

The Sign-ificance of Children's Toys: Explaining Their Cultural Meanings and Values

Writing Situation: In this assignment, you will be using a variety of rhetorical modes to explore the deeper significance of two childhood toys. Particularly, you will be using **description, exposition, and analysis**.

Evaluation/Objectives: You'll be evaluated on your originality, depth and insightfulness of analysis, the quality/precision of your thesis statement, and your paragraph development and organization skills.

Assignment: In a well-written essay, explore the meanings and value of two childhood toys that are common or popular in the culture you grew up in. Analyze and look at as many associations as you can find with the two toys. Focus on interpreting what these toys symbolize, what they say, what they reveal about the children, their parents' values and those of the larger society. The most important activity to practice to help your analysis emerge is to start asking questions—lots of questions—about your two toys. These questions will lead you to probe deeper into the significance of these cultural artifacts.

It will be necessary to read Roland Barthes' essay on "Toys," as a specific example of how to go about drawing meaning out of childhood toys and what they mean or reveal about their users and their culture. You will find Emily Prager's essay "Our Barbies, Ourselves" to be useful as well as she explores a particular childhood toy, the Barbie Doll. Stuart Ewen's essay, "Hard Bodies," provides you with general examples of how to draw meaning and analysis out of an object—the sculpted human body.

This essay does not and should not involve any outside research of other writers' opinions or ideas about the toys. However, depending on the toys you choose, you may want to learn basic background information, such as when the toy was invented. Encyclopedic sources like Wikipedia will suffice. For this first essay, if you want to reference one of the three authors above, then you will need to use the Works Cited page that is part of your MLA Essay template, and I will be showing you how to document such a references, both on the Works Cited page and in parenthetical notes.

Preparing the Essay:

- Brainstorm for a while until you come up with at least 10 different toys you could write on. Select the two you prefer to work with. They should have something in common with each other, such as being toys that are typically given to girls, for example, or toys that encourage creativity like Tinker Toys or Legos. These are just two example out of an infinite number.
- After choosing a subject (your two toys), make an outline by breaking your chosen toys down into aspects of them that you want to explore. Overall, you are trying to explore what these toys "mean" or say about children or the culture in which the toys are present. Making an **informal general outline** will keep you focused and allow you to work on drafting any particular paragraph rather than trying to compose your draft in linear order—something which writers seldom if ever do.
- Next, make a **micro outline**. Focus on the smaller details or observations you plan to make about each of the toys' aspects. Be sure that you are able to draw some connections between the two toys, either by comparison or function, utility, and so forth. The more precise you are, the better your readers will be able to understand your essay the analysis you are engaged in.
- Start **drafting** your main body section of the essay.
- The essay must be written in the third person point of view. So if you are explaining a point about a toy of your own, you will need to generalize it and cast it into the **third person**.
- As you discuss the toys, your essay will also sound better if you write in the **present tense** rather than the past tense.

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Organizing and Structuring the Essay:

1. *Introductory Paragraph:* Your essay must begin with an **introductory paragraph** that (1) hooks the reader's attention with 1 or 2 lead sentences, (2) states what your general topic is about (analyzing two childhood toys) by using generalizations that (3) gradually become limited and narrow in scope and that lead up to your **thesis statement**.
2. In the very last sentence of your introductory paragraph, state your **expository thesis**. The thesis will guide, direct, and focus your essay. But don't be so blunt by saying "The reason I am writing this essay is that...." Be more subtle and weave your reason for writing the essay into your introduction so that you aren't beating the reader over the head.
3. *Main Body section:*
 - Structure the main body so that you essentially have two *sections*, one for discussing each toy. Find some connection between the two toys.
 - The **main body** of your essay must be well organized and contain a clearly stated **topic sentence** for each of your main body paragraphs. The number of paragraphs will vary, but you should have at least two well-developed paragraphs about each toy—one for each quality you are explaining or analyzing.
 - Remember to include **transitions** between paragraphs to ensure smoothness in the flow of your ideas.
 - Give specific, detailed support that explains and develops each of your **topic sentences**. As you compose this section of your essay, remember to stay focused on what your **thesis statement** sets out to "prove" or assert.
 - Don't stray from your topic and go off on an unrelated tangent.
4. *Conclusion Paragraph:* Your conclusion paragraph should clearly bring the essay to a close. While you do not need to restate the points or concepts, you might want to reiterate your essay's purpose that was stated in the introductory paragraph. A technique that is often used is called "framing". Echoing a key phrase from the introduction, returning to anecdote in the introduction, or answering a question that the introductory paragraph raised are among the several ways that you can apply this framing technique. Good readers will recognize your method and acknowledge you as a skilled writer.
 - **Page length:** Your essay must be between 3 and 5 typed, double-spaced pages. *Essays shorter than 3 full pages will not receive a passing grade.*
 - **Title:** Remember to title your essay uniquely. Don't call it the "Toy Analysis Essay" or "Essay #1".
 - **Audience:** adults/college students; don't assume your audience is knowledgeable about the subject..
 - **Writing Mode:** expository, analytical.
 - **Purpose:** to practice the skill of accurately explaining your subject; to analyze/interpret and inform your audience.
 - **Standard American English (SAE):** Remember, your paper must follow the basic conventions of standard American written English (correct mechanics, usage, grammar, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, and so forth).

PEER CRITIQUE DRAFT DUE: _____

FINAL DRAFT DUE: _____