



Cornell University  
John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

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Author: Alexander Newell  
  
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## Spring 2003 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize

We are pleased to invite applications for the John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize. This prize of \$500 will be awarded to the teacher submitting the best sequence of writing assignments used in a First-Year Writing Seminar.

Assignment sequences in a writing course are built around a series of essay topics (probably for a portion of the course). Submissions should include a rationale and a description of your plans for eliciting and responding to student drafts and revisions, as well as a description of how you ready students for each essay assignment, for example by engaging them in preparatory writing exercises, including informal writing designed to help students understand the material on which they subsequently write formal essays. Reflections on what worked well, and why, and on what you would change another time would be appropriate.

Submissions are due in 159 Goldwin Smith by **Friday, May 16**. No exceptions can be made. The winner will be announced to the Cornell community, and copies of the winning assignment sequence will be made available to all interested staff.

## Spring 2003 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize Application

~Please print clearly~

Instructor's name Alexander Newell

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Home address 265 McGraw Hall

Department Anthropology Course # and title 197 Consuming Culture: The language of everyday objects

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of my essay, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I am also prepared to send an electronic version of my text to the Knight Institute (knight\_institute@cornell.edu).

Constructing a Counter-Argument

title of assignment sequence

Instructor's signature Alexander Newell

Date 5/15/03

Alexander Newell  
Anthropology 197  
Consuming Culture: The Language of Everyday Objects

John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize  
Constructing a Counter-Argument

I designed this assignment sequence in order to help students write more powerful arguments. Although students tend to be fairly accomplished at expressing their own viewpoints, they are often much weaker when it comes to marshalling evidence to support their opinion. I felt that one way to make them think about this was to force them to consider those viewpoints which countered their own, both describing the opposition's arguments and ultimately defeating them.

In order to make the exercise more accessible, I chose a topic with which most students would be both familiar and about which they were likely to already formed a strong opinion: breast implants and high heels. In fact, the real topic was about the construction of femininity through artificial accessories, but by orienting the argument around concrete practices around which there has been a great deal of public debate, I was able to give students easy access to the broader issues.

I began the exercise with an in-class writing in which I asked students to simply express their straightforward opinion about the matter. The assignment was written in such a way as to draw out the polarities in the debate. We had also begun reading a series of articles treating the expression of gender in everyday objects (an article on the marketing of the electric carving knife and household gender politics by Ellen Lupton, and an article by Susan Bordo on food advertising and the portrayal of gender roles around eating practices). After having given them 15 to 20 minutes to write informally on the topic, I handed out their formal assignment.

Assignment 5 asked students to write a 2-3 page essay about the same topic from the opposite perspective of the one they had just written in class (in other words, from a perspective counter to their own). In order to help them form coherent and convincing arguments against themselves, I asked them to find at least one external source countering their own opinions. Although students were somewhat frustrated by the idea at first, when they turned in their assignments it was clear that many of them had enjoyed the experience. One male student was very excited about a feminist website he had found called badasschicks.com, while several female students found that they had changed their own opinion based on the arguments they had read in the meantime. During this week, we also read another article by Elizabeth Wilson called *Feminism and Fashion*, which examined both sides of the argument critically and comes out somewhere in between. This gave students ready access to the complexity of the material, as well as concise explanations of the power and pitfalls of both sides of the debate. I was surprised to find how difficult it was to write comments for these papers. Knowing that the argument they expressed was not their own, I couldn't challenge the ideas behind the paper in the way I normally would. However, this allowed me to spend more time on the structure of the argument and the grammatical issues in their papers. I also made suggestions about how they could counter the argument in the assignment to follow.

Finally, I asked students to write a 5 page formal essay on the subject, but this time returning to their original argument. The trick to the assignment was that students were to incorporate the counter-argument from the former assignment. In this way, students were forced to express both sides of the debate, while demonstrating why their perspective was superior to the arguments of the opposition. Again, I asked students to find an outside source to support their own argument.

When the papers were turned in, I had students exchange papers with their peers, and in so far as demographics allowed, I had them review a paper by one of their peers who had argued the opposite side of the debate. Of course in the final revision, I asked students to incorporate their peers' comments.

I asked students for their feedback on the overall experience of the assignment and was happily surprised by their positive response. Many students explained that they had never had to try to express arguments counter to their own perspective before. More importantly, a number of students thought that they had a better understanding of how to write a more convincing argument. On the downside, in my own analysis of their final papers, I discovered that a number of them had structured their papers somewhat differently than I imagined. Rather than spending a section of the paper elaborating the counter-argument and ultimately defeating it, some of students wrote each paragraph about a particular point of the debate, mentioning in each case that some people viewed the matter differently, but that they were wrong. This structure was less convincing and did not really engage the point of the assignment. If I use this assignment sequence again (and I certainly will given the opportunity), I will spend more time in class explaining effective ways of structuring this kind of paper. In particular, I will bring in or assign readings in which authors use this technique for them to compare and evaluate. I think such concrete models will help them understand the idea of the assignment better. Overall, this sequence really helped students focus upon structuring their arguments. The assignments force students to imagine the kinds of arguments readers might form against their writing and counter such alternative perspectives in the essay itself. It also helps them understand how to use evidence to support their claims in a more convincing manner.

### In-Class Writing Assignment

In our society, many women emphasize their femininity through such artificial means as high heels and breast implants. Some women argue that these are merely means of expressing themselves and increasing their beauty or general appearance. They can be a form of self-empowerment or even a means of exerting control over the opposite sex. That is, these are ways to “look good”. Others argue that women fall victim to a masculine image of the feminine, a constructed and sexualized ideal, and that by submitting to this ideal they accept women’s subordinate position in society. Using breast implants, high heels, or another example of your own devising, take a stand on this debate. By wearing high heels, are women actually lowering themselves? Are bigger boobs an empowering means to a bigger ego? Choose one side and argue your heart out.

(other suggested topics: make-up, botox, corsets, miniskirts, pantyhose, liposuction, bras, collagen, etc.)

## Assignment 6

### Fashioning the Feminine (Constructing the Counter-argument)

Now that you have stated your own opinion, write a 2-3 page argument using the OPPOSITE perspective to the one you wrote in class. Be as convincing as possible. Imagine you are trying to convince a group of your friends who share your "real" sympathies that they should change their minds. Since it is often difficult to think of arguments against yourself, use the library or the internet for help, searching out articles from the perspective you disagree with. Find at least 2 sources (using anything from newspapers and fashion magazines to websites to scholarly articles) and use their arguments to support your paper, properly citing and incorporating quotations. (hint: if you run across sources that you agree with, hold on to them, they may be useful later on). Take this seriously and write for an academic audience. DO NOT write a caricature of the other side's opinions, rather try to write this as if you believe it yourself.

## Assignment 7

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### Part ii Fashioning the feminine: Incorporating the Counter-argument

So, in class you wrote about your own opinion concerning displays of femininity. Then you were asked to write an argument expressing the opposite of your opinion. Now, I ask you to write an essay arguing from your own perspective. In so doing, incorporate the counter-argument that you constructed in Assignment 6, and then refute it. This can be done either by citing the author(s) you used to support the position, or by explaining that this is a common perspective which opposes your own. The point is to demonstrate your awareness of the arguments and positions of those who disagree with you, and then show why they are wrong and your position is superior. If your opinion straddles the debate, or has transformed over the course of this assignment, explain your perspective and why.

You may use as much of your writing from Assignment 6 as you like, so long as it is smoothly integrated.

As in Assignment 6, use at least one source to support your argument.

(you might want to revisit Elizabeth Wilson's article as well, but this is not required).

Due Thursday March 27<sup>th</sup> ( 4-5 pages)

**PLEASE BRING TWO (YES, TWO) COPIES OF YOUR PAPER TO CLASS. YOU WILL BE SHARING THIS ESSAY WITH YOUR PEERS.**