

Semiotics

systems of signification

The brief – task 1, ‘write a semiotic analysis’.

1 Observational Writing: Identify an image, poster, cover, design, advertisement, or any other single piece of graphic design, and write a semiotic analysis. Choose 3 key aspects of semiotics and use them to simplify and focus your writing. Conclude by assessing how your understanding of your chosen image has changed.

- *Use a minimum of 3 books per task. Additional research sources could be journal/newspaper articles and/or quality online sources.*

Outcome: 500 words and images. Show your research with a bibliography and reference list which is not included in the 500 word count.

Submit this as part of your single portfolio of writing.

What and why.

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation.

It is important to understand semiotics in order to understand contemporary and historical culture.

As a practitioner, it also provides you with the knowledge and ability to communicate effectively.

What are Semiotics?

Semiotics is the study of signs and has directed our shared understanding of what we see and how we 'read' any image or artwork. It provides us with meaning and context with the aim of heightening our intellectual encounter with a piece of visual communication and art.

Most significantly it effects how we perceive the world and the meanings we acquire and share from the world around us.

For this reason, semiotics is the prevailing **structuralist** model persistently used to deconstruct contemporary imagery including advertising and design, as well as texts.

Structuralism

Structuralism first came to prominence as a specific discourse (debate) with the work of a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure often referred to as the 'father of semiotics'.

Structuralism uses the order of semiotics to help us define meaning.

This applied meaning is an external social process that is shared and agreed. It is a 'construct', meaning it is arbitrary and only exists as a shared concept or idea.

Post-structuralism

Emerging in the 1960s, Post-structuralism is a variation of structuralism, often seen as a critique, emphasising plurality of meaning and the instability of concepts that structuralism uses to define society.

Post-structuralism adopts the premise of multiple, unfixed interpretations whereby we can be certain of nothing.

Semiotics explained

All communication is the result of the interplay between:
representamen (a thing serving to represent something),
interpretant (... the person who encounters it), and
an idea (the concept).

(Macey, David. 2000: 294)

The Treachery of Images

René Magritte's painting *La Trahison des images* (*The Treachery of Images*) has long been identified as being a universal example of representation versus interpretation. The words below the image read 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' (This is not a pipe).

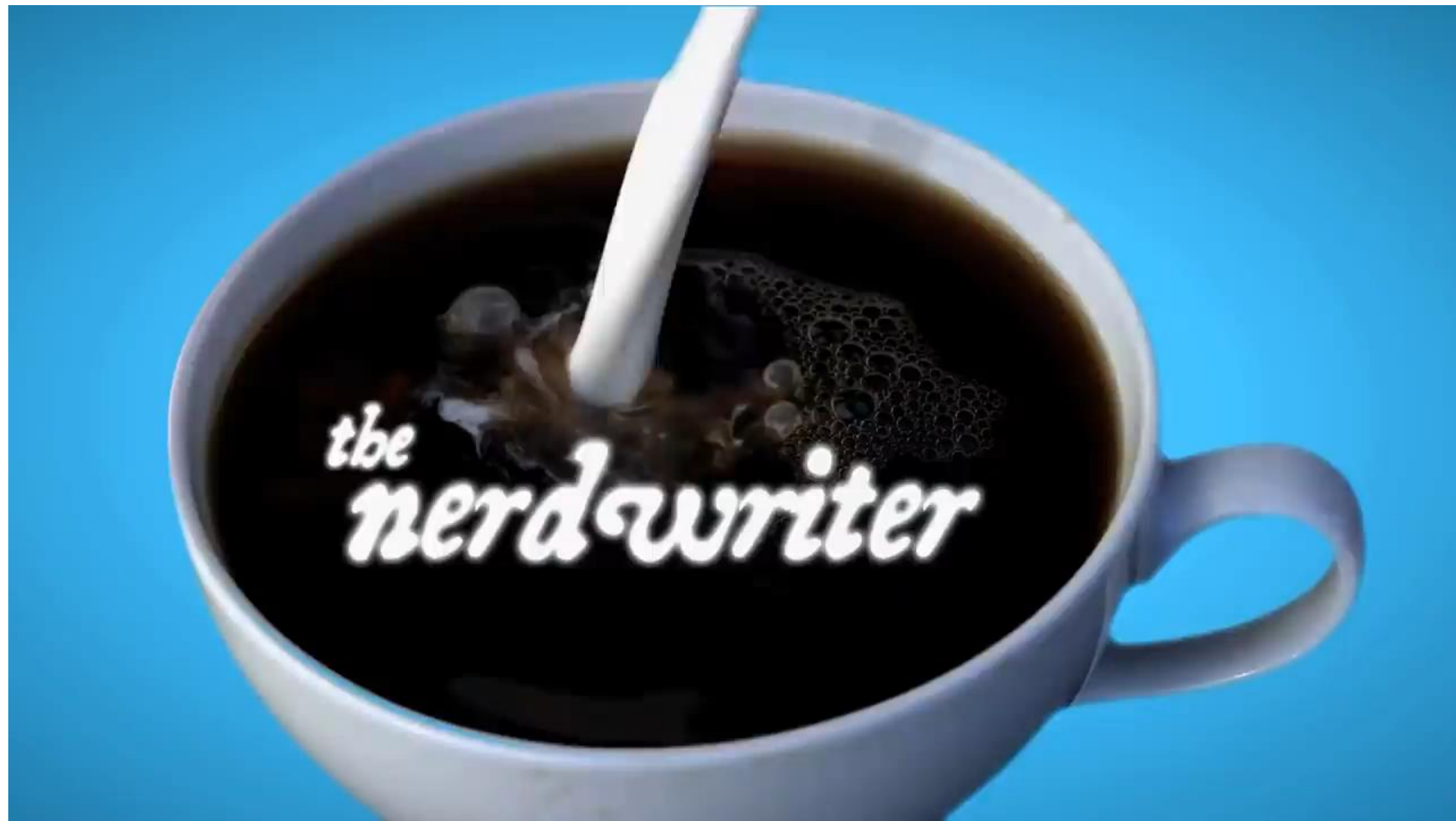
Compounding as this may seem to audiences, this in fact draws attention to the fact that the pipe in the painting is not a pipe, but rather a drawing or representation of a pipe.

(Indeed, what has been shown in this presentation is a digitised photograph of a painting of a representation of a pipe.)



Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

Magritte



This painting, part of a series created by Magritte, was seen as part of the surrealist movement and it creates a three-way paradox out of the conventional notion that **objects** correspond to **words** and **images**. This indeed is central to semiotic theory.

The relationship of these three things is constructed.

The relationship is arbitrary. (i.e. random rather than based on reason)

Important figures in the study of semiotic theory

There are three significant figures to be aware of in the study of semiotics. Charles Sanders Pierce (1839 -1914), Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913), and Roland Barthes (1915 - 1980).

It would be extremely beneficial to direct your initial research around these people.

Charles Sanders Pierce

American philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce established the symbol/index/icon triad as a core principal in the understanding of semiotics in communication.

Peirce defines a symbol as 'being reliant on conventional usage to determine meaning.' (Huening, Drew. 2006) It is a culturally or societally agreed metaphor that provides shared understanding based on our prior knowledge of what it represents. For example, we all agree that a piece of metal with an engine on four wheels is a car.

Peirce's study of semiotics was anchored in reason and logic.
He defined a sign as:

“something which stands to somebody for something,”
and he categorized these signs as follows:

An **index** is a referent through a factual connection. It does not rely on interpretation or symbolism. It has an actual relation to the object to which it refers, eg. smoke to fire.

An **icon** was 'originally called "likeness" by Peirce. Icons have a "topological similarity" to their object' (Sebok. 28 cited in Huening, Drew. 2006). Common examples are photographs, portraits, landscape paintings or road signs depicting information like falling rocks.

A **symbol** which is a communication device or element used to represent a person, group, object or idea through shared agreement of meaning such as the meaning of words or physical objects like traffic signals.

Ferdinand de Saussure

Swiss linguist, often referred to as the 'father of semiotics', Ferdinand de Saussure described semiotics as "the life of signs within society."

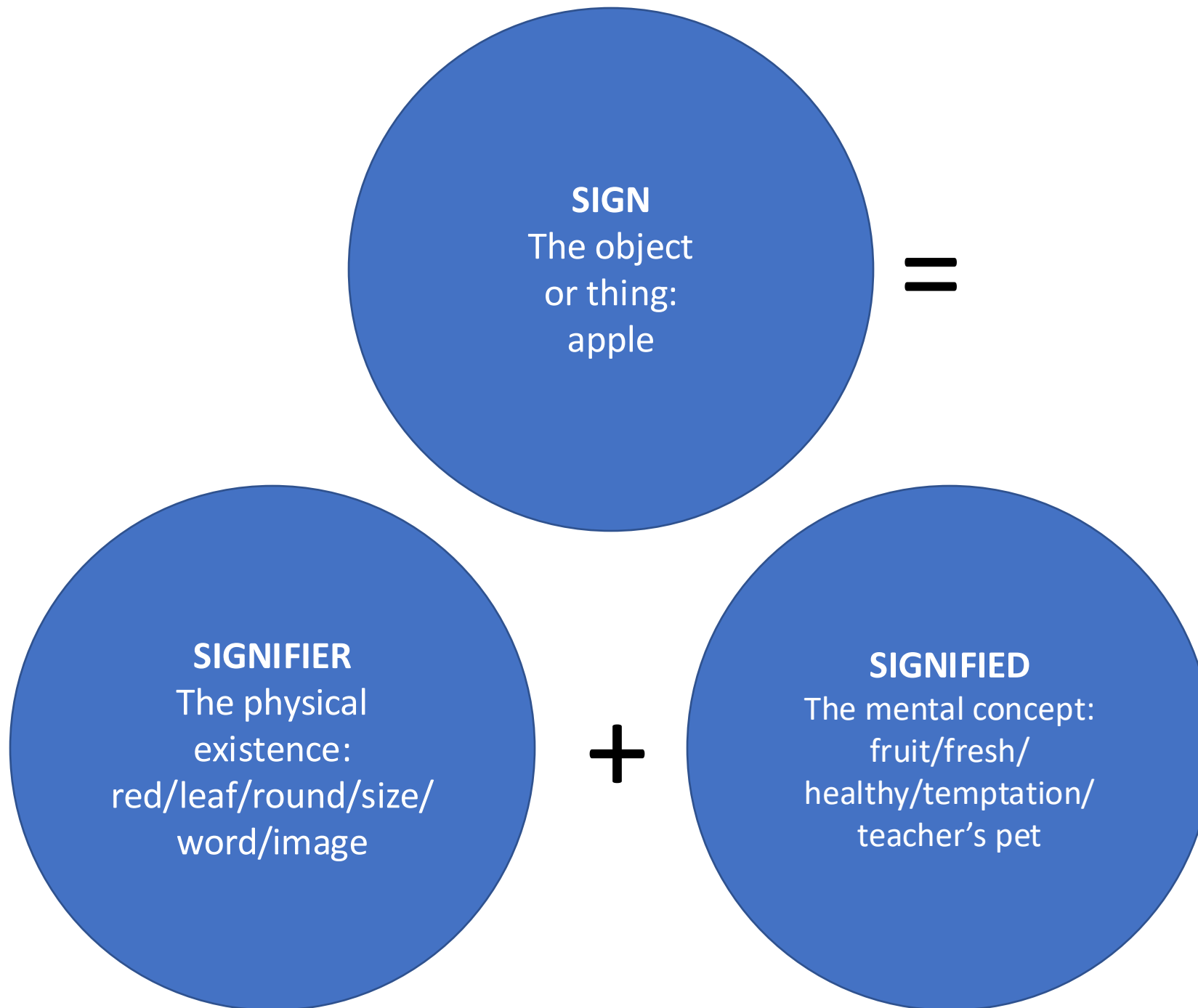
Saussure treated language as a sign system. This is because linguistics (the scientific study of language and its structure, including grammar, syntax, and phonetics) are significant as they are arguably our primary ubiquitous mode of communication i.e. through written and spoken words.

Saussure's approach was somewhat revolutionary. He defined the linguistic sign as being a two-sided entity (a dyad) which was made up of the signifier (the material aspect of the sign) and the signified (the mental concept). To illustrate this:

dog (is the sign)

is made up of the letters 'd' 'o' 'g' (is the signifier)

and conveys the idea of a dog (is the signified)



Saussure clearly identified that communicating through language relies on the transfer of ideas from one's mind. The notion of 'dog' is only understood as a concept as long as each individual share the same idea. This is what is known as a code.

Saussure described the relationship between the signifier and the signified as being arbitrary in nature. There is no definitive relationship between each other than we agree its' meaning unlike an icon (physical resemblance eg. a photograph) or index (something that exists with the presence of another, eg. smoke and fire).

Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes (1915 – 1980) was a literary theorist, critic and philosopher who has been hugely influential in the field of semiotics in popular Western culture.

His criticism has greatly contributed to the understanding representation of information and models of communication, including computers, photography, music, and literature. Two key texts worth exploring for design and communication are *Mythologies* (1972) and *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981).

Barthes work is unusual in that although it has contributed to thoughts on semiotics (as well as structuralism and post structuralism) he created no theoretical model like other thinkers. He developed a theory that unveiled signs as a vehicle of deception for example, how the drinking of wine can be considered a bourgeois activity whereas in reality there are also health implications. These theories have great implications and cast great insight into representations in contemporary advertising, design, film and photography.

Ways of Seeing

John Berger's (1926 – 2017) hugely influential book, 'Ways of Seeing' is an essential read in the study and interpretation of images. It was produced alongside a 1972 BBC television series (available on YouTube) of the same name. Berger sought to reveal hidden ideologies in visual images by deconstructing them through semiotic analysis.

(Email me for a pdf version as this book is an excellent long term investment if you are interested in the interpretation of images.)



WAYS OF SEEING

JOHN BERGER

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.

But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.



The Surrealist painter Magritte commented on this always-present gap between words and seeing in a painting called *The Key of Dreams*.

The way we see things is affected by what we

Berger attests that how we see things is largely determined by what we know. Meaning has been obscured by time, monetary value, academics, the media, reproduction and photography.

He considers how western art has objectified women through the tradition of the nude, and how this has been continued through photography. He also attributes how the ownership of art links with power, and further develops this link with consumerism, publicity and advertising.



BBC FOUR



Activity 1 – Anchorage

Create a series of captions

The following image does not contain enough information for a clear deconstruction. It is what is termed as 'polysemic' (having multiple possible meanings). Create a number of captions that change the interpretation of the image. This is what is known as anchorage text.

For this is one you are invited to have some fun!

Take a few minutes and then we will hear your suggestions.



Useful key semiotic terms

- Sign The sum of the signifier plus signified
- Signifier The physical thing.
(Works with signified to combine into a sign)
- Signified The meaning that is intended from a sign
- Iconic sign Looks like what it represents (falling rocks)
- Indexical sign Where there is a relationship between the signifier and signified (smoke and fire)
- Polysemic A sign that has more than one meaning
- Arbitrary or symbolic sign A sign where the meaning of it is culturally acquired
- Anchorage The combination of elements within a sign that fit together and fix the meaning (i.e. word and image)

Useful key semiotic terms

- **Denotation** The literal meaning of a sign or code
- **Connotation** The symbolic/abstract meaning or intention created by a sign
- **Code** A system used to create meaning
- **Decoding** When audiences interpret a text
- **Encoding** The intended meaning in a text
- **Myth** The way in which certain signs contribute to ideologies in our society
- **Paradigm** A distinct set of theories, models or class of objects or concepts (exemplar)

Activity 2 - Denotations and Connotations

Denotation (literal meaning)?

Connotation (abstract idea)?

- Feather
- Daffodil
- Blue
- Male
- Female
- Revolutionary
- Prisoner
- Tears
- Army
- Teacher

Activity 2 - Denotations and Connotations

Denotation (literal meaning)?

Connotation (abstract idea)?



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Next week

We will look at deconstructing an advertisement design.

Any questions?