

ENGL 1101  
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### Driving Interpretive Questions

As we begin to venture into the (sometimes overwhelming) world of sign analysis, you're going to need some new tools in your critical writing toolbox. One of those tools is a Driving Interpretive Question. A Driving Interpretive Question is any question that forces you to look more closely and more in-depth at your chosen sign. The Driving Interpretive Question must be theoretical, which is to say that you won't be able to answer it with spending some time really contemplating the "How?" and "Why?" questions. It also means that the Driving Interpretive Question will have a somewhat abstract answer that will require support in the form of analysis. Driving Interpretive Questions can never be answered with "yes" or "no," and they will usually require some kind of "because" (whether explicit or implicit) in the answer.

The final thing to remember about Driving Interpretive Questions: they can NEVER be answered in only one way, thus making them *Interpretive*. Questions with one, or even ten, observable answers are called practical questions. These include the Journalists' Questions discussed in class: Who, What, When, Where, and sometimes How and Why, though the last two are often more interpretive than practical. Often, you will need to ask several practical questions to come up with a DIQ.

### Examples of DIQs

If our sign for analysis is the infamous smiley face, we might come up with ten or so DIQs to help shape our analyses.

A few practical questions about the smiley face:

- What is it?
- Where have I seen it?
- When have I seen it?
- In what context it is used?
- How is it used?

If we contemplate the answers to these questions, we can come up with relatively observable data.

- What is it? The smiley face is, typically, a yellow circle with two black dots for eyes and a black line for a smile, though there are variations to this icon.
- Where have I seen it? I have seen this image in schools, in stores--specifically Wal-Mart--, and online.
- When have I seen it? I have seen this image at all times of the year, but especially around summer.
- In what context it is used? Sometimes, this image is used to tell students that they've done a good job, or that they are working hard. Online, this image is used to convey laughter, joviality, or other "good" feelings or emotions. It has even spawned a term called the "emoticon," which combines the terms emotion and icon into one idea.
- How is it used? Depending on the context, the smiley face is used, usually, to tell someone that they should be happy or that you are happy.

Now, once you've answered some of your practical questions, consider *why* these things occur. Try to come up with a few, say three, DIQs. Remember, complexity is the key to having a good DIQ. The more complex your question, the more complex your answer will be.

- If the smiley face is a symbol of doing a "good job," why would Wal-Mart choose it as a logo?
- Why has the use of the smiley face become so prevalent in online communications? How does the smiley face attempt to convey some kind of personal interaction in an impersonal (online) environment? What does this say about our interpersonal communication abilities or proclivities?
- How is the smiley face an American icon? What makes it American? What makes it un-American? If other cultures see the smiley face (and they do, especially online) what does it communicate to them?

Notice that the first DIQ is a kind of stand alone question. It is complex, but it is very focused. However, you'll notice that the other DIQs are grouped into several questions. This is likely how you will use DIQs. One question will inevitably lead to another, so on and so forth. Don't be shy about having five or six little questions under the banner of one DIQ. In fact, don't be afraid to ask supporting practical questions as you go along. You may find you need them to help you maintain clear focus on your ideas and your writing.

If you really get stuck, try this strategy:

Ask a yes or no question; then follow-up with "Why?"

- Is the the smiley face an American icon? Why?
- Does the smiley face represent a positive or negative image? Why?
- Does the smile face convey something impersonal about online or electronic communications? Why?

Remember, DIQs are just one tool of the many you may need to learn to write analytically.