

## Metatext Instructions: Critical Reading Strategies

Put your name, the name of the text you are reading, the date and course number at the top.

1. Begin with *your* questions. **What questions do you bring to the reading of this text?** What is puzzling you about writing, reading, thinking and learning this week? What questions do you have about literacy, language, consciousness, intellectual growth, education and changing the world, from our recent class discussions, readings, or your own experience as a literate, intelligent inhabitant of this culture, universe, society and institution? What questions does the title of the piece you are about to read (or what you can guess about it) suggest? What does all this make you wonder about?

2. This is the hard part, but struggle to make it happen. The more you can get it to happen, the more you will grow as a reader and writer, learner and thinker in this course and beyond. As you begin reading **try to be aware of what you are un-certain of in the text.** What puzzles you, confuses you, or seems unclear to you as you read? What is strange or unusual in the way the words are used? What does the text say that seems contradictory or *unclear*?

This is crucial, and you're probably not used to reading in this way. This is a new kind of reading, and writing. It will probably mean reading slower than you usually do. All texts are full of ambiguities, uncertainties and unresolved conflicts (not because the writers weren't good enough, but because, we are coming to understand, this is how texts work), but you have probably been trained to pretend you don't notice. This is about noticing, about awareness, about developing this different kind of awareness--learning to attend to and value what you previously ignored.

There are at least three kinds of uncertainties to look for: 1) Odd things in the text itself. Things that don't make sense, or seem strange, unusual or out of place. Places where the text seems to contradict itself, or where it does or says something you don't expect, or where you're not sure what it says. 2) Questions or uncertainties you have as a result of reading what the text says (and doesn't say). Things you are unsure of even if the text seems clear and sure about them. And 3) Questions the text raises about whatever it is the text is about (or even about stuff the text isn't overtly about). You may have been taught that the primary function of texts is to make assertions. This is only partly true at best. An even more important function of texts is to raise questions--to make us uncertain, disturb our usual certainty, so we can think. When we're certain, we *don't* think, because we already have the answers we need. We only think when we are uncertain, when something bothers, troubles or upsets us, when we aren't sure what is right, when we find we believe two contradictory things--when something is unresolved. We need texts for this; we can't usually do it for ourselves. Texts that provoke thought (and all texts can provoke thought if you learn how to read this way) do so by making us uncertain, by disturbing and disrupting our set beliefs. We may think of this as bad, but it is actually good. It is the best thing texts can do. It is where thinking comes from--the unresolved, and it is why texts are so important in thinking.

Work hard to develop this awareness and ability as you read. It is a new kind of awareness of an event that happens both in you and in the text--in your interaction with the text.

Sometimes, if it isn't happening, you just have to pick something in the text and start writing about it to develop your awareness of uncertainty. Writing and reading are two of the

best ways to do this, but you have to learn to write and read (and have writing and reading interact with each other) in new ways.

3. When you find something uncertain, or something that provokes uncertainty in you, *copy that passage into your metatext*. **Quote the exact words**. Put them in quotation marks and put the page number in parentheses so you can find it later if you need to. Don't skimp. Write out the whole thing that puzzles you. This may seem like a waste, but it isn't. These words will look different to you when you have copied them into your metatext and you will see things in them you didn't see before.

4. Try to state your uncertainty in your own words. This may take some doing. Write as much as you can about it, and then keep going. Especially try to ask questions--*to state your uncertainty as a question*, or several questions.

This may all feel a little weird. That's a good sign. It means you are doing something different from what you usually do when you "read." Write about the weirdness if you need to, but don't stop just because it feels weird. Go as far into the weirdness as you can. This weirdness is something that has been missing from your reading, writing and intellectual life. You need to work to recover it as much as you can. This is the weirdness of awakening.

Intellectual life dies when we can no longer experience the weirdness, and a big part of what we call "education" is about learning to ignore the weirdness, to depress curiosity, to stamp out the activity of our own minds so we can live in the mindless illusion of assurance, confidence and certainty. This way of reading is about recovering as much of your vital *uncertainty* as you can and thus recovering your own mind and language.

5. Here is another crucial step. When you have achieved uncertainty, when you have one or more questions, *don't stop!* **Go on writing in and from your uncertainty**. What are your thoughts about this question? What possible answers can you think of? How satisfactory do these answers seem?

Notice what happens to your writing as you write from uncertainty. Isn't the difference amazing? Did you know writing could be like this?

6. When you go back to reading, bring your questions with you. Don't just leave them behind and "go on reading." **Read from the uncertainty your questions have created**. Read as a way of looking for clues. What can you see in the text that might be some kind of clue? What answers, or ways of thinking about your questions, does the text suggest? And, of course, what further questions is the text now raising in your mind? This should be a cumulative process, like a snowball gaining size and force as it rolls down the slope. And it should feel like that--somewhat out of your control, but definitely not boring. If you're bored you aren't doing it yet. You're still blocking, preventing it from really happening.

*Did you know you can do this with any text?* When you know how to do this there are no boring texts. You probably don't believe that, right? Test it out some time, when you're reading or studying something boring, get a piece of paper or a computer and start writing about it and questioning it.

7. These are not just techniques for reading and writing. What we're really working on here is another possibility for living. Mostly we sleepwalk through life, thinking all the important questions have already been answered. This is not only false, it severely limits our capacity for

consciousness, awareness and for action that would make a difference. Think of the possibilities that would open up if we approached everything with an inquisitive attitude, questioning, probing, looking at it in alternative ways, seeking other ideas and opinions, problems and possible solutions. It would be a different world, a world of possibilities, and we would be different beings, different kinds of selves in it.

This step involves taking one of your questions, one you developed in the reading or one you wrote at the beginning, and **carrying your search beyond the materials of this course**. Go to the library, the internet, ask people and write down what they say, go interview an expert, do something that will take you and your inquiry beyond the provided materials of the course. You don't have to find answers (though there's nothing wrong with answers if you find them). You're looking for things that will help you carry your thinking further, and almost anything you find can help you with that, even things you don't agree with or that aren't what you expect, if, if... well you know, if you're willing to think about it.

This is where this assignment goes beyond being just an assignment. See if you can adopt a more inquisitive attitude and carry it with you as often as possible, not just when you're doing the current assignment for this class, but all week long.

Also, this kind of inquiry process develops best if you don't try to do it all at once. Three shorter sessions, with days in between, will get you a lot further than one longer session: one to form your questions and begin reading and writing to develop more questions; one to do some outside reading and research with the questions you found in the first session; and one to bring all this back to the text and read and write some more from your new questions and perspectives. A little each day would be even better. Think of this not as a single task, but as a journey you are engaging in each week, which could take your mind to new places you've never been to before.

You could even start thinking about next week's questions and start writing your next metatext or paper while you are working on this week's inquiry. What questions from your work this week do you want to carry over into your work next week? As you go this should become a cumulative and continuous process motivated and directed as much by your questions and inquiry and thinking as it is by my assignments and syllabus. It shouldn't just be a series of discrete assignments which have little if any relationship with each other.

This could change your life, your life as a student and learner, and the life of your mind.

8. Geez, you mean there is yet another step? Yes, always another step. In the life of the mind, this is an open-ended process. If there is no further step it is only because you have chosen not to make it--have chosen to close your mind and stop. We all do this all the time. Most of how we use language in every day discourse has to do with closing our minds and keeping them shut. This is about learning to use *language* for a different purpose, in a different way, one that opens instead of closes.

The next step is to **step back and take in a larger view**. Do this from time to time as you read and write. What's the big picture of what's been going on since you started working with this text? What's developing? Where do you seem to be headed? Where is the text heading? And, what larger questions does all this raise? What does the text as a whole seem to be challenging, confronting or contradicting? This is crucial--getting the larger disturbances and questions, both your own larger questions, and the larger questions the text is trying to get at. They may not be the same. These larger questions allow you to think about the text as a whole, and to think beyond the text--to think about what the text is about, and what you are about.

9. This is not really a step so much as it is something that should be going on increasingly all through this process. **Be willing to question and reconsider your own assumptions.** Most people have no idea how to do this, but if you can't do this you can't really read, write, think or learn anything but trivia (and what you already know). This is how reading, writing, thinking and learning can be more deeply transforming processes.

We all approach a text, or anything, with a bunch of assumptions already in place. This is, in a sense, what we are: bundles of assumptions. These assumptions, of which we are usually unaware, shape and determine what we can and can't see in the text. We will see, we will be able to read, whatever it is that our assumptions allow us to see, and we will be blind to anything else. To do this is of course to be a bad reader, a "reader" who can see in a text only what s/he already knew and believed when s/he started. If that is all we can do with a text then we really can't read at all, even if we have excellent "reading skills," even if we "love to read." This, sadly, describes most of the population in the U.S., even many of those who are deemed highly educated. We can't read in any way that would allow us to see anything in the text except what we already knew and believed when we started. It is part of our intellectual impoverishment as a culture and society. It is part of our dehumanization and our subjectification to the dominant ideology. We are unable to be transformed by reading. We don't even know transformation by reading is possible (If you doubt this go reread Douglass' *Narrative*. It was reading which transformed him from a slave to a free man, reading texts and reading, becoming able to reread, the world.) This is what we are trying to learn by writing metatexts. This is the crux of this whole process--learning how to engage with a text in a way that leaves us not the same as we were when we started. This makes us most uncomfortable, and it is the greatest liberation and pleasure texts have to offer.

This is why it is necessary to write as we read. This can only happen in the interaction, the interaction between the words the text makes, and the words we make, and it has to be an active interaction, a struggle, for both parties. Both the text on the page and the text we call our "selves" can be transformed by this process. It's amazing; allow yourself to be amazed.

In this sense also we are all bad readers. That is, we all start out reading any text with bundles of assumptions which make it impossible for us to see anything in the text except what we already believe. Good reading, reading well, powerfully, transformationally, isn't something we are. It is something we do, or can do--or can learn to do all over again with each new text--if we are brave enough to risk being changed in the process, and having the text change before our eyes as we learn--from the text, with the text, against the text--to see differently. This is what we are working on in these reading/writing assignments: seeing differently, reconstructing how we see the world and ourselves. If you can't do this--if you can't use a text to see differently--then you are still a non-reader and a non-writer, no matter how skillful and successful you may be in school or elsewhere. This is where literacy goes beyond skills, way beyond. This is the literacy of mutation and transgression, the literacy which is unknown even to most functionally "literate" people.

**10. You should never consider an assignment complete unless you have gone further than you did on the last one,** opened up new territory, seen things you never saw before, increased and stretched your capacity for uncertainty, for working *in* and *from* uncertainty. Don't stop until you are able to do this. What if you did this with each assignment in all of your subjects? Can you imagine how different your education would be?

11. When you are done go back over what you have written, Add meta-meta comments. Think

about the piece or pieces you have been reading as a whole. What are they getting at? What questions do they raise? Try to look at the big picture and write some more about that. What larger issues and questions does it get you thinking about? How do you find all of this troubling or disturbing? How can you apply it to the practical questions of tutoring, writing, reading, literacy, thinking, your own education and that of the children you are tutoring? Thinking is never just an exercise--unless your world has been changed in some way by what you've read and written then you haven't really read or written yet.

12. Bring all this to class, the text, and your metatext which should include your research. Go over your metatext and identify **one text-specific question to contribute to the class discussion**. Put it on a 3 x 5 card with your name. I will collect these at the beginning of class.

It has to be a question, a real question, something that puzzles you still, even after doing this reading, writing and thinking, and it has to be text-specific, has to be about something in particular, words, phrases, longer quotations or some identifiable textual feature--something you can point to in the text. No plot questions please.

13. **Don't forget:**

**Research**, at some point in the process, take one or more of your questions and do some research on them. Do both Internet and library. (I suggest using Google as a search engine on the internet. This is what the computer folk seem to use and recommend. Like other search engines it finds lots more hits than you want, but it seems to do a better job somehow of prioritizing them so that there will usually be several in the first ten or twenty it finds that are useful.)

14. Tips: **Do all of this *while you are reading*** the text. Read a little, stop and write, then read some more. Don't read it through and then attempt to write about it. This may disrupt your usual process for reading and studying and it may feel unnatural and even make you anxious. That's good. That's part of the idea. You're trying to learn a whole new way to use your mind and language here and disruption is an indication this is happening. Try to maximize disruption. Thinking is disturbance.

To do this well you must: **work on it more than once during the week**. The more times over the period of seven days the better. This is partly because it will take quite a bit of time, but mainly because thinking develops best when you work on it for a while, go do something else, and then come back to it with a fresh perspective. Do a little every day if you can.

15. **What this is all about:**

Make it an activity of personal discovery. This isn't just about the text. It is about **you**, *your* interaction with the text, but not just about what that interaction *is* (your habits and preferences), but about what that interaction could become.

But it isn't just about you, either. It is also about **the text**. And you must work with the text, work to discover its confrontation. Not so much what it says, as what it **disturbs**, what it disturbs both in your personal world view and in our shared cultural world view, which of course are not unrelated. It is about coming to see, experience and understand texts

differently. Texts are not containers of information to be learned. Texts are themselves disturbances. When they're doing textual work, which partly depends on your willingness to engage in that work as a reader, texts are disturbers of the closed-minded, complacent certainty we have settled for and have, sadly, come to think of as life.

And that means making a two-part relationship with the text, I think, **digging into the details** that disrupt and confuse you. And **stepping back and trying to understand the whole**, the larger disruptions this text is offering you and us--the little questions and uncertainties, and the big questions and uncertainties--which are, of course, deeply connected with each other and with the text (semiotic construction) you (we) are.

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