

Student sample

The following example of student writing for written task 2 focuses on an image from a print advertisement. Before reading the task itself, examine the advertisement. How could you use your knowledge of the language used in mass communication to analyze this advertisement? What prompts from the written task 2 prescribed questions would be appropriate to consider in relation to this advertisement? Finally, after reading the student response, and before reading the examiner's comments, be sure to think about approaches you may have taken that would differ from the approach of the student in this example.

"How and why is a social group represented in a particular way?"



"Bedouin: The desire to cut things up."
Created for Stihl by the advertising agency
Publicis Conseil Paris, France, in 2009.

We often do not think very deeply about the advertisements that we see on television, on the internet or in magazines. We see pretty pictures, get briefly excited about a story that is being told, or, more often, we laugh at a humorous idea or image. The advertisement above for a brand of chainsaws takes a moment of thought to understand why a chainsaw might be in the desert, but most viewers have a quick laugh and then do not think any more about the advertisement—except maybe to go on and remember or buy the product. All advertisements, however, in order to be attention getting, humorous, or memorable, have to work on many assumptions that the consumer will make. While this advertisement is visually striking and mildly humorous, it also shows the way advertizing can play to cultural and gender stereotypes, especially when marketing to an audience that is assumed to be Western and male.

The chainsaw advertisement is striking and funny, but why? The advertiser obviously wants to attract our attention and does so by using a beautiful but stark picture of a desert scene. The scene—including

This introduction comes to a strong conclusion but it lacks some specifics. The first two sentences generalize without getting to the image and in the last two sentences you could be more specific ... "striking," in what way? What particular "stereotypes"?

A good way to get at technique and meaning.

a broad expanse of desert, a man kneeling at work, a tent and camel—appeals to a romantic vision of what an exotic desert experience can be. The viewer's attention is drawn to the man and the product in the near center of the image and all of the objects in the image are pushed to the upper left hand corner, giving the viewer the sense of the emptiness in the surrounding environment.

The humor comes from the juxtaposition of the image with the brief text. The French slogan loosely translates to "it gives you the desire to cut (or saw) (translation my own) and this idea, along with the smile on the face of the man, his posture near the box that suggests eagerness, juxtapose with the treeless surroundings. This is funny; this chainsaw induces strong desires even for someone living in the desert. It is important that this humor and the basic attraction even of the image relies heavily on the depiction of a culture (including a geographical area, a race, and a way of living) that may be foreign to many of the viewers, considering that they would live in an area with trees or in France where the advertisement would run.

Much of the force of the advertisement comes from playing on stereotypes of a North African or Arabian culture that is represented here with very typical, striking symbols that may be a form of racism. First of all, the image calls our attention to details that we assume are accurate in relation to the culture: the man is isolated, he wears a head scarf, his tent is made of carpet or old material, his mode of transportation is a camel, and the only visible piece of modern technology is the foreign, purposefully out of place chainsaw. The man lives in poverty but not in an impoverished situation that is realistic, but one that appeals partially to a romantic or typical view of what the desert is like in our imaginations. While we may laugh at the lack of trees in the barren desert, we may also be laughing at the possibility that such a person in such a place, would even have access to, let alone need, a chainsaw. The chainsaw creates desire even in this person who is obviously not the intended consumer or viewer of the advertisement. The viewer of the advertisement is above this person, the image implies, and may in fact need the chainsaw.

Some of the cultural assumptions on display in the advertisement are even more troubling even if they are not made on purpose by the advertising agency. While the image is "typical," what is typical may be reductive, racist, or gender biased. First, a male is portrayed in this advertisement. There is a connection between the consumer in the image and the possible consumer in real life. Pictured here is a happy man in a plaid shirt. This might correspond to the type of man this advertisement is marketing to. In this way, the advertisement makes assumptions about gender roles, about who does outdoor work with saws, and about the toughness of a consumer of chainsaws. This also may imply, however, something about the portrayal of culture again. With no woman in the picture we are shown an image of Arab society that is male. If there is a woman (if this were real life) she must be in the tent. Second, the

Helpful description and beginnings of analysis.

Is it funny regardless of place?

A good transition to some important cultural issues.

You may need more here. What do you mean by "above"? Are you saying the viewer looks down on the man in image? If so, why?

Interesting and nice detail.

A bit off-handed here. Are you reading too much into this or, conversely, do you need a bit more development of this idea?

image of the man uses another easily recognized sign or symbol and that is the prayer rug and the posture of the man. If we see the carpet in front of the tent as a small rug that a man would kneel on and the man in the position of prayer (even the shadow points to the fact that the man may be facing directly East in the direction toward which prayers are given) we have to wonder about what kind of statement the advertisement makes in relation to culture. This may be belittling of the religious practices of an individual or it may be insulting in that the man is now in a position of praising the chainsaw, or maybe the chainsaw takes his attention away from prayer. While this advertisement is obviously not trying to spread any kind of racism or hatred, in making a simple joke it calls upon many small assumptions a dominant Western male audience may make about a culture that is exotic, different, and less powerful.

Yes, good point.

Advertisements must market to a careful focused audience and must make references in their advertisements that that audience will understand. This advertisement attracts attention with something humorous and strange for the viewer but using signs that are quite familiar. You could say that the advertisement reflects the assumptions about race, gender, and culture that a particular consumer might have. At the same time, in the creation of a humorous image, the advertisement also perpetuates reductive notions of another culture and makes elements of the portrayed culture part of the humorous appeal of the piece. Even very simple advertisement can, through the communication system of words and images, perpetuate typical power relationships.

Examiner comments

This is a very thorough response that clearly responds to the demands of the question. Though the introduction does not make specific reference to any of the terms in the question, it is clear that the main point is relevant and thoughtful. It is important to keep in mind that in this task, as well as in paper 2 of the exam, you should come to a clear and succinct "answer" to the question.

The following analysis is interesting and insightful. The candidate manages to give a thorough and at times surprising view of a very "short" text. One clear strength of this piece is that the argument, while it may be unexpected at first, is convincing. At the same time, a drawback might be that upon consideration, the essay at times makes assumptions about audience and

intentions that aren't clearly supported or may be argued against. At times the writer of this piece just assumes that we, the readers, will take the analysis for granted. How do we know the assumed audience? How do we know that the viewer of the advertisement will feel "above" the person depicted in the image? Though these ideas could be supported, there needs to be more here.

It must be said, however, that overall, and considering the word limit on the assignment, the candidate has managed to show great skill at "deconstructing" the advertisement as well as the possible significance of an intended viewer's reaction to it.