

Student sample
Who is your favorite musician? Why do you like this person's (or group's) music? How is this musician portrayed in the popular press? In music videos? These are all questions that can lead to a legitimate and engaged response on a written task clearly related to the goals of the course in language and mass communication. Before reading the student sample below, brainstorm some ideas about how you could incorporate an interest in music into a written task that relates to media institutions, modes of communication, bias, power, class, or the production and spread of popular culture.

Rationale Rock stars are more than just musicians who write and perform popular songs. Rock stars seem to transcend the everyday world of making music and become idols that attract attention for their lives and lifestyles as much as for the crowds they draw at concerts. While it is obvious that the songs and exciting performances are what initiate the popularity for the most successful performers, media also plays a role in developing the myth of a particular star. The roles of the media and the roles of the individual star are quite interesting when considering the way a persona is developed and marketed to the consumer. A newspaper or magazine, for example, wants to sell issues by publishing articles about a musician and thus would like the musician to remain popular. The musician, while agreeing to be interviewed or profiled by a magazine, is also concerned with self-marketing. To add complexity, the musician and magazine are also in the business of selling other products or somehow manipulating an audience. For this written task I will create two magazine articles about a fictional Irish rock star named Bolo. The first article will be a "profile piece" from a popular music magazine such as *Rolling Stone*, and will focus on music and the band's success. The second article, an editorial from a news magazine such as *The Economist*, will focus on the humanitarian work that the artist has done as a celebrity. By juxtaposing the two articles I hope to highlight the idea of celebrity as a construction of language used to sell to a consumer both on the part of the magazines and the celebrity himself and the ways in which language changes for different audiences and for different purposes.

Article 1

Pulling up to the front of the Regal Plaza in L.A. is disappointing. It's not because I'm driving a white Hyundai rental car. It's not because my jeans suddenly feel outdated when I look at the expensively dressed guests swishing through the revolving doors. I've grown up listening to the plaintive lyrics of Bolo and his legendary group UZ and when I was young these guys were rockers and rebels and now, I thought, as the valet sneered at my rental key chain, Bolo had finally sold out. UZ's newest album, the one we have all heard previewed on the Facebook page and piped through Gap stores, is supposed to be a return to their roots ... but

the Gap? A Starbucks promotion? Sitting around the pool at the Regal Plaza? I'm done with these guys.

So it is, with a mix of pleasure and ironic hesitancy, that I approach the pool and find Bolo, sure enough, splayed on a lounge, wearing his signature wrap-around shades and a mix of leather and denim, as the guests around him look at home in their impossibly small swimsuits. There he is: the rock star rebel. What can I say about this casually grungy get-up? Is it all for show? I am pleased because he looks different from the others, less polished but I am disappointed because he is fitting the mold of not fitting the mold. My confusion probably shows through in my awkward opening.

"This is about what I expected, I guess."

"Ah, you must be from the magazine. Then again, you could be anyone. I've been doing this for over thirty years and I've finally come to realize that no matter what you do it will go against and right bloody along with what people expect."

So, put in my place, I try to talk to Bolo, find out what he thinks, and more importantly, try to get a glimpse into what went in to the production of this new album. And I should say here that what we find in the album, what we get when we separate the music from the sales of jeans and t-shirts (yes, yes, I know, jeans sales that will eventually benefit malaria research and ethical development in Africa) is earthy, gut moving, and surprising. These are songs of nineteen-year-olds who don't want to work with their dads but have never eaten anything but food their mothers have made. These are songs of being young and out of work but put together with the slightly world-weary wisdom of a fifty-year old star. The first song on the album is the perfect example of a rock anthem that rebels but understands what it means to capture a feeling and entertain an audience. We know what we are getting in the song; we know that the guitar licks will make us progressively more excited. But just like meeting Bolo himself, listening to the song I find it fulfills my expectations and then laughs at me as it expands into something personal, self-conscious and a little bit pained.

"That's exactly what we wanted," says Bolo, "music that does what it is supposed to do but pushes some boundaries. It is tough always living up to expectations but isn't that what life is all about? Fulfilling a few expectations and using those ways of acting to push back a little bit too?"

The music on this album certainly does push back. As I listen to Bolo and the way he is both at ease with himself but also willing to keep experimenting, I realize that this is the mark of an artist. When UZ was an upstart band, what set them apart was that they took evident pleasure in their making of music. They played for

themselves and for the jumping audience crowding the local Dublin pub. For UZ now they still play for themselves and for what we might call a slightly larger pub.

This is the best aspect of the new album. As a listener I may approach the music with self-consciousness, expectations, and cynicism, but as soon as I listen, the joy and artistry takes over and I forget any of my worries or preconceived notions of what it means to rock.

Article 2

The continued success and music industry domination of UZ is an intriguing story of the value of a strong, easily identified product combined with the ability to adapt to large but subtle demographic changes in audience and societal expectations. We have no issue with UZ as a producer of entertaining music and we certainly respect UZ for its talent as a marketing machine. We wonder, however, how genuine and effective the humanitarian efforts of Bolo, the band's lead singer and song writer, can be. The star power being brought to the humanitarian crisis reveals a level of vanity and a narrow perspective of the possibilities of the African continent.

Bolo is an easily recognizable star capable of generating interest and money for humanitarian causes. The amount of money raised for malaria research in Africa, is quite significant in relation to the millions being spent by a number of publicly funded research agencies both in Africa and around the world. One wonders how more money being spent on research can be a bad thing. What is troubling is how this money ends up being directed, and by whom. "Research organizations are learning to play the game of tailoring their activities to match the desires of large private donor organizations in order to receive funding," says EU research biologist Stephen Harper. "When Redmond Tisch (Bolo's humanitarian coordinator) suggests that prophylactic drugs are a rich area for research," continues Harper "everyone abandons long range research to jump on board." Government funded research tends to allow for greater freedom for areas of research that may not be so glamorous but may offer longer term solutions.

On a more cultural level, the activities of Bolo suggest a mere marketing ploy that brings more exposure to his band, his future tours, and the products of companies allied with his activities. The sales of Bolo's awareness raising t-shirts, while raising money for research, has earned four times as much money for the clothing companies who have increased sales of other products because of Bolo's ability to attract business. Being an environmental and social reformer, for Bolo, is a more adult way of rebelling, fighting ... and selling out tour dates.