

MAKING YOUR READING COUNT

(Writing a good informal reading response)

Inspirational preamble. Ralph Waldo Emerson said in “The American Scholar” that engaging with literature involves creative *reading* as well as creative writing: it calls for paying critical attention to your own struggle, as an individual and as a member of a reading community, to *make sense* of a challenging work. When you read something—that is, when somebody is talking to you for pages on end—it’s only natural that you should be in a position to talk back, to say something of your own in response. Your main objective, however, should *not* be to discover something vague and mysterious like The Main Point or the Secret Meaning of Symbols (or even little nuggets of truth that you can collect for valuable prizes). Lemme explain.

When you read, you try to pay attention, even when you don’t completely understand what’s being said, trusting that it’ll make *some* sort of sense eventually, and relating what the writer says to what you already know or expect to hear or learn. Never mind that you may not quite grasp everything you’re reading at any given moment (and you may not), or that you can’t remember everything you’ve read (no one does); you can still begin—guided by your own impressions and questions—to see the outlines of a writer’s project, the patterns of his or her particular way of seeing and interpreting the world.

When you stop periodically along the way to think and make notes or to write or talk about what you’re reading, then you take over; you begin to respond and make sense of what this other person has said. At this point the writer and her text become something you construct out of what you remember and notice as you go back through their words a second or third time, working from specific passages of your choosing but filtering them through your own predispositions and sensibilities. Reading, in other words, should be the occasion for you to analyze and synthesize, to take things apart and put them back together, to notice this idea or image or character rather than that one, to follow a writer’s announced or covert ends while simultaneously following your own. That’s what’s involved in forging a reading of a story (or novel or play or poem or film—or a chapter in a biology textbook, for that matter). It’s a purposeful, labor-intensive process, but it’s a satisfying one, too. It’s worth it in the long run, and it beats the hell out of feeling helpless, daunted, or mystified along the way.

How to proceed. Keep a notebook or a laptop on hand as you read. Stop to write in it—and in the margins of your book—often. About what? I’ll often toss out some reading questions ahead of time (on Moodle) that may help you focus your attention or jumpstart your thinking. *Even if you don’t use them to guide your writing, look them over carefully and think about how you’d start to answer them before you come to class.* But here are some points of departure from which you can always improvise:

- How are you affected by certain passages, or by the text as a whole? (Delight, confusion, anger, repulsion, interest, boredom, amusement, suspense, sympathy with the narrator or characters, etc.—all of these are possible, valid reactions.)
- Why do you think the text is having this effect on you? (To answer this, start by marshalling your powers of observation: closely examine the nature of the text itself—its language, structure, subject matter, characters, and themes; its adherence to or deviation from literary conventions you might be familiar with; etc. Then: review any prior knowledge and expectations you might have about the text or its author, about its subject matter or its historical or social context, and about your own reading patterns and strategies, as well as your un/conscious values and ideologies—e.g., your assumptions about literature, culture, race, gender, etc. Any or all of this may have played a part in your reaction.)
- Keep track of questions that occur to you or puzzles that arise (and the points at which they do or don’t begin to be answered or solved), as well as other things that pique your curiosity, or remind you of something in your own life, some other work of fiction or non-fiction, or something going on out in the wider world.
- Keep track of individual images, words, and themes (or groups of them) that seem to be recurring. Note actions and episodes that twist or move along the plot in significant ways, or that reveal something new or develop your understanding of particular characters.
- For future reference, flag things that you suspect are “important,” but are not yet quite sure how.
- As your notes get messy and complicated, reorganize them into separate columns or pages for each main character or theme or image or group of related events (or whatever other categories you choose), and fill those columns with progressions of page numbers, shorthand descriptions and references, hierarchical charts, and lines & arrows pointing to cross-references in other columns or pages of your notes.

(over)

Using some kind of *method* such as this gives you a base to build on when you go back to skim the whole work and/or look more carefully at particular passages a *second* or *third* time. (Yes: really.) As you complete this process—as you begin to piece together your observations and to answer your own questions *in writing*—you’ll already be generating a “meaning” for what you’ve read, you’ll force yourself to observe and understand better how the text is constructed and how it has worked certain effects upon you, and you’ll spark still more questions and observations to follow up on. As with shampoo: repeat if necessary.

Next: So far, what you’ve done is for you. Before you show it to anyone else (i.e., post it to Moodle), you’ll want to go one step further. Go back over your notes, weeding and reorganizing them into some kind of narrative form (i.e., prose sentences and paragraphs), if they’re not already. This may be relatively (*relatively!*) disjointed—questions, observations, gut-responses, and ruminations strung together loosely, developed unevenly, with or without well-wrought transitions or interim conclusions from one topic to the next—or it can be a tidy short essay on one or two aspects of the work(s) you’ve studied, all wrapped up into a neat little package. Or it can be anything in between. Just so long as it’s a good-faith exercise in thinking-through-writing that genuinely grapples with the issues and the details of the text(s)—and so long as it’s at least 400 words (a pittance!).

What you post may be exploratory rather than conclusive, raising questions and identifying problems or puzzles or areas of interest rather than settling them. Still, it should have a point and a shape. If you find you’re not managing to discover a sustained focus for at least *some* portion(s) of your response, try zeroing in on one small segment or aspect of your text(s)—an incident, a character, the narrative “voice,” this text’s treatment of a theme or idea we saw in an earlier text, or some other specific textual element that intrigues or bothers you. Another useful strategy is to reread and think about a portion of the text that’s nagging you or giving you particular trouble; writing about a difficult passage can help you understand it better, and the exercise may spur you to unlock other parts of the text, as well.

An optional, final step: it might help both you and the rest of us if you went back over your post and singled out, at the end, something that you’d like particular attention paid to. Reiterate or paraphrase this in the form of a question or assertion that you’d like to see addressed in class.

N.B.: The greater part of any reading response should be devoted to the relevant “major” work(s) for the week, but I’ll be endlessly impressed if you find smart ways to relate the recommended and/or supplemental reading (and web resources) to your discussion, as well.

Credit? Bad Credit? Credit Default Swaps? You’ll do this six (6) times of your choosing over the course of the semester, though you’re welcome to contribute to the forums—or respond online to someone else—as often as you like, even when you’re not doing so for credit. (For deadlines, refer back to the syllabus.) While lively conversation, energetic debate and principled disagreement are highly desirable, it should go without saying that you shouldn’t be rude or abusive. (Everyone should at least selectively skim the postings before class and make note of things they find noteworthy.)

Years ago, before budget cuts and ballooning class sizes, I might have given you some evaluative feedback (in the form of chatty e-mails and terse letter grades) about the quality and promise of the thinking exhibited in *every one* of your responses. But these days, even though I understand that brevity is sometimes the soul of wit, I award credit largely on the basis of quantity. (I hope you won’t find this cynical; I also think there’s a value in pushing yourself to sustain and develop a thought or an observation.) So:

- for 400-500 words—the minimum effort—you’ll normally earn something in the “C” range;
- 600-750 words will get you a “B”;
- 850-1000 words an “A.”

(I will, however, try to give everyone a holler in reply to their first posted response, and I’m always happy to talk to you more about any given submission if you ask me to.)

You'll get credit if you show some genuine personal or critical engagement with what you read: i.e., if you demonstrate that you read attentively; that you grappled with the text; that you strove to compare it against things you'd already known (or thought you'd known) or read; that you tried to pose some interesting questions about it, come to some kind of understanding about it, attach some broader significance to it. You're practically guaranteed credit if you go above and beyond that baseline: e.g., if you pay exceptionally acute attention to formal, thematic, or writerly details, if you creatively identify (and tackle) unseen problems or puzzles posed by the text—or if you simply have some gob-smackingly brilliant insight.

BUT: credit is not automatic. I reserve the right to withhold credit for sub-par responses. If your post is short or perfunctory or un(der)developed; if it contents itself with glib, easy answers to the issues it identifies and the questions it raises (or if it doesn't manage to identify any salient issues or pose any compelling questions in the first place); if it suspiciously limits its focus to the first half (or third, or quarter) of the text; if it relies excessively on plot summary or the recitation of factual detail; if it shows little or no understanding of or critical engagement with the text; if it sounds like it could have been written from SparkNotes (!)—those are all reasons you might earn less than full credit.

Conversely, I reserve the right to award *extra* credit for:

- unusually long (1500+ words) responses *whose quality of thinking is commensurately high* (long-windedness alone won't get you anywhere)
- germane and well-wrought follow-ups of at least 150 words, posted later in the week (a follow-up may be a continuation of your own initial response or—preferably—a reply to someone else's, but it must be made *in addition to*, not in place of, a “full” credited post that you made earlier to the same forum)

The cumulative total value of any extra credit I award can not raise your grade for this portion of the class above an “A,” however.

This castor oil is good for you. No—really! The main idea behind this regular, informal writing is that you teach yourself the discipline of developing ideas about the things you take in through your eyes and ears. Two happy by-products are that a) you will have ready-made material (work-in-progress, anyway) to air and refer to in class, and b) the rest of us will have a chance to be exposed to, perhaps even stimulated by, some ideas besides our own before we begin discussing the texts in class.

In principle, this sort of thing is its own reward: it fosters your ability to organize and develop your own thinking and it gives you an opportunity to steal—er, learn—from other smart people. Whatever else this informal writing does for you will depend almost entirely upon what you make of it. It can be saturated fats and refined sugars or complex carbs and healthy proteins. Junk food or brain food: you decide.