

WRD 513: Semiotics

Course Description

The study of “the sign,” semiotics extends the notion of text beyond the written page to any artifact that can “stand for” something else—not only pictures, sounds, gestures, and body language, but also objects and even the spaces between them! Semiotics is therefore the study of making meaning (both “encoding” and “decoding”) in its widest possible sense. It is concerned with the description of sign systems and the codes (“rules” and conventions) that structure meaning, as well as the particular instances or events in which signs are constructed. Semiotics, then, fundamentally enriches the study of both discourse and rhetoric. We will study the activity of making meaning as inherently mental even as we recognize that signs are necessarily “in and of the world.”

By working through the materials and assignments, you should complete the class with an expanded ability to:

- Discuss semiotics as a discipline—a matter distinct from the generalized use of semiotic terms and principles
- Recognize and practice the specialized, conceptual vocabulary of semiotics
- Understand the activity of the writer in a broad context, recognizing how and why the written word came to define and organize public life in Western culture
- Apply semiotic principles to your chosen concentration or non-academic area of interest
- Design texts that reflect an understanding of signification across media and modes

Selected Readings

Bakhtin, Mikhail. “Marxism and the Philosophy of Language.” Trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik. *The Rhetorical Tradition*. Eds. Bizzell, Patricia and Bruce Herzberg. Bedford, 1991. 924-944.

Brown, Roger. “What Words Are: Reference and Categories.” *The Linguistic Basis of Metaphor*. Ed. Scholes, Robert, Nancy Cornley, and Greg Ulmer. New York: St. Martins, 1988. 48-53.

Chandler, Daniel. *Semiotics: The Basics*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Danesi, Marcel. *The Quest for Meaning: A Guide to Semiotic Theory and Practice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.

Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press, 1979.

Hoffmeyer, Jesper. *Signs of Meaning in the Universe*. Trans. Barbara J. Haveland. IUP, 1996.

Jappy, Tony. *Introduction to Peircean Visual Semiotics*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Selected Assignments

1. **Summary/Response (S/R) Papers:** This assignment asks you to prepare for class discussion by writing about what you have read for the week. The S/R paper gives you the opportunity work out in writing

what you understand from the reading, identify what you would like to discuss in more detail, draw connections across course content, and speculate about what you'll contribute to the class discussion. You will provide a thick summary of the content for the week; create points of synthesis among the readings for a given week and and/or across the course; offer any response stimulated by the readings; raise one or two compelling, open-ended questions for class discussion.

2. **Show and Tell:** The study of semiotics presents opportunity for understanding in objects, documents, and other *things*. We'll use the phrase we know best—*show and tell*—to reflect understanding we've come to between class meetings as we engage with the world. The idea is simple: the reading for a given week should stimulate you to remember, notice, or search out examples of concepts/ideas considered therein. Your task is to collect one such example and share it with the rest of us. (We'll spend a lot of time in class on the computers, so try to show a material object if you can; if an online reference is perfectly apt for a given week, that will be ok.)
3. **Individual Final Project:** The major assignment in this course will be an extended project due in two forms: 1) a finished *text* of some sort—paper, video, interactive media—which will be recognizable to us as an analysis—an application of semiotic theory, and 2) a cursory/summary presentation of the project to the class. The first item is the analysis itself, the second is an informal presentation on the analysis, which may be followed by comments, questions, and other happy input from the assembled group. Ideally, the final project is an opportunity for you to turn what you have learned about semiotics in the direction of your academic, career, or free-time interests/goals. This assignment will be challenging because, unlike many other fields, semiotics does not offer a replicable methodology, or blueprint for application. The “trick” will be to learn and study the concepts discussed throughout the term and abstract a method from them. Throughout the term, we will make an effort to consider ways that the theory we are reading can imply method. Because the quality of your analysis will be dependent on your understanding of the key concepts we discuss this term, your key objective is a rhetorical one—to establish strong ethos by controlling the necessary conceptual vocabulary.