

Paired Readings Presentation & Critical Question

engl 250 / sec. B / autumn quarter 2008-09 / chang



Our class covers a broad survey of American literatures, from Thomas Jefferson to Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Allen Ginsberg to Octavia Butler. One of the best ways to explore and understand a text is through close reading. Another way to explore and understand a text, using what you have gained through reading, is through lively discussion and questioning both the text and your experience of it.

In order to accommodate everyone in the class, you will sign-up for a readings presentation in pairs. As a team, you will read the texts assigned for that particular day, generate a critical question, and get class discussion started. As a team, you will be required to create a 1-page handout copied for the whole class that includes:

a very brief biography of the writer, a brief synopsis of the text, your critical question, and any other information you feel is useful or relevant. Readings presentations should be 3 to 5 minutes.

What is a Critical Question?

Generating critical questions is a necessary and useful academic skill; critical questions are often the beginning of intellectual or theoretical or artistic exploration, require active and attentive reading and thinking, and can generate the beginnings of analysis, multiple perspectives on an issue, topics for research, ways to critique and understand a text, and further curiosity for the material at hand.

Your critical question for your readings presentation should develop from a close reading of one of the week's texts and your critical thinking about the text. **What questions or concerns do you want to ask of the text? What questions or concerns does the text ask of you?** Your critical question should be developed, dimensional, and complex that pushes beyond simple questions of theme, symbolism, personal opinion, or personal reaction. Consider the following when generating your critical question; your critical question:

—May focus on one passage or one main idea of the text. How does the passage fit the overall text? How does the main idea run through the whole text? What makes the passage or idea important? What connections does it make to other texts, to the course goals?

—May think about the larger critical questions of our class, beyond just the course goals. What does the text reveal about our “culture”? How and why and what does the text respond to, reassert, or critique keywords like race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and citizenship.

—Asks more than, “What does _____ mean?” Critiques more than just theme, symbol, character, plot, setting. Think about the following: What is important about _____? Does _____ raise questions about representation (or how the text makes meaning), how we understand our lives and our world? Does _____ challenge or perpetuate cultural definitions, norms, traditions, ideologies?

—Begins with “How might...” or “Why...” and requires answers beyond yes or no, right or wrong, black or white. How and why and what would your answer to such a question be? In fact, critical questions often invite many different ways to answer a question and different kinds of evidence and reasoning as well.

—May be explicitly about the form, structure, language, and rhetorical or literary features of the text. What is its genre (short story, poem, essay, novel, play)? How and why and what does it play with form? What rhetorical or literary features does it possess? How and why and what does it play with these features? How is the text answering the question, “What is literature?”

—Contextualizes the text in history, geography, politics, academia, and its conditions and modes of production. In other words, how and why and what is important about when the text was made, who the text was made for, where it was made, how it was made, and why it was made? What does its context tell us about our own context as we read it now?

The ability to generate a critical question (and critical answer) will be invaluable for your Critical Response Papers as well.

Guidelines and Due Dates

- Format:** 3 to 5 minute oral presentation, prepare a critical question for the class
prepare a 1-page typed handout, copied for the class, posted to the class blog with the subject line formatted like: "9/26 READINGS PRESENTATION: Declaration of Independence"
refer to specific passages and the texts for the week
be prepared to answer your own question
- Evaluation:** you will be graded on preparedness, quality of handout, and overall cooperation;
on the date of your presentation, both presenters **must** email me with a one paragraph assessment of your presentation partner discussion division of work, each person's responsibilities, how much time you spent on the presentation, and a final evaluation, from 1 = very poor to 5 = very good, of your overall experience
- Due:** on your sign-up date, at least once during the quarter