

This assignment examines how television shows represent social class through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital—the knowledge, behaviors, and assets that shape social mobility. You'll analyze characters from different class backgrounds across multiple episodes, examining how their speech patterns, possessions, and credentials reflect and reinforce class distinctions.

Television provides a unique lens for studying cultural capital: while it may exaggerate obvious class markers like clothing and homes for dramatic effect, it often understates subtler distinctions that shape real social mobility, like micro-behaviors and cultural references. By critically analyzing these portrayals, you develop a sharper understanding of both media representation and real-world class dynamics.

This exercise develops three essential sociological skills:

1. Analyzing how media represents social class and inequality
2. Identifying cultural capital in its three forms (embodied, objectified, institutionalized)
3. Connecting media representations to broader theories of social reproduction

Assignment Overview

In this research application, you will select a television show featuring characters from different social class positions and analyze how they display different forms of cultural capital. You'll examine how characters' speech patterns, manners, possessions, leisure activities, credentials, and social networks signal their class position. Through careful observation across multiple episodes, you'll uncover how the show represents—or misrepresents—social class and cultural inequality.

The specific requirements for what you need to do vary depending on what grade you would like to earn: Basic (75), Proficient (87), or Advanced (100). Students who come close but do not satisfactorily complete the requirements for a level will be allowed to revise and resubmit their application.

Theoretical Framework to Apply:

Cultural capital, as theorized by Pierre Bourdieu (1973, 1984), refers to the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and cultural assets that individuals inherit and develop, which influence their social mobility. It plays a crucial role in *social reproduction*, the process by which social class is maintained across generations.

Cultural capital exists in three forms, each shaping how individuals navigate social life and are perceived by others.

- **Embodied cultural capital** includes deeply ingrained habits, mannerisms, and linguistic styles that are developed over time through socialization. These traits, such as an eloquent way of speaking, refined table manners, or confidence in elite social settings, often signal a person's upbringing and class background.

- **Objectified cultural capital** refers to material possessions that hold cultural value, such as books, artwork, musical instruments, or designer clothing. These objects not only reflect an individual's cultural knowledge but also require an understanding of their meaning and significance to be fully appreciated.
- **Institutionalized cultural capital** is formal recognition of cultural competencies, such as academic degrees, professional certifications, or prestigious awards, which serve as credentials that grant social legitimacy and access to higher-status opportunities. In television narratives, these forms of cultural capital can be observed in how characters speak, what they own, and the credentials they use to navigate their worlds, influencing their social mobility, relationships, and the way others perceive them.

Children from privileged backgrounds gain advantages through exposure to high-status cultural norms, shaping their educational success and career prospects. While some attempt to acquire cultural capital later in life—through education, travel, or social networking—deeply ingrained class markers like accent and mannerisms often persist, reinforcing social hierarchies.

Assignment Tasks

- **Choose a TV Show and Characters:**
 - Select a television show featuring characters from different social classes. It could be either a reality or a scripted television show.
 - **Note:** *Gossip Girl* may **not** be used for this assignment. Because it makes class distinctions unusually explicit and stylized, it limits your ability to analyze subtler forms of cultural capital. Choose a show where class differences are present but not always announced.
 - Identify two characters who represent different class positions:
 - * Upper class (wealthy professionals, business owners, inherited wealth)
 - * Middle-class (white-collar workers, teachers, small business owners)
 - * Working class/poor (service workers, manual laborers, unemployed)
 - Watch the required number of episodes based on your assignment level
- **Cultural Capital Analysis:** Track specific markers, including:
 - **Embodied Cultural Capital** (habits, manners, language)

- * **Language use:** Consider how the character speaks—does their vocabulary, accent, or use of slang reflect a particular social background or class position?
- * **Manners and etiquette:** How does the character behave in social settings? Do they display confidence, politeness, or discomfort in high-status environments?
- * **Food and dining preferences:** Does the character exhibit knowledge of fine dining, gourmet cooking, or wine pairings, or do they prefer fast food or casual dining?
- **Objectified Cultural Capital** (material possessions and cultural goods)
 - * **Leisure and cultural consumption:** What pastimes and entertainment does the character enjoy? Do they engage in activities and consumption (golf, opera, museums, classic novels) associated with wealth and status, or more working-class pursuits (barbecuing, bowling, pop culture)?
 - * **Fashion choices and brand preferences:** Does the character wear designer labels, business attire, or casual clothes? Do their fashion choices signal wealth, professionalism, or rebellion against social norms?
 - * **Physical spaces and living environments:** Where does the character live? Is it a luxury apartment, suburban home, or shared space in a lower-income neighborhood? What decorations or possessions suggest their cultural capital?
- **Institutionalized Cultural Capital** (formal credentials and social legitimacy)
 - * **Educational background and attitudes:** What level of education has the character attained? Do they reference prestigious universities, technical training, or a lack of formal education? How do they value education in their personal or professional life?
 - * **Social networks and relationships:** Who does the character associate with? Are they connected to influential or elite social circles, or do they primarily interact with people from a similar or marginalized background? How do their relationships reinforce or challenge their cultural capital?

By organizing your analysis around these three forms of cultural capital, consider how the character's background, behaviors, and possessions influence their social mobility, relationships, and opportunities within the show's narrative.

- **Critical Analysis:** Things to think about?

- How stereotypes and biases shape character portrayals
- Whether the show challenges or reinforces class hierarchies
- How intersectionality affects character depictions (race, gender, sexuality)
- The economic and social implications of these representations
- The show's overall commentary on class mobility and inequality

Write a Research Report:

- Use the standard research report template provided
- Include specific examples from episodes watched
- Use pictures as evidence.
- Apply theoretical concepts to your analysis

In your submission, clearly state which level you are attempting: “Basic,” “Proficient,” or “Advanced.” You must complete all components of that level to earn the grade.

Rubric

All levels should include supporting evidence such as screen images or photos from the show.

Basic (250-word minimum) – Watch 2 episodes

- Identifies characters and their class positions
- Provides 2+ examples of cultural capital markers
- Applies at least one theoretical concept
- Includes basic critical analysis

Proficient (500-word minimum) – Watch 3 episodes Basic Requirements plus:

- Detailed analysis of cultural capital differences (3+ examples) by cultural capital form.
- Applies multiple theoretical concepts
- Examines intersectionality
- Analyzes stereotypes and bias
- Evaluates show's commentary on class

Advanced (600-word minimum + hypothesis) – Watch 4 episodes

Proficient requirements plus:

- Develop and test a hypothesis about cultural capital representation
Sample Hypotheses:
 - Characters attempting to "pass" in a higher social class will face social penalties (mockery, rejection) within the episode
 - Upper-class characters' cultural tastes are mocked, but their power remains intact
 - Working-class characters mainly engage in "lowbrow" leisure activities (sports, TV) rather than "highbrow" ones (opera, art)
 - Characters maintain stronger relationships with others sharing their cultural capital markers
- Detailed analysis of cultural capital differences (5+ examples).
- **As part of your findings, include an analysis of which of the three forms cultural capital are most prominent.**

Conclusion Guidance

All levels should: - Reflect on what your analysis reveals about how media represents social class and cultural capital - Discuss the limitations of your analysis: Does the show oversimplify class? What aspects of cultural capital does it miss? How might a character's race, gender, or other identities affect how cultural capital appears? - Consider: How might different viewers (from different class positions) interpret the same scenes differently? - Connect your findings back to Bourdieu's concept and to broader questions about social reproduction and inequality

Additional Notes:

- Consider how production elements (cinematography, music, set design) reinforce class distinctions
- Analyze how character development may challenge or reinforce class expectations
- Examine how audience reception might vary based on viewers' class positions