

BECOMING AN ACTIVE READER

For this class, you will write essays in which you formulate and present a coherent analysis of what you have read. To do this, you must consider a variety of issues. How does the text work? What meaning does it construct? How do the language, tone, and imagery of the text contribute to its sense of meaning? The only way you can begin to answer these questions is to spend time with the text. Read it. Read it again. The following tips are intended to help you become an active reader, aware of your responses to the text, and able to communicate clearly your thoughts and ideas about the materials you have read.

Remember that being an active reader is also being an active questioner. Always read with a pen and notepad handy. You want to jot down any ideas and pages references so you can reflect again later. You want to mark key passages, themes, and tropes in the text and to note any questions that arise while reading. Post-its are a great tool for marking your books for papers and discussions. You can “label” the passage topic on the post-it while reading to help collect textual evidence for your essays.

THE FIRST READING

On your first reading of a text, you will probably be most interested in simply following what happens. Such interest in the plot is natural, but try not to let that blind you to other things that are going on while the plot unfolds. Mark passages that strike you for whatever reason. Is a word, phrase, symbol, theme used repeatedly? How does the author set the mood or tone of the piece? Mark the passage so that you can return to it easily.

FREEWITING

Immediately after reading the work for the first time, write about it for fifteen minutes. Do not concern yourself with logic, style, punctuation, or any other standard of “correctness.” If, in the middle of a sentence, another idea comes to you—go with it. The point of this exercise is to get down as many of your impressions of what you have read as possible without having to consider any possible use for what you are writing. Just let yourself think about what you have read and record those thoughts.

To develop your compare and contrast skills, you can continue with the following exercise: After a quick break, do another free-writing on the various ways you think the text links up to other texts and themes of the course. What are the connections with and differences from other works in terms of thematic content, generic conventions, literary style?

SEEING YOUR IDEAS AND ASKING QUESTIONS

You never know what a session of freewriting will produce, and once you have it in front of you it is hard to know what to hang on to and what to toss away. Presumably, your work this semester will make you a better judge of what is a useful line of inquiry and what is not, but until you have informed such opinions, go through what you have written and underline what looks to you like a possible idea or significant question. List these on a separate sheet of paper and begin to think about how to follow-up on them. Whatever topic you have begun to focus on, plan to look for solid evidence of that on your next reading.

FOR OUR NEXT CLASS – DUE Thursday, August 29th

After completing the reading the first five chapters of *Little Women*, freewrite for ten minutes. Time yourself and write continuously for the designated amount of time. Take a break. Then reread your freewriting, and underline any possible ideas or significant questions. Write these ideas/questions down on the back of the page or a separate piece of paper. You will hand-in your freewriting to me in class, and the ideas and questions you come up with will be part of our discussion.

Close Reading Worksheet

A close reading, or explication, seeks to confront the particular words, images, and organization of a (usually literary) scene or passage. Close reading is a technique used to break up dense or complex ideas and language, or to draw attention to such individual parts as images or word choice. A critic employs close reading to better understand the relationship between the form of a passage and its content, and to clarify the meaning of a passage in the overall context of the text. Your close reading of a passage constitutes the basis of your interpretation and becomes evidence in your argument.

While you do not need to discuss every line in your chosen passage, you should address the main features of the passage and quote from it to demonstrate your interpretation. Consider the following elements. They may occur separately or together; their relative importance will vary depending upon the passage at hand. As you analyze a passage, you want to focus on how the form of presentation contributes to the meaning a text conveys.

1. **Context:** How is the passage situated in the text? What comes before and after it? How does your reaction to the passage change in relation to scenes, characters, and narration that precede or follow?
2. **Speaker/s and Narrator/s:** Who is speaking or narrating and why? Is the speaker or narrator objective or biased? How do you know?
3. **Chronology:** What chronology do events, dialogue, or the appearance of characters take in the flow of the passage? How is the order of presentation important?
4. **Concepts:** What are the main ideas the passage or speaker is trying to convey?
5. **Imagery:** What sorts of images, similes, or metaphors are used? What is their effect?
6. **Language:** Are repetition, formal or informal language, conventional or unconventional sentences, important to the way meaning is produced in the passage?