

MAKING YOUR READING COUNT (Writing an informal reading response)

Soothing preamble: If you don't have much experience dealing with literature in an academic setting, the notion of being held responsible for having *ideas* about what you read may put knots in your stomach. Don't panic: it's more a matter of attitude and practice than of expertise. 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, both as an individual and as a member of a reading community, to *make sense* of a challenging work. Remember, first of all, that 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. You're *not* reading primarily to get something vague and mysterious like The Main Point or the Secret Meaning of Symbols or even little nuggets of truth to 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. Even if you don't quite grasp everything you're reading at every moment (and you may not), and even if you can't remember everything you've read (no one does), you can 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 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 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 an aggressive, 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, *begin* 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 any literary conventions you're 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.

Using some such *method* as this gives you a base to build on when you go back to skim the whole work and/or look more carefully at certain passages a *second* or *third* time. (Yes: really.) As you complete this process—begin to piece together your observations and 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 better understand 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, you’ll want to go one step further. Go over your notes and weed and reorganize them into some kind of narrative form (i.e., sentences and paragraphs), if they’re not already. This can be relatively disjointed—a series of questions, observations, gut-responses, and ruminations strung together loosely, with or without any kind of 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 500 words each time.

What you post can 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 at least a temporary sustained focus at some point(s) in your response, try zeroing in on one small portion or aspect of your text(s)—an incident, a character, the narrative “voice,” the comparative treatment by two or more texts of a similar theme or idea, 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.

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.

While lively conversation, energetic debate and principled disagreement are highly desirable, it should go without saying that you shouldn’t be rude, personal, or abusive.

Credit? Bad Credit? Credit Default Swaps? You’ll do this at least four (4) times of your choosing over the course of the semester, though you’re welcome to use the forums as often as you like, even when you’re not doing so for credit. (For precise logistics, refer back to the syllabus.) Four credited responses will earn you a “C”; six will get a “B”; and eight, an “A.”

You’ll get credit if you show at least a moderate degree of personal or critical engagement with what you read (or watched, or listened): if you demonstrate that you paid close attention, that you genuinely grappled with the text, that you strove to compare it with or against what you’d already known (or thought you’d known) and read, that you tried to pose some interesting questions about it and come to some kind of understanding about it and/or attach some broader significance to it. And you’re practically guaranteed credit if you go above and beyond that: i.e., if you show exceptionally acute attention to formal, thematic, or writerly details, for example, or if you creatively identify (and figure out for yourself) unseen problems or puzzles posed by the text—or if you simply have some absolutely, 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 shows little or no understanding of or critical engagement with the text; if it sounds like it could have been written from SparkNotes rather than out of your own head (!); if it contents itself with glib, easy answers to the issues & questions it raises (or if it doesn’t really even raise any compelling issues or questions); if it limits its focus suspiciously to the first half (third, quarter) of the text; if it relies excessively on plot summary or the recitation of factual detail—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;
- germane and well-wrought follow-ups of at least 100 words, posted later in the week, or at least before we move on to the next text (a follow-up might be a continuation of your own post or a response to someone else's, but it must be made *in addition to* a "full" credited post that you've made earlier to the same forum); and/or
- well-formulated discussion questions inspired by your perusal of what others have contributed to a given forum. Your query might be triggered by a particular remark written by someone else; it might bring (parts of) two or more posts into direct dialogue (Cartman said X about topic Y and Kyle, by contrast, said Z; what I'm wondering is...?), or it might reflect a more general synthesis of your reading of the entire crop of responses in that forum. A good question will have some heft: it should make explicit reference (at least in passing) to one or more individual posts, and it should be both pointed and open-ended enough to invite some genuine dialogue.

The total value of any extra credit awarded can not raise your grade for this portion of the class above an "A," however. Normally, I'll just award you CR or NC, but I'll try to provide some evaluative feedback about the quality of your thinking on a specific submission if you ask me to.

This castor oil's good for you. No—really! The main idea behind this kind of regular, informal writing is for you to teach yourself to develop ideas about whatever you take in through your eyes and ears. A happy by-product of the procedure is that you'll have ready-made material (work-in-progress, anyway) to air and refer to in class, and the rest of us will be able to mark, mull over, and be stimulated by some other ideas besides our own, before we all sit down together for a discussion.

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. But 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.