

MEDIA LITERACY

Thinking Critically About

VISUAL CULTURE

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Contents

<i>To the Teacher</i> - - - - -	v
<i>To the Student</i> - - - - -	vi

Unit 1 Visual Culture and Society - - - - - 1

Teacher Buzz - - - - -	1
Visual Culture Buzz - - - - -	2
Activity 1: Blindness - - - - -	3
Activity 2: The Blind Person and the Airplane - - - - -	4
Activity 3: Technology and Literacy: The 1400s - - - - -	7
Activity 4: Technology and Literacy: The 1800s - - - - -	8
Activity 5: Mechanical Reproduction and Visual Representation - - - - -	10
Activity 6: The Multinational Logo - - - - -	12
Activity 7: Design a Sign - - - - -	14
Activity 8: What Is Art? - - - - -	15
Activity 9: “The Wall”—the Vietnam Veterans Memorial - - - - -	17

Unit 2 Material Culture - - - - - 19

Teacher Buzz - - - - -	19
Visual Culture Buzz - - - - -	21
Activity 1: The Beetle and the Ram - - - - -	22
Activity 2: The Brake Light - - - - -	24
Activity 3: License Plates - - - - -	26
Activity 4: Bumper Stickers - - - - -	28
Activity 5: The Time Capsule - - - - -	30
Activity 6: It’s Fake, but It Looks Real - - - - -	32
Activity 7: Don’t Judge a Book by Its Cover - - - - -	34
Activity 8: Money, Money, Money - - - - -	35
Activity 9: The Shopping Mall - - - - -	38
Activity 10: Mickey, the Silent Mouse - - - - -	40
Activity 11: How Do You Get There? - - - - -	41

Unit 3 The Visual Culture of Media - - - - - 43

Teacher Buzz - - - - -	43
Visual Culture Buzz - - - - -	44
Activity 1: Are Billboards Good or Bad? - - - - -	45
Activity 2: What Is the Future of Magazines and Newspapers? - - - - -	48
Activity 3: What Is the Future of All Print Media? - - - - -	50
Activity 4: The White Van - - - - -	52

Contents

Activity 5: The Rodney King Beating	54
Activity 6: Cinema Therapy	56
Activity 7: The Written Word Versus the Oral Word	57
Activity 8: Video Games	58
Unit 4 The Visual Culture of Color	61
Teacher Buzz	61
Visual Culture Buzz	62
Activity 1: Color Blindness	63
Activity 2: Naming Colors, Describing Colors	65
Activity 3: What Color Is Confusion?	67
Activity 4: Describe Blue	68
Activity 5: Which Is Your Favorite Color?	69
Activity 6: Passive Pink	71
Activity 7: The Pink Artichokes and the Rainbow Warriors	72
Activity 8: A New Kind of Coloring Book	74
Unit 5 The Visual Culture of People	76
Teacher Buzz	76
Visual Culture Buzz	77
Activity 1: Why Is Thin In?	78
Activity 2: Tattoo You?	80
Activity 3: The Good, the Bad, and the Victimized	82
Activity 4: What Is Attractive in America?	86
Activity 5: Plastic Surgery	88
Activity 6: The Hairy President	91
Activity 7: "You're Not Leaving the House Looking Like That!"	93
Unit 6 Language and the Written Word	95
Teacher Buzz	95
Visual Culture Buzz	96
Activity 1: Alphabets	97
Activity 2: Two Countries Divided by a Common Language	100
Activity 3: Borrowed Words and False Cognates	102
Activity 4: Cambodians and Khmer	104
Activity 5: Literacy and Voting	106
Activity 6: Which Font Do You Want?	110
Glossary	112
Additional Resources	113

To the Teacher

A 1991 STUDY PUBLISHED in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that about 91 percent of six-year-olds surveyed recognized cigarette advertising icon Joe Camel—about the same number of six-year-olds that recognized the Mickey Mouse logo on the Disney Channel. The recognition rate of Joe Camel among three-year-olds was about 30 percent.¹

It is a truism to state that there are economic and social consequences for people who can or cannot read written words. There are also significant consequences for people who can or cannot read symbolic imagery and behavior, just as there are important ramifications of people's ability or inability to recognize the various agendas that attend symbolic imagery and behavior.

This book, the sixth in a series on media literacy, focuses on visual culture. The effort here is to

help students understand the complex social, economic, political, and personal foundations of visual culture. Each unit introduces students to the different contexts in which visual culture exists and functions. The activity sheets require students to recognize these contexts and demonstrate their understanding of the role that visual culture plays in each. The central principle of this book is that visual culture can be used to help students improve their critical-thinking skills.

¹ P. M. Fischer, M. P. Schwartz, J. W. Richards Jr., A. O. Goldstein, and T. H. Rojas, "Brand Logo Recognition by Children Aged 3 to 6 Years: Mickey Mouse and Old Joe the Camel." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 266, no. 22 (1991): 3145–3148.



To the Student

MOST OF WHAT WE SEE every day we have seen before. We are often able to understand new things because they look similar to things we have seen before. There are many factors that contribute to the way we see things. The culture we grow up in is one of the most important factors. For example, when most Americans see a crawling bug, they may think “Oh, gross.” In some other cultures, the bug may be seen as food. As our needs, attitudes, and interests vary, so do the ways that we perceive visual items.

Much of the information we need to survive and be happy is transmitted through the written word. You already know the ability to read and write is an important part of literacy. The fact that you can read these words demonstrates that you already possess this type of literacy. However, we also possess other types of literacy. For instance, in the years before the average resident of London, England, could read or write, she or he could still recognize the sign for British pubs

(similar to restaurants or taverns), that used symbols, not words. Thus, an otherwise illiterate Londoner in the 1400s could find a meal at the Rose and Crown or at the Brown Dog, because of the symbols on their signs. Similarly today, the average citizen of the world does not need to be able to read English, nor any other language, to recognize McDonald’s golden arches.

This book discusses a different type of literacy: visual literacy. Visual literacy includes not just our ability to understand the written word, but also symbols, the design and arrangement of objects, and people’s appearances and behaviors. This book is designed to help you to develop your visual literacy—to better understand visual culture and how it affects your life.

There are probably several words in this book with which you are not familiar. You will find a glossary at the back of the book. Words that are defined in the glossary are highlighted in bold when introduced in the book.

The objectives of this unit are to help students

- understand that standards of human attractiveness are culturally and historically bound
- recognize how gender and racial stereotypes affect perception of oneself and of others
- identify the social factors that contribute to people's desire to alter or modify their bodies

ANY TEACHER of teenagers knows how much emphasis teenagers place on the appearance of themselves and of others. Social belonging, self-esteem, and the transition to adulthood emerge as powerful factors in teenagers' lives. Facial features, body types, and fashion receive intense scrutiny. This unit uses these common concerns as the basis of a series of activities in which students investigate various perspectives of how society regards the human body.

In this Unit. . .

Why Is Thin In? has students explore cultural and gender differences in the perception of ideal body weight. Students also are asked to identify some of the causes of eating disorders and to consider how best to address the needs of a friend who may be suffering from an eating disorder.

Tattoo You? has students investigate the reasons for the recent surge in popularity of tattoos.

The Good, the Bad, and the Victimized provides students with an opportunity to analyze how television programs present visual cues to identify goodness, evil, and victimization.

What Is Attractive in America? is an effort to have students assess stereotypical notions of human beauty and gender distinctions in appearance.

Plastic Surgery asks students to evaluate the reasons that people elect plastic surgery, and requires students to determine when it is appropriate to ask others to help pay for a person's surgery. Students also examine the criticism of pop singer Michael Jackson's efforts to change his appearance.

The Hairy President presents historical information about American presidents as the basis of students' investigation into the role facial appearance plays in politics.

"You're Not Leaving the House Looking Like That!" has students explore the relationship between fashion and social identification.

IN THE LATE 1800s, the United States was in the midst of the Industrial Revolution. Factories were built across the country. The lure of factory jobs drew many young men and women from rural farming communities to fast-growing cities. City life was different from country life in many ways.

“No one is born ugly. Nor is anyone born attractive.”

One of the things young people found different was dating. In small farming communities, young people grew up together and knew each other their entire lives. In the city, almost everybody was a stranger. People had to learn how to make intelligent decisions about other people based on much less information than they were used to having. While appearances were considered important, it was also known that looks could deceive.

Today, we have access to cosmetics and dyes to change our appearances. Clothing can highlight some parts of a person’s body and conceal other parts. Some of us will use plastic surgery to add to, remove, or rearrange body parts. People’s efforts to modify their appearance are typically based on idealized concepts of beauty and body types. Because most of the United

States’ population has historically been of European heritage, the American cultural views of idealized beauty and body types have tended to be based on European ideals. However, with the number of Americans of Asian, African, and Latin American heritage increasing, there may be a change in how Americans view the human body.

Despite changes in how the body is viewed, a basic reality of American culture that seems to be unchanged is the social pressure placed on females to be more concerned about cosmetics and fashion than males are. While this may seem basic to humans, remember that the situation is reversed among birds. Male birds, with their brightly colored feathers and impressive plumage, are more spectacular than their relatively drab female counterparts. But one doubts that a male bird with dull feathers suffers from low self-esteem and a lack of dates. Humans are not as kind.

No one is born ugly. Nor is anyone born attractive. How we define these terms is based on what we are taught—not formally, but informally. Today, the media play a large role in determining what our view of attractiveness is. The study of visual culture is the study of how we perceive what we see. In this unit, we will look at how we perceive the human body.

Why Is Thin In? -----

MANY AMERICAN DOCTORS consider a person overweight if he or she is 25–35 pounds above the maximum desirable weight for a certain height. You probably already know that there are several factors that make it more likely for some groups of people to be overweight than other groups of people. You probably also know that some people have physical or medical conditions that make it almost impossible for them to maintain the desirable weight for their height.

Studies have found that when shown pictures or drawings of a thin person and an overweight person, American children are more likely to identify the thin person as the healthier of the two. That might not surprise you. But when children are asked to guess which of the two people shown is the hardest worker, they are also more likely to choose the thin person. The same result occurs when children are asked to guess which of the two people shown is the smartest. This is a form of prejudice. *Prejudice* is a word that is often incorrectly used. Its true meaning is to prejudge a person or situation based on insufficient information about that particular person or situation.

Record your answers below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. Why do you think American children often demonstrate prejudice about overweight people? Explain your answer.

Different cultures have different attitudes about the appropriate weight for a person. Some cultures value large body types that would be considered overweight in today's United States. Among the Matsigenka people, a tribe in the South American nation of Peru, men often identify the heaviest women as the healthiest and most attractive. This is also true of the men of the Hazda people in Tanzania, an African nation.

2. Why do you think that some cultures prefer heavier women and others prefer thinner women? Explain your answer.
3. Do you think most American males are
 - more concerned about their weight than females,
 - equally concerned about their weight,
 - or less concerned about their weight than females?

Explain your answer.

(continued)

Activity 1 (continued)

Why Is Thin In? -----

4. Think of famous entertainers—musicians and movie stars—who are overweight by American standards. Which gender has more overweight entertainers—men or women? Who has an easier chance of becoming a well-known entertainer—an overweight male or an overweight female? Explain why you think this is the case.
5. Most models in American fashion magazines and advertisements are thin, certainly thinner than the average person in real life. Some critics argue that these images of unusually thin people make members of the public unhappy with their own bodies. Do you agree? Explain why or why not.

You probably know that millions of American females, and many males, suffer from eating disorders. A common disorder is anorexia nervosa, a psychological condition in which people—in order to make themselves abnormally thin—refuse to eat as much food as they should. Another common disorder is bulimia nervosa, in which a person binges on large amounts of food, then tries to purge the body by vomiting or abusing laxatives to force defecation. Some people who suffer from bulimia do not purge themselves, but follow uncontrolled overeating with excessive exercise or fasting.

6. Studies have shown that the average (mean) age for the onset of anorexia in females is seventeen. Explain what you think is going on in the lives of teenage females who suffer from anorexia or bulimia.
7. The best way to help a friend who may be suffering from anorexia or bulimia is to encourage them to seek professional counseling. What would you say to a friend whom you suspected of suffering from anorexia or bulimia? Explain your answer.

Tattoo You?-----

TATTOOS ON HUMAN SKIN have been around for many centuries. However, in the United States and other countries, tattoos have experienced a new surge in popularity. The popularity of tattoos is strongest among teenagers and young adults.

Record your answers below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. Imagine that our friend Chilly has been frozen in a block of ice for twenty years. Chilly has recently thawed out and is surprised to see how many more people are getting tattoos today than they were twenty years ago. He asks you why. What would you tell Chilly?

2. People in their forties, fifties, and sixties are also getting tattoos today. Ask older adults why they think some people their age get tattoos, and write down what those older adults tell you.
 - Do you think older people get tattoos for reasons different from teenagers' reasons, or for the same reasons? Explain your answer.

3. According to the American Society of Dermatology (an organization of doctors who specialize in skin problems) more than 50 percent of those who have a tattoo in the United States will later want it removed. That figure rises to almost 70 percent for married people. Why do you think more married people want tattoos removed than single people? Explain your answer.

4. Tattoo parlors typically have many examples of tattoo designs displayed in their front windows and hanging on their walls. Some tattoo enthusiasts look down on these predesigned tattoos, calling them "flash." Why do you think some people who like tattoos do not like predesigned tattoos? Explain your answer.

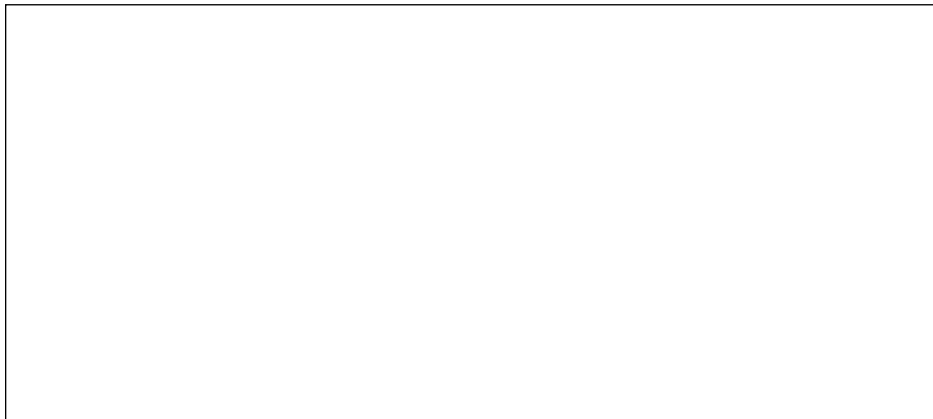
(continued)

Tattoo You? -----

5. A number of professional athletes have been asked to get corporate tattoos. These tattoos would feature the logo, or trademark, for a company. In exchange, the companies have offered to pay the athletes a significant amount of money. Suppose you are a famous athlete or some other type of famous celebrity. A large company offers you a million dollars to get a tattoo with their logo on it. Would you get the tattoo? Explain why or why not.

6. Find somebody who has a tattoo and ask why he or she got it. Write down what you learned here. Do you think their reason was a good one? Explain why or why not.

7. If you were going to get a tattoo, what would it look like? Draw it here:



9. Explain why you drew the design that you did.

10. Do you think that someday you might get a tattoo? Explain why or why not.

The Good, the Bad, and the Victimized -----

IN TELEVISION DRAMAS, especially police dramas, there is usually a conflict between good and evil. The most common way of displaying this is as a conflict between two or more characters (person against person, more formally called "local conflict"). One person represents good, and the other represents evil. Most television dramas are one hour long. However, after subtracting time used during that hour by commercials, the average television drama is really about forty-five minutes long. In those forty-five minutes, the characters must be introduced, their conflict must be introduced, and their conflict must be resolved.

The good person (or persons) is usually a regular character on the program, so if the viewer is familiar with the program, he or she may already know that character is a good person. This good person will be placed in conflict with one or more bad people. These bad people are rarely regular characters on the program, so the fact that he or she is bad must quickly be established. Certainly, what the character does or says helps the viewer understand that the character is a bad person.

Television is a highly visual medium. After all, we do not say we "listen" to television, we say we "watch" it. Because of the visual nature of television, the bad character will usually "look the part." In those cases where part of the element of surprise in a television program is that a character we think is good turns out really to be bad, his or her evilness is typically concealed by their "good" appearance.

Record your answers below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

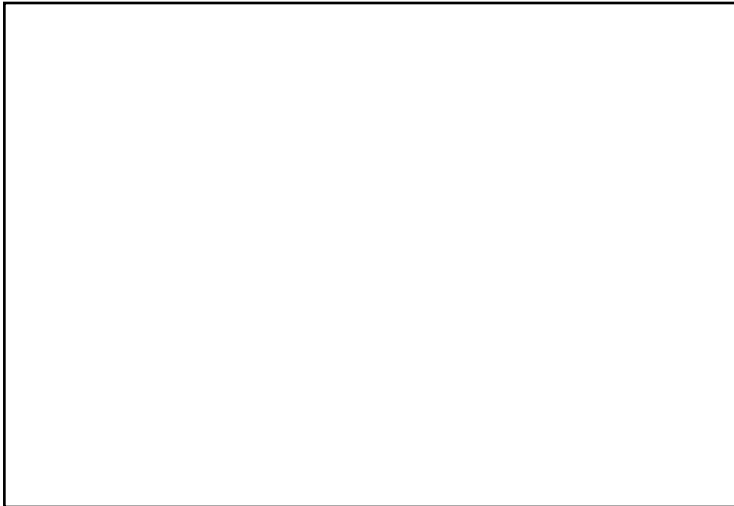
1. In the space below, draw a "good" person.



(continued)

The Good, the Bad, and the Victimized -----

2. In the space below, draw a "bad" person.



3. Is your good person male or female? Explain why you chose that gender.

- What kind of clothes does he or she wear? Why?

- What color is his or her skin? Why?

- How old is your good person? Why?

4. Is your bad person male or female? Explain why you chose that gender.

- What kind of clothes does he or she wear? Why?

- What color is his or her skin? Why?

- How old is your bad person? Why?

(continued)

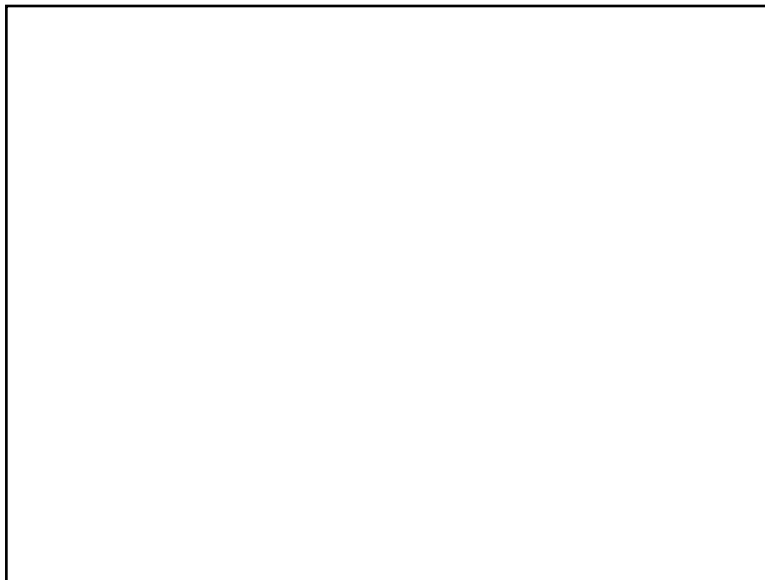
The Good, the Bad, and the Victimized -----

5. Are most characters that are good people on television programs male or female? Why do you think the people who create television programs often choose that gender to represent goodness?

6. Are most characters that are bad people on television programs male or female? Why do you think the people who create television programs often choose that gender to represent evil?

7. What color of skin do most characters that are good people on television programs have? Why do you think the people who create television programs often choose that skin color to represent goodness?

8. In the space below, draw a "victim."



(continued)

The Good, the Bad, and the Victimized -----

9. Is your victim male or female? Explain why you chose that gender.
- What kind of clothes does he or she wear? Why?

 - What color is his or her skin? Why?

 - How old is your victim? Why?
10. What color skin do most characters that are victims on television programs have? Why do you think the people who create television programs often choose that skin color for victims?
11. Are most characters that are victims on television programs male or female? Why do you think the people who create television programs often choose that gender for victims?

What Is Attractive in America? -----

THE CONCEPT OF attractiveness is not the same in every culture. Different cultures have different ideas about what an attractive male or an attractive female looks like. As mentioned in Activity 1 in this unit, different cultures have different ideas about the ideal weight for a female.

Suppose that Marvin and Martina Martian have recently arrived on Earth from Mars. The concept of attractiveness is different on Mars. Marvin, for example, is admired by Martian females because he has three eyes; most Martian males have four, but three is considered more desirable. Martina is admired by many Martian males because her skin is a particularly lovely shade of green, with just the right purple highlights. Marvin and Martina have never been to Earth before. When they return, they know that they will be asked the following questions by their fellow Martians. Help them answer the questions.

Record your answers below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. Which color hair is considered the most attractive for American females? What evidence could you find in stores to prove this?
2. What color eyes are considered the most attractive for Americans? What evidence would you use to prove this?
3. Is it more desirable for American males to be taller than average or shorter than average? What evidence would you use to prove this?
4. Is it more desirable for American females to be taller than average or shorter than average? What evidence would you use to prove this?
5. Is it considered most desirable for a female to be taller than her male partner or shorter? Why?

(continued)

What Is Attractive in America?-----

6. Who is supposed to have more body hair—males or females? What evidence would you use to prove this?

7. In consideration of your answers to number 6, can the more hairy of the two genders have too much hair? Explain your answer.

8. Is it considered more desirable among Americans to have curly hair or straight hair? Can hair be too curly? Can hair be too straight? Explain why or why not.

9. Can a female be attractive without wearing makeup?

10. Why do many females in American society wear makeup?

11. Why do most men in American society not wear makeup?

12. Are there social situations in which a female should wear makeup? Explain why or why not.

Plastic Surgery

MANY PEOPLE are uncomfortable or unhappy with their appearance. Sometimes, a person's discomfort or unhappiness with their appearance is created by idealized images of men and women in fashion magazines and other media. Many photographs of beautiful women and handsome men in magazines are the result of hours of work by teams of make-up artists, special photography techniques, and extensive use of editing devices to change a person's appearance. Recent advances in digital photography and digital photo editing make this increasingly common.

Sometimes, a person's discomfort or unhappiness with their appearance may be easily understood by others. For example, there are situations when a person is born without a fully developed ear, or has suffered a disfiguring scar on an area of the body where it can be easily seen. Other people have had their bodies disfigured by illness or disease.

Many of us have health insurance. When we are insured, we are part of an insurance pool. The idea here is that most people who are insured by a single company will not be seriously ill during any given period of time. In turn, we help pay for the medical costs of those few members who do need expensive medical care during that period. If there is an outbreak of illness or disease among people insured by a particular insurance company, health care costs go up. These costs are passed along to all members through increased insurance payments.

Some medical procedures are considered necessary. These procedures are needed in order to save a person's life or to help reduce significant pain. Necessary procedures include treatment of cancer and other severe illnesses. Some medical procedures are considered elective. Elective procedures are for physical conditions that are not considered serious or life-threatening. Many plastic-surgery procedures are considered elective procedures.

Record your answers below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

The American Medical Association and the American Society of Plastic Surgeons make the following distinctions between reconstructive surgery and cosmetic surgery:

Reconstructive surgery is performed on abnormal structures of the body, caused by congenital [birth] defects, developmental abnormalities, trauma [injury], infection, tumors or disease. It is generally performed to improve function, but may also be done to approximate a normal appearance.

Cosmetic surgery is performed to reshape normal structures of the body in order to improve the patient's appearance and self-esteem.

(continued)

Plastic Surgery

1. If people want to use their own money to have plastic surgery, should they be able to have that surgery? Answer this question for each of the following procedures. For each, explain why or why not.
 - Abdominoplasty—a “tummy tuck”
 - Blepharoplasty—propping up droopy eyelids; for some people this is a purely cosmetic procedure, while for others this procedure may help their vision.
 - Mammoplasty:
 - a. Breast augmentation—making a female’s breasts larger
 - b. Breast reconstruction—usually, for women who have had one or both breasts removed because of breast cancer
 - c. Breast reduction—a procedure done when the patient believes that her breasts are too large; there may be social problems (being stared at) or physical problems (a bad back)
 - Otoplasty—“pinning back” ears that stick out from the head abnormally
 - Rhinoplasty—reducing the size, or otherwise changing the shape, of one’s nose; for some people rhinoplasty improves breathing.
2. For this question, presume that a patient is poor or otherwise unable to pay for plastic surgery. In these situations, they want their health-care insurer to help them pay. This of course means that other members of the insurance company will be required to help pay for those procedures. If the patient is uninsured, he or she is hoping that the government will use taxpayers’ money to pay for the surgery. Should an insurance company or the government help pay for the following procedures? For each, explain why or why not.
 - Abdominoplasty
 - Blepharoplasty
 - Mammoplasty:
 - a. Breast augmentation
 - b. Breast reconstruction
 - c. Breast reduction
 - Otoplasty
 - Rhinoplasty

(continued)

Plastic Surgery -----

Some plastic surgeons have provided treatment for a reduced price or at no charge to patients who have some particularly disfiguring body features or scars. For example, some women who have had their noses disfigured as the result of domestic abuse have benefited from the generosity of plastic surgeons. Plastic surgery corrects the victims' facial appearance and removes a physical reminder of the abuse they have received. Some children who are born with facial features that cause them to be stared at and teased have also been helped by plastic surgeons' charity work. However, a plastic surgeon can rarely afford to donate his or her services to everybody who asks for them.

3. Should insurance companies (or in the case of uninsured people, the taxpaying public) help pay for plastic surgery for abused women? Explain why or why not.
4. Should insurance companies (or in the case of uninsured people, the taxpaying public) help pay for plastic surgery for children born with disfiguring facial features? Explain why or why not.

You are probably familiar with some of the criticism of the singer Michael Jackson's numerous surgeries by plastic surgeons. Some people, both African American and otherwise, have criticized Jackson, claiming that he has tried to replace his African-American facial features with European-American facial features.

5. Why do you think that some African-American people are unhappy about Jackson's decision to undergo plastic surgery? Explain your answer.
6. Why do you think that some people who are not African-American are unhappy about Jackson's decision to undergo plastic surgery? Explain your answer.
7. Do you believe that a person who has facial features that are not considered European-American should be able to pay to have plastic surgery to make them look European-American? Explain why or why not.