-day website.

Clarifications

- 1) By “narrowly focused,” I mean narrow. I have been pressing you all semester to develop more focused paper topics and to learn to say a lot more about a lot less. For example, in the most recent edition of the *Journal of American Culture* (JAC), the topic of one of the papers is the way in which *Seventeen* magazine—the author’s entire dissertation is on *Seventeen* magazine—produces a society of young, middle-class, female consumers. By “facet of culture,” I mean something like *Seventeen* magazine. You could choose something like “Country Club Membership and Masculinity” or “The Mating Ritual of American Twentysomethings in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy.” To give you an example of how narrow you can go, the same issue of JAC contains the equivalent of a 25 page paper on the significance of the rubber ducky in American culture and there are reviews of books (books!) on American hotel decorations and the symbolic significance of the sequoia tree. I am not, of course, asking you to write like employed scholars in your papers, but it is far from unreasonable to ask for narrow and focused (and interesting!) analysis in a college essay. You are, after all, writing for employed scholars. The fact that your topic is narrow should not prevent your ideas from being ambitious.
- 2) By “thesis-driven,” I mean thesis-driven. Somehow a few students always confuse the research paper with a report assignment. Reports will not receive passing grades. You need to offer a thesis about your topic that unites your analysis and pushes your evidence toward proving a meaningful and contestable claim.
- 3) I have designed this project to encourage both primary and secondary resource research. In other words, part of your research will require you to look at texts that will improve your understanding of your topic itself. For example, if your topic is the way in which adolescent females are gendered through their consumption of *Seventeen* magazine, one of your primary sources would have to be *Seventeen* magazine itself. In addition to this primary source, you would also have to research what people (hopefully scholars) have already written about the topic. In the case of *Seventeen* magazine, you could use Kelley Massoni’s article in JAC. However, in addition to these highly specific articles, you will want to look at some articles about the broader themes in your topic. Writing an essay on the gendering of teenage girls through their consumption of *Seventeen* magazine, might require you to look at books like Daniel Thomas Cook’s *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children’s Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer*, Joseph Kett’s *Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present*, Jean Kilbourne’s *Can’t Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel*, or Ellen McCracken’s