# Semiotics
Writing about Signs/Signifiers

What is semiotics?
Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their use of interpretation. Usually, semiotic analysis studies the roles of signs and the part they play on a social and cultural scale.

What is a sign/signifier?
- A <u>sign</u> is the smallest unit of meaning.
- In order to create or define a sign, you will need two pieces:
  - The <u>signifier</u> (any material or physical form of the sign – *the object that exists*)
  - The <u>signified</u> (a cultural or social concept that a signifier refers to – *what it means*)
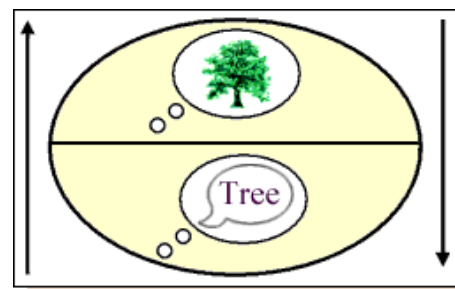
The diagrams above are examples of the **"Sausserean" models** (named after Ferdinand de Saussure, who helped create the model).

- The **tree** represents the <u>concept</u> of what we think about when we hear the word "tree." (**the signified**)

- The **sound of the word "tree"** - or reading the word in print – brings up the mental image of an actual tree. (**the signifier**)

- The **line between the signified and signifier** represents the link the mind triggers whenever the two are placed together. The **arrows** represent that constant interaction between concept and sound/visual.

All together, the **signified** and the **signifier** make up the <u>sign of a tree</u> and all of the <u>cultural meanings</u> we associate with a tree (environmental issues, Christmas trees, the rainforest, a tree in your backyard, etc.).

- Semiotics is used to inform the reader of what interpretation he/she should make in regards to the sign <u>tree</u>.

What is my ultimate goal in a semiotic analysis?
- The goal is to create **a link** between **the concept [signified]** and **the sound/visual [signifier]** of the sign.

- That link will help you – the writer – **interpret the cultural and social meanings** associated with the sign (your argument).

Types of Signs

- **Symbolic** – the signifier (the physical/material) does not resemble **the signified (concept)**, so the relationship between the two must be taught.

    o Some examples of these are traffic signs/traffic lights, foreign language/sign language, national flags, punctuation, and Morse code.

- **Iconic** – the signifier (the physical/material) resembles **the signified (concept)**, so the relationship is obvious.

    o Some examples are a photograph or portrait of someone, a cartoon, a gesture, or a metaphor

- **Indexical** – the signifier (the physical/material) is directly connected to **the signified (concept)**, but the relationship is at the interpreter's discretion.

    o Some examples are sound signals (a knock at the door or a phone ringing), natural signals (smoke means fire or footsteps means someone is approaching), pointer signals (directionals or a finger pointing) or recordings (a film, TV show, photograph, or YouTube video).

Another Semiotic Terms to Know

- **Denotation** – the most basic literal meaning of a sign. Denotative interpretations help associate **the signifier (the physical/material)** with the actual definition of **the signified (concept).**
    o Example: a rose is a sign for a type of flower in a garden.

- **Connotation** - the secondary, cultural meaning of a sign. Connotative interpretations help associate the **signifier (the physical/material)** with emotions, feelings, or cultural "stories" of **the signified (concept).**
    o Example: a rose is a sign for passion or true love (think *Romeo and Juliet* or the enchanted rose in *Beauty and the Beast*)

- **Ideology** – a set of ideas that create a culture's expectations, goals, and actions; in semiotics, this relates usually to social or political issues.

- **Paradigm** – a set of associated **signifieds (concepts)** or **signifiers (the physical/material)** which belong to the same category;
    o Example: when working with film and television, a paradigm may include ways of transitioning, or moving, from a shot/camera angle (dissolve, cut, fade, etc.)

- **Syntagm** – a sequential chain that combines interacting **signifiers (the physical/material)** and forms a meaningful whole within a semiotic text
    o Example: courses to different meals - each meal (breakfast, lunch, and dinner) holds a separate meaning, so the sequential chain would dictate what courses to serve.

- **Mythology** – the combination of paradigms and syntagms that make up a well-told story with regards to cultural association
    o Example: the American cowboy mythology/the Wild West mythology)

- **Semiotic situation** – a moment when we try to make sense of our surroundings and interpret one aspect based on the signs of our situation