Writing Assignments Using Other Patterns of Development

3. Morrison writes that her grandfather’s “rancor [toward whites] was legitimate rancor.” Develop your definition by narrating a single event that shows the circumstances under which you believe rancor would be a valid response. Let the power of your details rather than inflamed language show that anger would be a justified reaction. For a narrative about situations that justify anger, read Brent Staples’s “Black Men and Public Space” (page 407).

4. Despite the racism they encountered, Morrison’s grandparents and parents believed in themselves and lived lives of great dignity. Focus on a specific group of individuals who, because of prejudice, often struggle to maintain the self-esteem. Possibilities include immigrants, the elderly, the overweight, the learning disabled, the physically challenged. Write an essay describing the specific steps that one group (for example, parents, schools, communities, or religious organizations) can take to encourage a healthy sense of optimism and possibility in these people.

Writing Assignment Using a Journal Entry as a Starting Point

5. Morrison reveals how members of the same family can hold different beliefs about the same issue. Write an essay in which you contrast your beliefs about one subject with the beliefs held by a family member of an older generation. Possible subjects include the status of women or men, the work ethic, racial relations, homosexuality, education, and so on. Before beginning to write, review the material you generated in your pre-reading journal entry, and try to come up with additional details and examples of these contesting viewpoints. At some point in the essay, indicate what you think has caused the shift in thinking between generations.

DAVE BARRY

Pre-Reading Journal Entry

To what extent would you say our images of personal attractiveness are influenced by TV commercials and magazine advertisements? Think of commercials and ads you’ve seen recently. What physical traits are typically identified as attractive in women? In men? List as many as you can. What assumptions does each trait suggest? Use your journal to respond to these questions.

THE UGLY TRUTH ABOUT BEAUTY

1. If you’re a man, at some point a woman will ask you how she looks.
2. "How do I look?" she’ll ask.
3. You must be careful how you answer this question. The best technique is to form an honest yet sensitive opinion, then collapse on the floor with some kind of fatal seizure. Trust me, this is the easiest way out. Because you will never come up with the right answer.

The problem is that women generally do not think of their looks in the same way that men do. Most men form an opinion of how they look in the seventh grade, and they stick to it for the rest of their lives. Some men form the opinion that they are irresistible stud muffins, and they do not change this opinion even when their faces sag and their noses bloat to the size of eggplants and their eyebrows grow together to form what appears to be a giant forehead-dwelling tropical caterpillar.

Most men, I believe, think of themselves as average-looking. Men will think this even if their faces cause heart failure in cattle at a range of 300 yards. Being average does not bother them; average is fine, for men. This is why men never ask anybody how they look. Their primary form of beauty care is to shave themselves, which is essentially the same form of beauty care that they give to their lawns. If, at the end of his four-minute daily beauty regimen, a man has managed to wipe most of the shaving cream out of his hair and is not bleeding too badly, he feels that he has done all he can, so he stops thinking about his appearance and devotes his mind to more critical issues, such as the Super Bowl.

Women do not look at themselves this way. If I had to express, in three words, what I believe most women think about their appearance, those words would be: "not good enough." No matter how attractive a woman may appear to be to others, when she looks at herself in the mirror, she thinks: woof. She thinks that at any moment a municipal-animal-control officer is going to throw a net over her and haul her off to the shelter.

Why do women have such low self-esteem? There are many complex psychological and societal reasons, by which I mean Barbie. Girls grow up playing with a doll proportioned such that, if it were human, it would be seven feet tall and weigh 81 pounds, of which 53 pounds would be bosoms. This is a difficult appearance standard to live up to, especially when you contrast it with the standard set for little boys by their dolls... excuse me, by their action figures. Most of the action figures that my son played with when he was little were hideous-looking. For example, he was very fond of an action figure (part of the He-Man series) called "Buzz-Off," who was part human, part flying insect. Buzz-Off was not a looker. But he was extremely self-confident. You could not imagine Buzz-Off saying to the other action figures: "Do you think these wings make my hips look big?"

But women grow up thinking they need to look like Barbie, which for most women is impossible, although there is a multibillion-dollar beauty industry devoted to
convincing women that they must try. I once saw an Oprah show wherein supermodel Cindy Crawford dispensed makeup tips to the studio audience. Cindy had all the middle-aged women applying beauty products to their faces; she stressed how important it was to apply them in a certain way, using the tips of their fingers. All the women dutifully did this, even though it was obvious to any sane observer that, no matter how carefully they applied these products, they would never look remotely like Cindy Crawford, who is some kind of genetic mutation.

I'm not saying that men are superior. I'm just saying that you're not going to get a group of middle-aged men to sit in a room and apply cosmetics to themselves under the instruction of Brad Pitt, in hopes of looking more like him. Men would realize that this task was pointless and demeaning. They would find some way to bolster their self-esteem that did not require looking like Brad Pitt. They would say to Brad: "Oh yeah? Well what do you know about lawn care, pretty boy?"

Of course many women will argue that the reason they become obsessed with trying to look like Cindy Crawford is that men, being as shallow as a drop of spit, want women to look that way. To which I have two responses:

1. Hey, just because we're idiots, that does not mean you have to be; and
2. Men don't even notice 97 percent of the beauty efforts you make anyway. Take fingernails. The average woman spends 5,000 hours per year worrying about her fingernails; I have never once, in more than 40 years of listening to men talk about women, heard a man say, "She has a nice set of fingernails!" Many men would not notice if a woman had upward of four hands.

Anyway, to get back to my original point: If you're a man, and a woman asks you how she looks, you're in big trouble. Obviously, you can't say she looks bad. But you also can't say that she looks great, because she'll think you're lying, because she has spent countless hours, with the help of the multibillion-dollar beauty industry, obsessing about the differences between herself and Cindy Crawford. Also, she suspects that you're not qualified to judge anybody's appearance. This is because you have shaving cream in your hair.

Questions for Close Reading

1. What is the selection's thesis? Locate the sentence(s) in which Barry states his main idea. If he doesn't state the thesis explicitly, express it in your own words.

2. Barry tells us that most men consider themselves to be "average-looking" (paragraph 5). Why, according to Barry, do men feel this way?

3. When Barry writes that most women think of themselves as "not good enough" (6), what does he mean? What, according to Barry, causes women to develop low opinions of themselves?

4. Barry implies that women could have a more rational response to the "difficult appearance standard" that pervades society (7). What would that response be?

5. Refer to your dictionary as needed to define the following words used in the selection: regimen (paragraph 5), municipal (6), societal (7), dispensed (8), genetic (8), mutation (8), demeaning (9), and bolster (9).
Questions About the Writer's Craft

1. The pattern. Which comparison-contrast method of organization (point-by-point or one-side-at-a-time) does Barry use to develop his essay? Why might he have chosen this pattern?

2. Barry uses exaggeration, a strategy typically associated with humorous writing. Locate instances of exaggeration in the selection. Why do you think he uses this strategy?


4. Barry's title involves an oxymoron—a contradiction in terms. What does this title imply about Barry's attitude toward his subject?

Writing Assignments Using Comparison-Contrast as a Pattern of Development

1. Examine the pitches made in magazines and on TV for the male and female versions of one kind of grooming product. Possibilities include deodorant, hair dye, soap, and so on. Then write an essay contrasting the persuasive appeals that the product makes to men with those it makes to women. (Don't forget to examine the assumptions behind the appeals.) To gain insight into advertising techniques, you'll find it helpful to read Ann McClintock's "Propaganda Techniques in Today's Advertising" (page 282). For useful perspectives on gender issues, consider reading Susan Douglas's "Managing Mixed Messages" (page 251) and Deborah Tannen's "But What Do You Mean?" (page 288).

2. Barry contrasts women's preoccupation with looking good to men's lack of concern about their appearance. Now consider the flip side—something men care about deeply that women virtually ignore. Write an essay contrasting men's stereotypical fascination with one area to women's indifference. You might, for example, examine male and female attitudes toward sports, cars, tools, even lawn care. Following Barry's example, adopt a playful tone in your essay, illustrating the absurdity of the obsession you discuss.

Writing Assignments Using Other Patterns of Development

3. Barry implies that most men, unaffected by the "multibillion-dollar beauty industry," are content to "think of themselves as average-looking." Do you agree? Conduct your own research into whether or not Barry's assertions about
men are true. Begin by interviewing several male friends, family members, and classmates to see how these men feel about their physical appearance. In addition, in the library or online, research magazines such as People, Gentlemen's Quarterly, or Men's Health for articles describing how everyday men as well as male celebrities view their looks. Then write an essay refuting or defending the view that being average-looking doesn't bother most men. Start by acknowledging the opposing view; then support your assertion with convincing evidence drawn from your research.

4. Barry blames Barbie dolls for setting up "a difficult appearance standard" for girls to emulate. Many would argue that the toys that boys play with also teach negative, ultimately damaging values. Write an essay exploring the values that are conveyed to boys through their toys. Brainstorm with others, especially males, about the toys of their youth or the toys that boys have today. Identify two to three key negative values to write about, illustrating each with several examples of toys.

Writing Assignment Using a Journal Entry as a Starting Point

5. Review your pre-reading journal entry. Focusing on the characteristics of male or female attractiveness conveyed by the mass media, identify two to three assumptions suggested by these standards. Illustrate each assumption with examples from TV commercials and/or magazine advertisements. Be sure to make clear how you feel about these assumptions. For additional insight into the possible consequences of mass media messages, read Joyce Garity's "Is Sex All That Matters?" (page 256).

JOSEPH H. SUINA


Pre-Reading Journal Entry

Bilingualism—instruction in a student's native language as well as in English—remains an important educational issue in many parts of the country. Do you think non-English-speaking students should be forced to speak only English when they start school, or should they for a time be taught in their native tongue as well? Why? Use your journal to reflect on your beliefs about this question.