

# Teaching guide: Semiotics

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## An introduction to Semiotics

The aims of this document are to:

- introduce semiology and show how it can be used to analyse media texts
- define key theories and terminology to be studied and used in media analysis
- identify where semiology can help with the analysis of the close study products CSPs.

Semiology is the study of signs and how they communicate meaning. There are three main theorists to study for AS and A-level Media.

This teaching guidance and activities are designed as a starting point for teaching semiotics and you are encouraged to explore this topic further in relation to the CSPs and different media forms.

## Barthes

Barthes analysed the signification process and studied the relationship between **denotation** and **connotation**, understanding there was a process taking place and referred to this as the **order of signification**. He begins with denotation which is the literal meaning of a sign and connotation which are the associations that are made when interpreting that sign.

### Denotation – signifier

The process of analysing the signifiers of a sign – a literal description of what you can see or hear.



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For example: the signifier in this sign is a large aeroplane in flight. The image denotes the same.

### Connotation – signified

The process of analysing the meaning of a sign.

For example: what is **signified** by this sign or the **connotations** of this sign could be:

- the beginning of a journey to faraway places
- the idea of speed
- representing the idea of modern day travel.

In Media Studies all of the media language used that make up a finished media text are signs ie in print based media all text and images are signs and in moving image based media all elements of mise-en-scene, sound, cinematography and editing are signs.

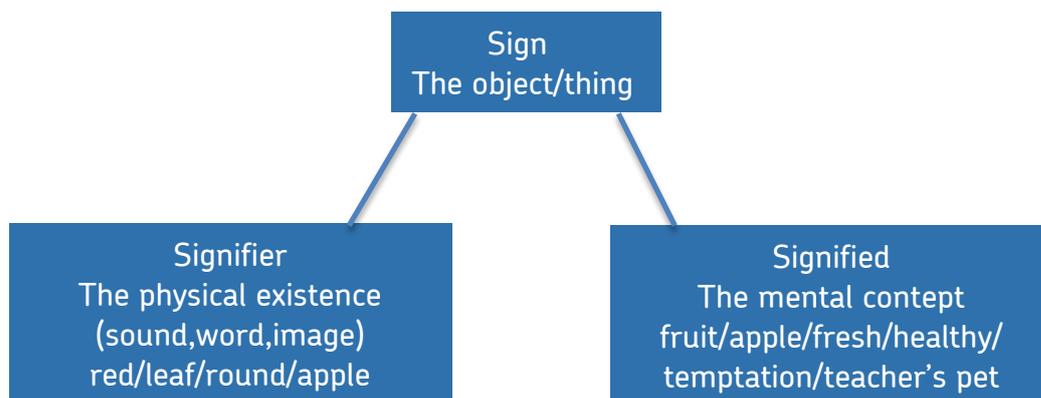
It is essential to remember that every sign that is used in a media text has been specifically chosen by the producer of that text and consequently all signs used in a text have a meaning or a specific purpose.

Barthes also introduced the concept of **myth**, which is important to the study of culture. Myths are shared cultural connotations that reflect the dominant ideology. They are ways in which we share ideas about our society and ourselves. They are seen to be part of a higher level of signification and help to establish ideologies within a society, these are often politically based. Barthes contends that ideology is the third order of signification and that the term myth does not mean something is false but that it can be true or false.

## Ferdinand de Saussure

Ferdinand viewed semiotics as a scientific discipline and that linguistics provided a good model for application to wider cultural phenomena. Written or spoken language is the primary form of communication between humans, but it is not the only form. The mass media are forms of other codes. Semiotics allows us to access these other codes and to understand the sense that audiences make of them.

His model is exemplified below, using an apple as the object.



At its simplest, Saussure's model of the sign and signification process can be illustrated as:

**Sign = signifier + signified**

Saussure also introduced the terms **paradigm** and **syntagm**.

A paradigm is a class of objects or concepts which are all members of a defining category but markedly different in themselves. To use the example of language, the vocabulary of a language is a paradigm. The use of one paradigm over another (ie the choice of one word rather than the choice of another word) shapes the meaning of a text.

A syntagm is a chain of signs, that is, an element which follows another in a particular sequence. Saussure identified a syntagmatic relationship in language: language is linear so there is a relationship between the words: "the cat sat on the mat".

We need to consider the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations between signifiers – their vertical and horizontal relations between words/objects to create meaning.

|               |        |     |     |    |     |      |
|---------------|--------|-----|-----|----|-----|------|
| ↑<br>Paradigm | The    | cat | sat | on | the | mat  |
|               | A      | dog | ran | in | the | park |
|               | The    | man | got | on | a   | bus  |
|               | Sytagm | →   |     |    |     |      |

## Charles Pierce

Charles Pierce's triadic model meaning it has three parts, is less commonly used than Saussure's because it is a little more complex to understand. His legacy is that he attempted to categorise signs into types.

The categories he defined were:

Iconic signs (icon) – Look like their signified, making the relationships between the two very straightforward and obvious eg a photograph of a person or animal is an icon.



Here the picture of a bike resembles a real bike and is therefore an icon.

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Indexical signs (index) – where there is a causal relationship between the signifier and the signified.



Here, sweat is an index for hard work.

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Symbolic signs (symbol) – Also known as arbitrary, where there is no physical relationship between the signifier and its concept. Language falls into this category.



Here, the meaning of these symbols for male and female are not immediately obvious but have to be culturally acquired.

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### Exam technique

In an exam higher grades can often be achieved where 'analysis outweighs description'. Written work that focuses solely on denotations will be descriptive and will be likely to achieve lower grades whereas answers that focus on connotations will be more analytical in content. Denotations can be mentioned but connotations should always be discussed.

## Context and anchorage

Often our interpretation of a sign will be based on the context within which it is shown. For example the colour red often has connotations of danger and it is used in many warning signs, therefore the circle with a red border or with a diagonal bar across it gives our interpretation some context. The term anchorage is used to describe how the combination of elements within a sign fit together and fix the meaning.

Anchorage is the way different media language elements combine to help fix the meaning that a producer wants to convey to the audience. Print texts such as magazines, adverts and newspapers all use anchorage (this is mainly in the form of captions which are found close to the pictures) to help their audiences interpret the photographs in the way that the producer intended.

### Activity one

When looking at this picture of Teresa May and Donald Trump there is not enough information to know precisely what is going on and therefore the image is **polysemic** and can be interpreted in various ways by the reader.

Using the image create different captions that could be used to give different meanings that could be associated with the picture.



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## Activity two

Fill in the grids below noting the denotations and connotations of the signs

| Sign  | Denotation | Connotation(s) |
|---|------------|----------------|
| Rose  |            |                |
| Gold  |            |                |
| White   |            |                |
| Black   |            |                |
| Feminine  |            |                |
| Masculine   |            |                |
| Hostage   |            |                |
| Freedom fighter   |            |                |
|  |            |                |
|  |            |                |
|  |            |                |

## Activity three

Choose two print advertisements for different types of products. Analyse the way these adverts use cultural myths to promote the products. Use the semiotic theories of Saussure and/or Pierce to explain your ideas.

### CSPs and semiology

You must use a semiotic approach to analyse the CSPs, especially those products that are from forms that are studied in depth (TV (audio-visual), Magazines (print), online, social and participatory media and video games). You should also analyse music video and advertising and marketing products using a semiotic framework.

Particular focus should be paid to how images signify cultural meanings.

The following is a list of key terminology to be used when conducting a semiotic analysis.

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| Anchorage                  | Fixes meaning between pictures and text                                |
| Arbitrary or symbolic sign | A sign where the meaning of it is culturally acquired                  |
| Code                       | A system used to create meaning  |
| Connotation                | The meaning created by a sign  |
| Decoding                   | When audiences interpret a text  |
| Denotation                 | The literal meaning of a sign or code                                  |
| Encoding                   | The intended meaning in a text   |
| Iconic sign                | Looks like what it represents  |
| Indexical sign             | Where there is a relationship between the signifier and signified      |
| Myth                       | The way in which certain signs contribute to ideologies in our society |
| Paradigm                   | A class of objects or concepts   |
| Polysemic                  | A sign that has more than one meaning                                  |
| Sign                       | The sum of the signifier plus signified                                |
| Signified                  | The meaning that is intended from a sign                               |
| Signifier                  | Works with signified to combine into a sign                            |
| Syntagm                    | An element which follows another in a particular sequence              |