

## Informal Writing Assignment #5

The idea for this Informal Writing Assignment is to practice techniques from my “How to Read” handout on a passage of Lee Patterson’s “Literary History.” Although the instructions below are long and detailed, the product you hand in will really only amount to a couple of pages—probably no longer than any other IWA.

First: choose *one* of the passages I’ve selected (there are three possible choices). You’ll probably want to print one or two extras as “practice” copies. (You’ll need to transcribe your *final* scribbles onto a clean copy to hand in; I won’t credit your assignment if I can’t read it!) Remember, however, that no passage makes meaning in isolation. Just as you did with “Lycidas,” you’ll want to have a reasonably good grasp on the entirety of Patterson’s chapter, and you’ll want to study the paragraphs that precede and follow yours, in particular, so that you have the immediate context firmly in mind before you begin. But keep the entire essay close by so you can refer to it as necessary.

Now, a couple of specific tasks:

1. Highlight or underline portions of your paragraphs in such a way that reading back only what you’ve picked out will result in a grammatically coherent summary of Patterson’s main point in your passage. Again: to the extent possible, your highlighting should read back as complete grammatical sentences, even if you’re excerpting from several different sentences. Ultimately, because fragments and phrases convey little—and far less than do independent clauses—highlighting random words may only confuse you later, or force you to reread more of the original text than you want.

So, for example: If you were going to underline the preceding paragraph of this handout, you might have produced something like this:

... to the extent possible, your highlighting should read back as complete grammatical sentences, even if you’re excerpting from several different sentences. Ultimately, because fragments and phrases convey little—and far less than do independent clauses—highlighting random words may only confuse you later, or force you to reread more of the original text than you want.

Your purpose in highlighting/underlining is to pick out the writer’s intentions and objectives—*not* just statements that *you* find interesting or provocative or even debatable. Highlighting/underlining represents your effort to understand a writer on his or her own terms, so that you don’t misrepresent their ideas.

2. Annotate judiciously. Marginal annotations should include *brief* definitions of unfamiliar vocabulary; questions the passage raises for you; tentative objections you have to the writer’s claims; random comments that help you to relate the ideas to other ideas (e.g., “This right here sounds like Frye on ‘Lycidas’”); notes on tone/rhetorical strategy (e.g., “He’s being ironic, right?” or “Understatement.” or even “Oh, snap!”); brief summaries/paraphrases of dense or challenging material (“Okay—what I *think* he’s saying here is . . .”) or that relate a passage to the essay as a

whole (“he’s summarizing the *opposing* view here, *not* what he believes”). Marginal notes can also make explicit what the writer states only *implicitly* (“so, in other words, . . .”).

You shouldn’t note *all* of these things for every paragraph, of course—you wouldn’t be able to read back your annotations if you did. That’s why I say “judiciously.”

Okay? So far, you’re just writing on (or beside) your chosen passage, and you’ll hand in a marked-up copy. Now open up a fresh document on your computer.

3. In two or three sentences, write out what you take to be the major point(s) that Patterson wants to make in this essay as a whole. For that, you need to read the entire essay carefully. (Remember that this essay comes from a book called *Critical Terms for Literary Study* that advertises itself as an introduction to literary theory.) Then add a further two or three sentences explaining how *your particular passage* contributes to making those points. I.e., how does that passage fit into his overall argument or project? (Some questions to ask yourself: What does Patterson discuss in the paragraph immediately preceding this one? Where does he take his discussion *after* this? Is your passage somehow pivotal or indispensable?)

4. *If necessary*, write up some brief notes on other things you observed about the passage that you couldn’t fit into your marginal notes: questions/confusions you continue to have, definitions that couldn’t be expressed with a simple synonym (e.g., trying to define “discourse” as it’s used by Foucault would be hard to do in a one-inch margin), and so on. This is not an invitation for you to get long-winded, though; to the extent possible, your notes should appear solely alongside Patterson’s text. This may involve getting a little creative and investing some energy in thinking about how to express your ideas succinctly but accurately.

5. Write a paragraph (*one* paragraph, please) about what you got out of this assignment—that is, what do you now understand about this passage that wasn’t clear after your first, presumably more casual, reading of it. What questions, if any, do you continue to have about this passage and/or about the essay as a whole? About the general relationship between texts and their historical contexts *as literary scholars currently understand that relationship*?

To review: you’ll hand in the following:

- A copy of your chosen passage, with your highlighting/underlining and annotations (written tidily and legibly—more tidily and legibly than you’d write for just yourself). You will probably submit this to me in person, unless you have a scanner and prefer to upload it to Moodle.
- Your responses to #3 and 5, above, (and to #4, if you so choose). You may submit this part on Moodle, as usual—or you may give it to me in person, together with your marked-up passage.