

Anthropology Stage One Skills Session

“Strategic Reading”

Friday 9 March 2012

Five suggestions.

1. Use the *visual clues* to figure out what you actually need to read.

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Tear down the walls: Jefferson Airplane, race, and revolutionary rhetoric in 1960s rock

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Abstract
While the notion of the ‘rock revolution’ of the 1960s has by now become commonplace, scholars have rarely addressed the racial implications of this purported revolution. This article examines a notorious 1968 blackface performance by Grace Slick, lead singer of Jefferson Airplane, to shed light on a significant tendency in 1960s rock: white musicians casting themselves as political revolutionaries by enacting an idealised vision of African American identity. Rock, a form dominated by white musicians and audiences but pervasively influenced by black music and style, conveyed deeply felt but inconsistent notions of black identity in which African Americans were simultaneously subjected to insensitive stereotypes and upheld as examples of moral authority and revolutionary authenticity. Jefferson Airplane’s references to black culture and politics were multifaceted and involved both condescending or naïve radical posturing and sincere respect for African American music. The Airplane appear to have been engaged in a complex if imperfect attempt to create a contemporary musical form that reflected African American influences without asserting dominance over those influences. Their example suggests that closer attention to racial issues allows us to address the revolutionary ambitions of 1960s rock without romanticising or trivialising them.

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On 10 November 1968, five days after Richard Nixon’s victory in the hotly contested US presidential election, the CBS television network broadcast the latest episode of *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, a variety show well known for controversial political satire. The episode, which had been taped in late October, featured Jefferson Airplane, one of the best-known bands to arise from San Francisco’s much-publicised rock scene. The band performed ‘Crown of Creation’, the title track from their recently released fourth album. Astute listeners at the time might have been impressed by the song’s unusual formal structure, its brief foray into a 5/4 metre, or its obscure, apocalyptic text. No viewer, however, could have missed the most unsettling aspect of the performance – white singer Grace Slick appeared covered in dark brown makeup, and gave the Black Power salute at the song’s end.¹
Slick’s gesture is difficult to interpret. Because her appearance evokes, first and foremost, the ugly spectre of blackface minstrelsy, the first reaction of many observers today, as then, might be offence. Slick’s gesture was, on one level, an insensitive attempt to shock square viewers, comparable to her appearance in an Adolf Hitler

← Name of the journal

← Subtitle includes key words: ‘race’, ‘rhetoric’, ‘1960s rock’

← The article is *one* person’s opinion, backed up by research. There will be other articles that agree/disagree with Burke.

← Here is the abstract, which gives us the main point (thesis) of the article.

← The article has several sections, each with its own sub-point.

2. Don’t read from start to finish. Academic articles are not novels! Focus only on *whatever you need to complete your assignment*. Read the abstract (or the last part of the introduction), then the conclusion, then skip back for any other information you need.

3. Ask yourself some questions as you skim through the article.
 - What is this author trying to say? Can I summarise it in two or three sentences?
 - Do I believe what she's saying? Where's the evidence?
 - What assumptions is this author making?
4. To get a quick sense of what an article is about, skip to the topic sentence of each paragraph. Paragraphs in the body of the article usually have a *topic sentence* near the start.

and the broader ways in which popular music and political movements inform one another.

Critics and historians who describe rock as revolutionary clearly reflect the subjective experience of many participants in the 1960s rock scene, who often recall feeling that the musical landscape was shifting rapidly and unpredictably under their feet. In many accounts, however, the concept of revolution is only loosely defined, so that some writers present any aspect of rock that seemed new, unusual or rebellious as revolutionary. In *You Say You Want a Revolution: Rock Music in American Culture*, Robert G. Pielke aggressively asserts that 'there's simply no possible conclusion other than to see rock music as revolutionary', but his model of rock's revolutionary potential is applied so broadly that it allows him to describe the 1984 teenage dance movie *Footloose*, musicians from Dire Straits to Stevie Wonder, and the Kingsmen's *Louie Louie* all as revolutionary (Pielke 1986, pp. 14–15, 45–8, 77). In *Closing the Circle: A Cultural History of the Rock Revolution*, Herbert I. London describes the rock era portentously as the 'Second American Revolution', but his all-inclusive argument that revolution encompasses 'sincere, cynical, and neutral advocates of radical change' leads him to grant 'revolutionary' status to unlikely candidates such as Fats Domino (London 1984, pp. 59, 66, 183). While these authors winningly convey their sincere affection for rock, their generalised enthusiasm at times reminds one of critic Robert Christgau's tongue-in-cheek assessment: 'Q.: Why is rock like the revolution? A.: Because they're both groovy' (Christgau 2000, p. 94).

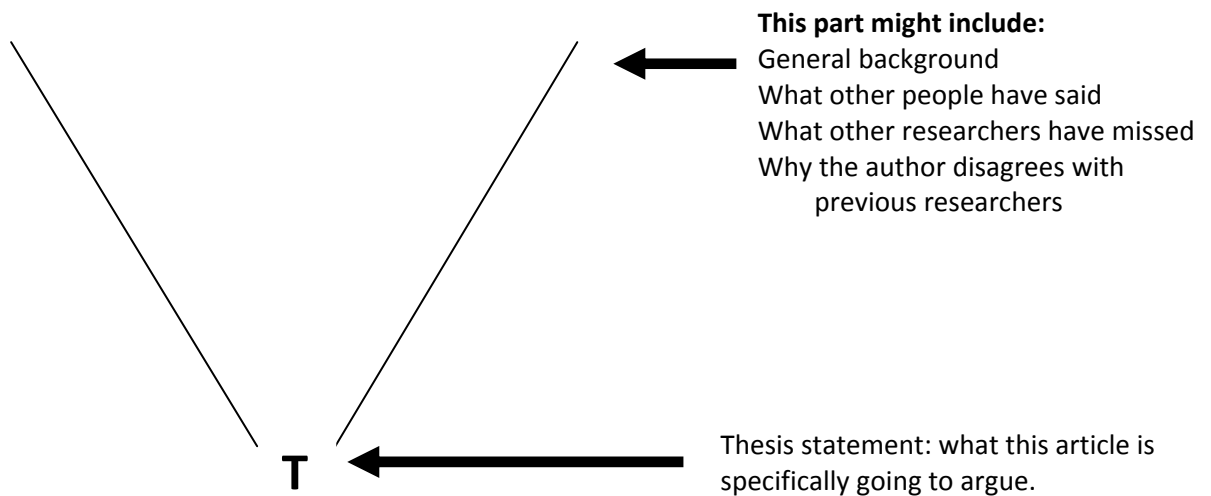
Topic sentence: the main point of the paragraph, usually near the start of the paragraph.

Extra information supports the main point

Many scholars, however, assert a more direct link between the rock revolution of the 1960s and those broader political and social movements whose participants described themselves explicitly as 'revolutionary'. As Terry H. Anderson points out in his detailed survey, *The Movement and the Sixties*, while 'revolution' became a kind of rallying cry for disparate radical groups during the 1960s, the term was typically used imprecisely to express a sense of outrage rather than a concrete strategy (Anderson 1995, p. 202). Like the notion of revolution itself, the connection between rock music and revolutionary politics is defined variously in discussions of the 1960s. Some accounts focus on the ways in which rock helped to create a sense of community among young radicals. Anderson, for example, writes that rock 'forge[d] a hip community ... challenged the establishment and liberated freaks from the older generation' (*ibid.*, p. 246). Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison argue that 'within the youth movement ... it was in the music that the utopian images of a multicultural society gained coherence and form', and assert that during the

Notice how this topic sentence continues directly from the last topic sentence.

5. Find the thesis statement in the abstract. An abstract is usually shaped like a funnel. It moves from general information to a *specific thesis statement* (or main argument).



Notice the 'funnel' shape in this abstract:

Abstract

While the notion of the 'rock revolution' of the 1960s has by now become commonplace, scholars have rarely addressed the racial implications of this purported revolution. This article examines a notorious 1968 blackface performance by Grace Slick, lead singer of Jefferson Airplane, to shed light on a significant tendency in 1960s rock: white musicians casting themselves as political revolutionaries by enacting an idealised vision of African American identity. Rock, a form dominated by white musicians and audiences but pervasively influenced by black music and style, conveyed deeply felt but inconsistent notions of black identity in which African Americans were simultaneously subjected to insensitive stereotypes and upheld as examples of moral authority and revolutionary authenticity. Jefferson Airplane's references to black culture and politics were multifaceted and involved both condescending or naïve radical posturing and sincere respect for African American music. The Airplane appear to have been engaged in a complex if imperfect attempt to create a contemporary musical form that reflected African American influences without asserting dominance over those influences. Their example suggests that closer attention to racial issues allows us to address the revolutionary ambitions of 1960s rock without romanticising or trivialising them.

What other researchers have missed, at a very general level.

Still very general: Burke talks about "white musicians" as a group. We don't yet know what he's going to say about Grace Slick/Jefferson Airplane.

Still writing about a *general* trend (all of "rock" music, not a particular band).

Getting more specific (now writing about a particular *band*).

THESIS STATEMENT. This is what Burke is going to argue.