

**Writing Topics for Essay #3:
“True Women and Real Men: Myths of Gender”**

Choose one of the following topics and write an essay of at least three to four pages in response. In your essay, be sure to make explicit references to the essays in our text (Devor and Kilbourne). Keep in mind that you need to **engage with** the critical essays, integrating and incorporating them into your arguments, not just mentioning or briefly quoting from them.

1. In his essay, Devor discusses the social concept of gender (as opposed to biologically-determined sex) and the ways in which we learn to be men and women. He discusses several aspects of our traditionally defined notions of “femininity” and “masculinity,” including body posture and uses of space, speech patterns, and styles of dress. For this essay, you will do some field research to look for evidence to support his arguments. Choose a place to conduct your observations (your workplace, church or temple, a coffee shop or shopping mall, or other public place where men and women gather), and determine the aspects of behavior and self-presentation you want to observe and tabulate. Limit your observations to only one of the three characteristics that Devor identifies (posture, speech, OR dress). Be sure to observe and record the characteristics of several people of both sexes to enable you to draw conclusions and make some generalizations about the two groups. **Then, in an essay, report on your findings, describing your research methods and comparing your results to Devor’s findings and arguments. What conclusions can you draw from your observations?** Be sure to make specific references to Devor’s work, incorporating his ideas with your own.

2. Very often the same product is marketed to men and to women in very different ways, products that by definition aren’t necessarily “gendered.” For this essay, **find two magazine ads for the same type of product (such as cigarettes, cars, toothpaste, soap, deoderant, etc.), one of which is intended for a female audience and one for a male audience, and analyze them.** How do the ads differ in their approaches? How do they depict images of “femininity” or “masculinity” in hopes of reaching their audience? How do they conform (or not) to Kilbourne’s arguments about the ways femininity and masculinity are portrayed in advertising? Be sure to pay attention to as many details in the ads as possible, no matter how insignificant they might seem, and be sure to include copies of the ads with your essay.

3. In the introduction to Chapter 4, the editors of our text state that

the definition of ‘appropriate’ gender behavior varies dramatically from one cultural group or historical period to the next. . . . History shows us how completely our gender derives from cultural myths. . . . And history is replete with examples of how the apparent ‘naturalness’ of gender has been used to regulate political, economic, and personal relations between the sexes. (373)

This is especially evident in the U.S., where we can observe many differences in “proper” or acceptable gender roles or behavior, for men as well as women, both across cultures and over time. For this essay, conduct an interview with someone of your gender who is at least 25-30 years older than you (someone of your parents’ or even your grandparents’ generation), to find

out what changes have taken place over the years regarding his or her gender roles or expectations in political, economic, or personal terms. **In your essay, report on your findings, and tell how your subject's experiences reflect Devor's arguments about gender identity and behaviors. How might the changes your subject describes call into question our ideas about the "naturalness" of gender roles?** In your interview, be sure to ask open-ended questions which will elicit the honest and candid responses you want, taking care not to "lead" your subject in a particular direction (for example, don't ask, "Did the clothes you wore when you were younger emphasize sexual characteristics?" but rather, "Tell me about the clothes you wore when you were younger -- how were they similar or different to what young people wear these days?"). Include a list of the questions you asked and the answers you received with your essay.