

# Dress Provocatively

A rhetorical analysis by August Dombrow

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Clothing has long served as a vehicle for personal identity and self-expression, defining individuals and entire generations, myself included. Growing up, I had my “punk” phase, a youthful attempt at socio-political expression every time I got dressed. Then I traded in the tattered jeans, threadbare tees, and thrift store threads for tailored suits, tempered tees, and more tasteful thrift store regalia. Over the years, my personal dress code has consistently avoided commercial aesthetics, opting for the unadorned and unbranded as a form of personal dissent against the rigid hierarchies of fashion. But this subtle form of protest was drowned out by indifference. By contrast, a tiny piece of metal, jutting obtrusively from an eyebrow or lip, elicits a variety of reactions. People notice.

Such simple acts represent more than mere “youthful rebellion” or “cries for attention” as the critics would suggest. They subvert traditional concepts of fashion, usually appropriating those same elements in the process, and force us to reexamine our values, standards, and beliefs. At least, that was the theory. Eventually you tire of the judgment – the accusatory glances, the speculation and stereotypes, the stalking glares of police officers as you walk by with that Mohawk or studded leather jacket. You eventually feel like a masochist, bound by pride and principle, and you realize acquiescence is easier. And convenient.

Then I enrolled in ENGL 250. And then we had a conversation about what clothing “says,” specifically in reference to Margaret Weaver’s article, “Censoring What Tutors’ Clothing ‘Says.’” We debated, deliberated, and occasionally disagreed on whether the anonymous student was justified to wear his “fuck” t-shirt in the writing center and the implications for our lifestyles in general. I persistently and unequivocally insisted the student was, not only in the right, but

that we should be grateful to him for initiating a broader discussion, one of the central tenets of this course. The very fact that we spent two days of class on the topic illuminates how worthwhile the incident was.

Admittedly, I was a bit dismayed to hear some of my classmates call for capitulation to “common sense” and the whimsical trends that dictate fashion. But who are the gatekeepers of such standards and, more importantly, who appointed them the paragons of good taste and sensible standards? If we suppose, for a moment, that we arrive at this definition of decency through some democratic process, then the student’s shirt should be welcomed as a referendum on our tastes. If not, then we need to seriously consider who these arbiters of fashion are and why? Why should we consciously choose self-censorship over advocacy, symbolic or otherwise? Our classroom discussion raised many questions but provided few answers.

So I went home and designed some t-shirts. I conceived and created a series of three t-shirts displaying provocative political commentary in the form of simple cartoons. Granted, my shirts are not as “forthright” as our classroom *cause célèbre*, but like my anonymous ally, they address an audience that does not expect it. Regardless, they are part of the conversation and these shirts act, primarily, as a reminder that we are *all* citizens.

The simplest and most transparent design features a quote from then National Security Advisor, Condaleeza Rice: “We don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.” Super-imposed before the unmistakable scrawl of a mushroom cloud, I hope to illustrate the audacity of such a claim and illuminate the consequences of our rhetoric. Of course, Ms. Rice was only a small part of a much larger campaign to sell a war, but by using this iconic moment (and our collective willingness to play along) from those pre-war days, the shirt reminds us of our roles as custodians of the most powerful military machine on the planet.

Another design incorporates more imagery of our militaristic past, this time borrowing from the recruiting posters first seen during the recruitment

efforts of World War I (though not for the last time) and applying it to another contemporary issue. The Monopoly Man, integrated into the draft posters, represents that blurry area where individual consumer responsibility overlaps with government obligations. It is no secret that our consumer lifestyles, fueled by the deceptive freedom of credit, have contributed to the current economic climate. The shirt inquires about the balance between our personal desires and social obligations, especially regarding the distribution of wealth.

The final design is perhaps the most contentious of the three, raising questions about the role of the United States and its citizens within the global community. Because the language might be abrasive or contrary to certain standards, some might feel compelled to dismiss it as sophomoric and, therefore, devoid of worth. As the sketches reveal, I initially struggled with the inclusion of profanity on the shirt for many of the reasons discussed in class. But for those same reasons, I finally settled on the current form, convinced that I can prove the contrary, co-opting both clothing and language in a cohesive statement regarding our roles as citizens.

Take, for example, the ambivalent message behind “fucking shit up.” To the macho- militaristic mindset, the phrase invokes images of physical domination. But to “fuck up” also serves simultaneously in its verb/ noun capacity: the vulgar synonym for (making) a mistake. The phrase, sharing a space with the twin fat man atomic bombs, alludes to a tumultuous history rife with conflict. This same history provides – a source of national pride for some, defined in terms of patriotism. Personal opinions regarding nuclear weapons will likely influence individual interpretations of the shirt, but my intent is not to pass judgment on the decision leading to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. My intent is to raise questions about the continued existence of nuclear weapons, especially considering that civilians, not military officers, have weathered the brunt of the tragedy that accompanies such weapons.

Each shirt utilizes iconic and easily recognizable imagery, taking advantage of a common ground between the speaker and audience. It is when

these images are depicted within a particular context that they broadcast my specific message and, consequently, make a statement regarding my identity. Still, these statements are largely open to and encourage interpretation because, just as the speaker cannot separate his or her identity from the message, the receiver can (and should) not interpret the content without bringing to bear the full weight of personal experience.

Unfortunately, we frequently equate emotions with irrational thought, yet even while we can never detach ourselves entirely from our past experiences. In Jay Sloan's piece on facing ethical dilemmas in the writing center, he writes that "[f]inally, it was my sheer power of emotional response which saved the session...I began to think my way through emotions, sought to confront and localize them." In this instance, concepts like emotions and professionalism and confrontation are not incompatible, and they actually "save the session." An emotional response can either destroy dialogue or salvage it if wielded as tools to move the conversation forward in a constructive manner.

Then there is the issue of conflict: people tend to find disagreement uncomfortable and avoid it. In the first text we read for the class, *Hearing the Other Side*, Diana Mutz found that "there are clear patterns of difference with respect to race, income, and education, but they are not in the usual directions (30)." According to her research, as wealth stratifies the population, those with the means *actively seek out* less contentious company: "To the extent that people see their lives as easier or more comfortable if they are surrounded by like-minded others, high socio-economical status allows some people achieve that end more than others (31)." Perhaps this is an adverse effect of higher education – indoctrination into a common belief that polite, reasoned "debate" precludes disagreement, resulting in shifting definitions and perceptions of what constitutes deliberation, determined by education and income. , which correlates with levels of education and income. Such an outlook provides an obstacle to open discourse which dialogue, an obstacle these shirts attempt to correct.

I am suggesting that confrontation is not only an acceptable ingredient for the writing center, but a necessary one. In the aforementioned Weaver article, she writes that “the free expression of competing views is essential to the institution’s educational mission” and “the university is a special setting where a premium is to be placed on free expression (22).” These descriptions mirror any decent democracy, where freedom of speech and deliberation provide a foundation for representation and, ideally, fair compromise between the participants. Any brand of self-imposed political seclusion is dangerous to democracy, inoculating citizens against alternative beliefs, which in turn breeds complacency. When dissenting views are branded dangerous and silenced, political participation is reduced to mere acquiescence, and flag-waving and chest-thumping replace rational thought and civic discourse. Just as Weaver recommends a plurality within the writing center, democracy demands a plurality of voices to sustain itself. Only then can we arrive at those essential components, coalitions and compromise.

The assignment asks students to identify as writer, tutor, scholar, or citizen. While I have placed an emphasis on the citizen aspect, the research and relevant experience suggests that we cannot separate and isolate these dimensions of our lives – that each facet of our daily experience influences and informs the others. Fortunately, the writing center encourages such an interaction. But if real communities must deal with diversity (of both peoples and opinions) and adversity, then the writing center should reflect this reality in its own composition. We can leave our judgments at the door, but August the Citizen occupies the same seat as August the Tutor and ignoring this is not only dishonest, but a disservice to everyone involved, depriving them of the exposure to an environment where we can learn to respectfully disagree.

Our speech, manners, and even clothing are all an extension of these intertwined identities, and my shirts exemplify this position. In contemporary usage, the term to “dress provocatively” implies sensuality and has taken on a pejorative connotation. I propose an alternative application where we provoke

conversation, employing our clothes as the mode of expression they already are and realizing the full potential for communication. My shirts allow me to embrace my identity as political provocateur and, to use the old idiom, “wear my heart on my sleeve.”

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## Works Cited

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