

Critiquing Violence
Preliminary Activity
College Writing I
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Motives: We haven't all experienced the sort of dramatic physical violence Andre Dubus III describes in *Townie*, but that doesn't mean we cannot contribute something meaningful to the conversation about violence his book invites us to join. We might begin by considering that "violence" takes many forms. *Townie* is filled with accounts of bloodshed and broken bones. However, you may have noticed that the author devotes as much space to describing the pain caused by words (or by the absence of words) as he does to evoking the physical pain of fist-fighting: social rejection and parental neglect seem to wound the author as much as punches do. Each one of us has probably felt the impact of a targeted, antagonistic attack on our bodies, our reputations, our self-esteem, or our social identities; each of us has also most likely committed such an attack on another individual or group. In one way or another, we are all victims and perpetrators of violence. Dubus III argues that the first step to breaking the cycle of violence is to become aware of the ways we come to enjoy it, or uncritically accept it as an unavoidable part of life. This assignment will ask you to establish a critical distance from the texts you consume so that you might ask pointed questions about the arguments these texts are making concerning the uses and abuses of violence.

Objectives: One of our primary goals for this class is to become adept at perceiving and critically analyzing the social value systems that influence our thought and behavior. These value systems are communicated and challenged through media such as novels, movies, music, and visual art. For this assignment, I would like you to interrogate a cultural text that speaks to your own experience with violence. This doesn't necessarily have to be a literary work; you may choose to write about a song, a film, a painting, or a photograph. In the past, I've received essays on films such as *Mean Girls*, *Fight Club*, *Precious*, *Dazed and Confused*, *Easy A*, *American Beauty*, and *The Boondock Saints*; music from Lady Gaga, Eminem, Nirvana, Pink, Garth Brooks, and NWA; books and short stories such as *The Hunger Games*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *American Psycho*, "The Lottery," "The Sneetches," and "Harrison Bergeron." These are all excellent choices, and you should feel free to contribute new texts to the list.

Like an interrogator on a police drama, your job is to cut through the surface details of a story and find the motives buried within. This requires you to try to avoid being swayed by your emotions, and to ask clear-headed, hard-hitting questions. This assignment is intended to help you produce the ideas and insights you'll eventually shape into a 6-8 page final paper. The final paper will ask you to put your text and *Townie* into "conversation" with each other. You'll evaluate how Dubus III's arguments cohere or conflict with the arguments made in your text, and then add your own unique perspectives to the conversation. Throughout the composition process, you'll draft, revise, edit, and proofread your work. You will also work with other students to provide feedback, critique the work of others, and generate new ideas through collaborative effort.

Please ask the following questions of your chosen text. Next week, I will ask you to perform the same interrogation on *Townie*. You should offer a minimum of 6-8 sentences of response for each prompt.

1. How would you categorize the violence represented in this text? Is it physical combat? Emotional neglect? Verbal or virtual bullying? Peer pressure? Codependency? Self-criticism? Ritualistic or ceremonial violence? Define the forms of violence, and describe the social context (the location and circumstances) in which it takes place. What is the relation between the context and the forms of violence that occur within it? How does one influence the other?
2. What underlying social factors compel or motivate the violence represented in the text? Does it attribute blame to racism, sexism, homophobia, economic inequalities, religious belief systems, or some combination of these or other forces? How do you know? Identify the specific verbal, visual, and/or aural elements of the text that lead you to your answers.
3. What argument is the text making about the ethics of violence? Which attitudes or actions are punished in the text, and which are rewarded? Does the text suggest violence is ever justified? If so, what makes it justifiable? Offer your interpretation of the text's ethical stance.
4. How does the text's violence appeal to your emotions? Is it intended to make you feel pleasurable excitement? Righteous indignation? Profound sadness? Rueful laughter? Guilt and shame? Analyze the ways in which the text uses specific words and images to produce visceral reactions to violent content. Explain how your "gut" reaction affects your ideas about the violence you perceive.
5. Do you believe the text makes valid arguments about the causes and effects of violence? If the text offers alternatives, do you believe they are possible to implement? Why or why not? What personal experiences do you draw from to reach this conclusion?

Criteria for Evaluation: You'll have one week to complete this assignment. The final draft must be 3-5 pages, double-spaced, 12 point, Times New Roman type. While I am only asking you to respond to these five questions, I nevertheless expect you to write with articulate prose, and to offer thoughtful answers. Your success will be determined by the degree of specificity with which you answer each question, and the coherence with which you structure your responses. You should structure each response as a mini-essay. Begin with a thesis statement ("The violence in *Tosh.0* is intended to provoke audiences to laugh maliciously at the confusion and embarrassment of non-native English speakers, the mentally challenged, and other disadvantaged people"). Next, offer specific examples taken from the text ("For example, in episode 36, Tosh targets..."). Finally, interpret and evaluate your examples ("This is troubling because the pleasure of laughter makes it difficult to think clearly about..."). This assignment will constitute 10% of your final grade.