

COLL C103 – The Semiotics of Advertising

Fall 2025, 2nd 8 weeks (Section 13342)

Instructor

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<https://iu.zoom.us/j/84190467007?pwd=VWtjZlF4WHhleDhwNE9lVmVsZmkyQT09>
Passcode (if prompted for one): 846028

Grader

Pedram Aghaalikhani pedragha@iu.edu
Office hours: No regular hours scheduled

Course Goals

1. A good orientation in and understanding of the general principles and philosophical underpinnings of semiotics, including terminology and concepts.
2. Development of the ability to apply the tools of semiotics for the analysis of concrete texts, both visual and written.
3. The ability to write concise, focused analyses of finite semiotic texts (ads).
4. An appreciation of advertising as a creative medium (as I call it, the “new poetry”).
5. Heightened introspective sensitivity to and awareness of the subtle nuances of language use employed in advertising.
6. Increased ability to articulate how the same semiotic and linguistic effects which push our buttons and manipulate us as consumers also occur on all other levels of language, from fine literature to everyday conversation.

Textbook & Materials

- The main course web site is located at:
<http://www.gfowler.net/c103/index.html>
- Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*. London: Routledge, 2022, 4rd ed.

The IU Library now has an unlimited-use library copy of this book, which permits all students in the course to access it simultaneously, and which can also be downloaded in epub and pdf form, so you can save it to your phone or computer instead of accessing it online every time. Here’s a link to that version of the textbook:

<https://proxyiub.uits.iu.edu/login?url=https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781003155744>

This link worked for everybody in the Spring, 2025 edition of this course, and downloading the textbook in both formats also works, but you should all try it for yourselves. Let me know if there are any problems with that link. Because this is an online course and the online version of the textbook is readily accessible, I didn’t order it even as a recommended textbook through the IU Bookstore, but if anyone wants to buy a print copy (the paperback isn’t expensive), they might have some copies left over from the spring, when I did order it. Or you can get it from amazon.com readily.

- Additional materials provided via web site as required.

Course Requirements and Grading

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| 1. There are no exams in this online course | 0 pts |
| 2. Each week there will be three asynchronous “bundles” of material presented online (no assignments are due during finals week other than the term paper). Each bundle will have a short writing assignment, to be turned in via Canvas, for a total of 21 such graded assignments, each worth 20 points. | 420 |
| 3. A term paper proposal, due by Wednesday of week 13 of the semester, 11/19/2025 | 20 |
| 4. A term paper, due on Thursday of finals week, 12/18/2025 | 100 |
| Nominal possible points | 540 pts |

Structure of the Course

Weekly lectures. Each Monday afternoon from 5:30–6:45 pm starting in Week 9, 10/20/2025, the instructor will give a lecture, basically introducing a week’s worth of material. Some material in these lectures is drawn from or based upon the textbook, while other content is original to the course, although it generally builds upon material presented in the textbook. **I will record the weekly Zoom lectures and post these recordings via Canvas.** If you have to miss the live lecture, you should view the recording before tackling the week’s asynchronous assignments. This permits you to treat the course as entirely asynchronous if that’s what you want to do.

Online asynchronous bundles. The majority of the course will be presented in asynchronous “bundles” of material presented online. These take the form of a separate web page for each bundle, including text, links to advertising and non-advertising material (text, graphics, and videos), and occasional short (1–2 minute) video snippets in which I explain something not covered directly in the weekly lecture. I plan to have each week’s bundles posted online by the time of each Monday lecture. Each bundle will include several short-answer writing assignments based on it, adding up to a page or so for each bundle, which you should submit in a single document via Canvas. Assignments are checked for plagiarism and AI use by Turnitin; any possible infractions flagged by this system will be examined closely by the instructor.

The deadlines for submitting the three asynchronous bundle assignments for each week are Friday at 11:59 pm. Please do them in sequential order, as any given bundle may sometimes build upon material in the previous bundle! I know that many students will prefer to reserve their Friday nights for personal activities instead of schoolwork. If that applies to you, you are absolutely welcome to submit the weekly assignments earlier! Do them all on Tuesday if that’s what works for you. **But please bear in mind that deadlines for submission of the bundle writing assignments are firm** (exceptions will be made for documented illness and family emergencies; if any students have intercollegiate athletics or a registered disability that might interfere, please get in touch with me as soon as possible to discuss possible accommodations). **Technical issues such as temporary loss of your internet connection are not considered a valid excuse for not submitting an assignment on time. You can guard against such problems by not trying to do an assignment late on Friday evening when it is due!** I will consider requests for extensions on individual assignments if they are made in advance of the deadline for submission, but not after they are already due. Note that I have provided my cell phone number and email address; you can call, text, or email with any problems. Assignments will be graded primarily by Pedram Aghaalkhani, a graduate student in my department who has previously served as AI in this course several times. If you have an issue with your grade on any assignment, email him first and he will consult with me if necessary. Don’t just insert a comment to the assignment in Canvas, as he and I might well never see it there. This semester Pedram is not appointed as an AI, but as a grader, and as a result, he will not keep regular office hours during the course. If you need help with materials (lectures, textbook, assignments) I suggest you email me and we can set up an appointment via Zoom or in person. We intend to get all assignments graded by the week after they are due, but you never know, “stuff” happens.

Grades will be assigned on a 10% basis:

A+	N/A	B+	88.00–89.99 %	C+	78.00–79.99 %
A	92.00–100.00 %	B	82.00–87.99 %	C	72.00–77.99 %
A–	90.00–91.99 %	B–	80.00–81.99 %	C–	70.00–71.99 %, etc.

The course as designed has 540 possible points, so you need 497 points for 92.00% to get an A, 486 for an A–, etc.

It is important to note that a lot of the graded assignments involve subjective evaluations of media material, primarily advertising, a small percentage of which take an identifiable position on certain controversial social topics. The instructor’s personal views on such questions are not sacred, and there is no reason for you to attempt to fine tune your views to accommodate what you might perceive to be my personal opinions. Our grader has been instructed to be ideologically neutral. What is important is that you demonstrate a good understanding of the semiotic topics involved in the assignments (derived from the textbook and the weekly lectures).

Notes on things we have encountered in our asynchronous assignments. There are several things I’d like to draw to your attention that have come up in the past couple of years when I’ve been teaching this course in this format.

1) A few students have complained that the workload in the course is too heavy. You need to realize that the College standard for a 3-credit course calls for approximately 6,000 minutes of work (including everything: class meetings, readings, small and large assignments, studying for exams, etc.), which averages out to about 6 hours/week for a full semester, but 12 hours/week for a 2nd 8 week course. In the responses to the OCQ questionnaire last spring, the largest number of hours cited for this course by any significant number of students was 7–8 hours/week, well below even the College standard. Remember when you feel pressed for time that you have only one lecture/week, one book chapter to read, three written assignments that will usually take you no more than about one hour apiece, and no exams (though there is a concluding term paper in place of a final exam). If the workload feels heavy, that’s because we (and you!) have to cram a full semester course into half a semester.

2) *Plagiarism.* If you want to get together with other students to work on the bundle assignments, that’s fine, **BUT** what we understand

that to mean is for you to discuss and brainstorm the questions with a few other students in the class. What we will **NOT** accept is very similar submitted assignments, such as those consisting of sentence-by-sentence identical answers with nothing varying except for some specific wording of the same ideas. We are on the lookout for this and if we find it, we will not give you credit for such submissions. And this is exactly the sort of thing that Turnitin in Canvas is designed to catch. Instead each member of a workgroup should take their own notes during the discussion and then write up their own individual assignments later for submission. That's healthy and fine, and we strongly endorse that approach to the bundles.

3) *Artificial Intelligence..* Those of us who have been involved with teaching this course in recent semesters (the instructor and several AIs) are really sick of students who submit our assignments to AI systems such as ChatGPT and then turn in the AI responses. This is seriously contrary to the spirit of this course, and we won't accept assignments that we identify as being written by AI systems. ***Substitution of AI writing for your own is cheating!*** Often AI-generated answers to our questions are not highly focused on the specific points our questions ask about; refer to other ads or materials besides the ones specifically targeted in our questions; or misapply the semiotic terminology and concepts introduced in this course. Assignments that have come through AI often do worse than average in straightforward grading due to the frequent non-specific or off-target answers. In most assignments we are looking for your authentic, introspective, subjective reactions to the ads we ask you to discuss, for which AI is simply no substitute. A big part of this course is to ask you to think about how and why you respond personally to individual stimuli ("signs") in advertisements, and substituting ChatGPT for yourself simply isn't a legitimate way to deal with our assignments. If you're having difficulty with the material or don't know how to approach a particular question, we encourage you to seek help during office hours from the instructor, or by emailing him (I usually respond pretty quickly).

A separate problem is the use of AI to edit, polish, and improve a students work on the asynchronous assignments. This is not technically cheating, but the problem is that it is very hard to distinguish between AI-written work (cheating) and AI-edited work (not cheating). Therefore, if you insist upon using AI software like

Grammarly and its cousins to edit and polish your work, we will require the following from you in each and every assignment submitted that way: 1) A statement at the top that "This assignment has been edited by Grammarly [or whatever]." 2) The edited assignment, the output of Grammarly editing. 3) At the end you ***must*** append your non-Grammarly-edited work, i.e., your rough draft, to demonstrate to the grader and me that the thinking in the assignment is your own and not the product of AI. Note that this will force you to use Grammarly in a kind of batch mode: write up your entire assignment first outside of Grammarly, and then paste it into Grammarly to obtain an edited version. We will compare both versions of the assignments when grading the edited version, and we will be unhappy about anything that suggests that new content was added to your writing by any AI program, rather than just editing and polishing.

This is a pain, I know. Bear in mind that we are ***not*** grading your weekly asynchronous assignments based on the quality of your writing. We do not care how perfect or imperfect it is, as long as it is coherent enough for us to understand what you are saying. None of us writes perfectly, including me, and what we really want to see in your work for this course is a direct connection to your thoughts on the assignments. I believe every student in this course will be better served by not using Grammarly or any similar add-on editing software in this course. Use it in other courses, fine, I don't care, but I suggest avoiding it here.

As a further concrete means of combating AI use on the weekly bundle assignments, we have activated the Turnitin system in Canvas, and all student submissions will be processed there before the grader sees them for grading. This looks for suspicious overlaps between responses from the different students in the class, and also checks for AI use. This will alert us to be on the lookout for suspicious AI use, as well as plagiarism. The instructor is unfortunately quite sensitized to the kind of work that AI systems produce. I reserve the right to submit any suspicious work to any of a variety of software packages for additional checking. The grader has been instructed to be alert to likely AI use on our assignments and to refer them to me for assessment. My judgment overrules software support from Turnitin or any other source. If I identify a bundle assignment as the product of AI, the first occasion will earn a 0 on that assignment. A second offense will result in submission of

an academic misconduct complaint with the university. If the instructor is convinced that an assignment was generated by AI, but the student denies it vigorously, the result will be an academic misconduct accusation and the student can fight it out with the Dean of Students office rather than the instructor. Last spring seven students wound up dropping the course because of repeated AI use on the asynchronous bundle assignments.

I guarantee you that there is no advantage to you in the end if you use AI to do your assignments for you. You have to monitor it very closely to prevent off-target answers; the time that requires would be plenty for you to answer the questions yourself! And by doing the work yourself, you can actually learn how to apply semiotic terminology and reasoning to the analysis of texts. This will improve your bundle assignments later in the course, since they get a bit more complicated as we go along; plus you will be equipped to write a much better final term paper (the most important assignment in the course, replacing a final exam in a traditional course), because you will be much more prepared to use the methods of this course effectively if you have taken real advantage of the weekly exercises along the way. Finally, the instructor isn't actually a very hard grader, and responds positively to all manner of interpretations on these assignments. We tend to be stricter with near-uniform, inexact AI assignments, even if we are not 100% sure that they are AI generated, but merely suspect it strongly.

Term paper and proposal. The term paper is intended to be a 5-page discussion of a group of related advertisements, either: 1) a set of ads for a single product (Coca-Cola, Nissan Pathfinder SUVs, McDonalds, etc.); or 2) a set of ads for competing products in the same market niche (McDonalds vs. Burger King vs. Wendys vs. Taco Bell vs. Kentucky Fried Chicken; or anything else you want to use along this line); or 3) a set of ads for unrelated products which share the same semiotic approach (e.g., ads for a variety of products based on intertextuality, or on presenting a narrative to the viewer, etc.). More information will be provided later about the choice of a term paper topic. If you happen to have a keen interest in some particular aspect of advertising, you can do a more individualized term paper, but this will require advance negotiation with the instructor. The instructor will evaluate the term papers, not the grader.

In advance of writing the term paper, you must first present a one- or two-paragraph summary of your topic to the instructor. This doesn't have to be

particularly detailed, but it should identify which of the pre-suggested topics you intend to follow and outline the types of advertisements you plan to write about. Models for the proposal will be provided later.

Course Structure

The instructor has taught this course many times, and in an in-person format he usually tries to conduct free-form lectures, with plenty of opportunity for students to speak up. The primarily asynchronous nature of this course will limit the amount of interaction, but students are encouraged to express their personal opinions when appropriate in the weekly bundle writing assignments. And you can always speak up during the one weekly lecture to ask questions, request clarifications, or express an alternative perspective on any point. Obviously if you do not attend the synchronous lecture on Monday afternoon but instead view the recording of the lecture, you lose any opportunity to speak up in the lecture.

Important note 1 (trigger warning): This course includes a certain amount of sexual and/or vulgar material, for several reasons: 1) ads often include sexual innuendo and sometimes surprising explicit sexual references, occasionally pushing beyond what is commonly approved for mainstream U.S. network television; 2) for orientation purposes, we need some material of this sort from outside the sphere of advertisements; 3) the instructor enjoys vulgar language and considers it appropriate for expressing strong opinions and emotions, and may use it occasionally in lecture. If you find such material offensive and do not view it as a proper object for intellectual investigation, you might be better off taking another course. You can use Bundle 2 in week 9 as a test for whether you might be seriously uncomfortable with such material as presented in this class. That is the bundle with the most sexual material in the entire course.

Important note 2: The instructor is opinionated about matters involving popular culture, politics, and current events. He does not intend to impose his views on you, and will attempt to discuss any such material relevant to the course in a balanced and neutral way, consistent with Indiana law SEA 202. The instructor will *never* require that you agree with him either informally or formally (i.e., for a grade of any sort).

Important Resources

There is a www site for the course at:

<http://www.gfowler.net/c103/index.html>

The web site contains:

- A weekly schedule of readings and assignments. The individual webpages for bundle topics will be added a week at a time, with postings for the week in place by the initial lecture time. As of the first weekly lecture, the links for Week 9 and all associated materials for that week are in place, but nothing more beyond a bare bones schedule with broken links.
- Notes for the weekly lectures and a video recording each week, as well as the asynchronous bundles, will be archived on this site, so you can revisit them at any time (for example, if you want to consult them in connection with your term paper).

If you need to communicate with the instructor at any time, the preferred method is his IU email address (see contact info given above). Phone calls are also permitted (it is better to use my cell phone rather than my land line; it has much better voicemail); my phone hours are generally 8:00 am – 10:00 pm every day, including weekends.

The Zoom link for each weekly synchronous lecture (the first day of the week's classes, Monday 10/20 and next seven Mondays through 12/8) from 5:30–6:45 pm will be posted as an announcement on Canvas and on the course home page, but for the record, it is given here in the syllabus as well:

<https://iu.zoom.us/j/86945286616?pwd=tbzWSyNQJgDU2UG223wGmu0ibubcaa.1>

Passcode (if you are prompted for it): 846028

Personal note: The instructor lives in NW Indianapolis and expects to be on campus regularly only on most Fridays during the second half of the semester. I will regularly be available for Zoom appointments during the weekly Zoom office hours (see link near the top of the syllabus), and I am always willing to set up a special appointment via Zoom or phone with an individual student. Do not hesitate to contact me in this way; you are *not* bothering me if you do. I would not publicize my personal phone numbers if I didn't find it acceptable for you to use them. I have lived in Indianapolis for the entire time of my teaching at IU (this is my 36th year), and I have never wanted anyone, either students or faculty colleagues, to feel I was less available than my colleagues who live closer to their offices.