

Teaching Analysis

Many teachers of writing at the college level often lament the way their students read. In faculty lounges and departmental mailrooms, one can regularly hear versions of this complaint:

I tell my students to read something so we can discuss it in our next class meeting. But then the next time we meet, they can't seem to answer even the simplest questions about the reading. If even my easiest questions about the reading just draw blank stares, how can I even begin to teach my students to *analyze* a piece of writing, to dig out its deeper meanings and subtle implications, to examine its structure, its hidden assumptions and biases, its tricky ways of transmitting its meanings and influencing readers? How can I accomplish any of this, when, apparently, my students can't even read at all!?

Of course, most teachers don't literally believe that their students can't read. But years of classroom experience have convinced them that students enter their classrooms with a very different set of reading habits than the ones needed to succeed in college.

If teachers are sometimes inclined to feel a little exasperated with the way their students read, students themselves can often feel a corresponding discouragement. When students chat in the halls, courtyards, and quads after class, they sometimes comment along these lines:

That class makes me feel so stupid. The teacher just breezes in and starts pointing out all these hidden meanings in what we've read. Once she points them out, I can see them, crystal-clear. And they're brilliant! But I could never find them on my own. How does she do it? Is she some kind of god? Or am I just stupid? I'm really worried about this, because she says we have to come up with original insights about the reading and develop them into a five-page essay by Monday. My question is *how?!?*

What is it that enables English teachers to find so many interesting things to say about something we've read? The simplest answer is this: all the other things we've read. More specifically, strong readers are those who have read a very great deal and who can thus carry into every act of reading something like a vast catalogue of memories of other texts. When we look at a new piece of prose, we do so "through the lens" of the many dozens of other things we've read, texts that are at once very similar and very different from the one at hand. When we look at a new text this way, all sorts of unique features in the piece we are reading become visible, all sorts of ways that this particular piece is saying something new or making an unfamiliar move—or, conversely, repeating ordinary messages in fairly standard ways. In the simplest sense, experienced readers are able to supply the sort of context necessary to make a text seem more and more thickly dotted with meaningful moments and significant turns.

We've come then to a first, tentative piece of advice about how to help students read more productively, to read in a way that will give them ideas for writing: try to coax students to read *comparatively*. The vaster one's web of past reading experiences, the richer and more instantaneously one can develop an analysis of what one reads. Naturally, teachers who have spent years and even decades reading all sorts of books and articles and honing their sense of how to link and oppose groups of texts will do better than first year college students at coming up with original insights about a given reading. But, on a smaller scale, students *can begin* to imitate their teachers and adopt the fundamental principle that enables those teachers to develop such compelling insights. In short, students can acquire the habit of always reading one text in terms of another--or "through the lens" of another--in order to notice some of its significant features.

An important implication follows from this principle. Given that the set of readings one person draws upon to formulate insights into a given text will differ at least a little from the set that his or her friend draws upon, no two people will understand a given reading in exactly the same way. In fact, two people might each develop their own analysis of a given reading and wind up disagreeing vehemently about what is important in the text. This sort of thing happens all the time. However, just because more than one analysis of a particular text is possible does not mean that all analyses are equally valid. Some responses to a given reading will be much stronger than others, and what makes them strong is how *convincing or persuasive* they are in the eyes of others. How do you help students make their analysis strong, persuasive, and convincing? By showing them how to support their assertions with concrete evidence taken from the text, by getting them to proceed with careful attention to the logic of what they're saying, and by showing them how to muster meaningful support from outside the text.

In other words, tell your students that in order to be a strong reader they must understand that role as deeply *active*. They must read with a pencil in hand and with a notebook open alongside the book. They must assume that their goal in reading is to build, little by little, their own understanding of the text, and they do that by making notes, connecting the notes, and then using this partial sense of what the piece is about to steer themselves toward still more insights, toward a greater and greater sense of the piece. In doing this, they have, in a sense, left behind the role of reader in a simplistic, passive sense and begun to operate as a writer. More accurately, the best readers understand themselves to be already involved in a kind of writing the moment they open a book.

But *how*, in the most immediate, concrete, practical sense, does one go about reading closely and analytically? A handful of simple strategies are shared by all good readers, strategies for paying a special kind of attention to special moments in the text. When you're working with a student who is frustrated by a piece of reading, encourage the student to use some of the following rules of thumb.

- Think carefully about the beginnings and endings of sections of the text, and, too, about the opening and closing of the work as a whole. These *privileged positions* in the text usually carry important information.
- Think carefully about any assertions that the author seems inclined to *repeat*.
- Look closely at any *oppositions or conflicts* that would seem important in the writer's treatment of the subject matter.
- Try to list any *unstated assumptions* that might guide the author to think the way he or she does. Can you think of anyone who might not share these assumptions and why?
- Why did the author choose to *title* the piece the way he or she did?
- Are there any *compelling details* that trigger for you any vivid memories or strong emotions? How do these color your sense of where the author is trying to take you as a reader?
- Always read everything *more than once*.
- Always try to have *conversations* about the things you read, whether with classmates, friends, or whomever, for all sorts of unexpected insights can emerge in the natural flow of dialogue.
- Try to read resistently, to find ways to *disagree* with or at least to complicate the author's message.
- List as many memorable details in the text and categorize them according to Kenneth Burke's pentad of "Who-What-When-Where-Why." And then try to link a detail from one category to a seemingly unrelated detail in another category to evoke a certain resonance between them, the resonance of *metaphor*. As larger and larger metaphoric relations emerge among more and more details, something like the notorious "hidden meaning" of the text will be revealed.

The most important strategy at all for reading analytically is, however, the first one discussed above: the habit of constructing a context by situating the text alongside others that seem relevant. Strong analytic readers do this unconsciously and out of sheer habit all the time, drawing, as they do, on vast reserves of past reading experiences. To teach your students to do this, simply give them lots of practice: always ask them to write about one reading in terms of another, "through the lens" of another, even if the question or prompt for their writing is as simple as "what would writer A probably say to writer B about the point of connection between their work?"