

DEVELOPING CRITICAL QUESTIONS AS A READER

Below is a brief description of "critical questioning" – the reading strategy you should be using as you approach all of the readings in this course from here forward in order to begin taking clear (thesis) positions on the things you read before you're asked to write about them.

"Critical questions" derive from a classical dialectical tradition commonly referred to as the "Socratic Method" – a pattern of persistent questioning that's meant to unfold through dialogue with a work and is specifically designed to help us see beneath the surface of something in order to better understand its ideas but also *how* it communicates, *how* its arguments are constructed.

Critical questions that focus on "rhetorical strategies," (which are just the formal word and sentence patterns and persuasive tactics a writer uses to communicate) are designed to help you decide how and then how well a text is written and why you think so. Critical questions help you read smarter, so that you understand more and can then more easily articulate what you like and don't like about the writing – because you understand it and what it's trying to do.

Again, the goal is to understand what a text means and how it's built to mean just that. And if you see those specific language tactics in a text, you can generate ideas and arguments to critique or respond to the work in a much more fruitful and sophisticated way. You'll also be able to connect the text to others you've read, deepening your comprehension of them too.

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Why ask critical questions?

These critical questions you're learning how to ask here will help you see the fundamental connection between form and meaning in any work. What's that mean? It means that if you learn how to ask the right questions now about how and why something is written the way it is, you'll discover that writing is just a series of formal choices – word by word, sentence by sentence – that a writer makes in order to say something, in order to deliver an idea. Reading won't seem so mysterious and unfathomable to you if you learn how to peel it apart – that's the idea here.

Let's divide the world into simple categories of good writing and bad writing for a moment. Here's the thing: there's a direct correlation between good ideas and good writing, and it's this: the meaning of a work is "good" because *the writing* lets you see it, not because the ideas themselves are good. Bad, or ineffective, writing hides good ideas, no matter how good they are. Put another way: a given piece of writing is only successful when the *language* is effectively controlled and manipulated, not because characters or themes, ideas or meaning are inherently "good" on their own.

What makes good writing sing, what makes you laugh or weep over "good" writing, is how well the language is handled by the writer. A poem is a fine illustration of this. Poems are all about formal strategy, about the plan the poet has for each line and how it fits into the larger puzzle of the poem. Poems are about how well a poet is able to lay words down on a page so that we'll get the exact meaning and impression from them that the poet wants us to. Poems have to be about successful control of rhyme and rhythm, word choice and word order before they can be about idea or meaning. The same is true of other kinds of writing. The writing comes first, and meaning follows.

So when you're focusing on critiquing or even just understanding a work, focus on the writing itself, focus on how it's built to communicate with you. Look at sentence patterns and how paragraphs are developed, look at how ideas are supported and illustrated. Take note of what kind of voice the writer is using to talk to us. Ask yourself if those things are handled well by the writer, or not. Ask yourself why one piece of writing is better than another – when they're both ostensibly about the same thing. What does one do that the other does not? Ask yourself what the writer is actually doing with the language to get you to laugh or weep.

Studying the writing will help you really discover the work, and then you'll understand how form and meaning are absolutely connected. One makes the other possible. This is a fundamentally liberating, even revolutionary, principal. If you can learn how to read a text well enough to see which patterns the writer uses to make it, you'll (A) understand the work and the writer's intention better, and (B) begin learning why some writing strategies (even simple things like quoting another source for support, or using 2nd person voice to talk to the reader more directly) are better than others to reach readers in a given context. You'll learn what makes good writing good – and then you'll be able to emulate those same good strategies in your own work, ideally. Two very good reasons to work hard at asking the questions below of the things you read in this class and out of it.

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Some example starter questions:

Typically, critical questions that are meant to help you lift up the text and examine how it's built are open-ended, not summative yes/no questions. They should require you to form an academic opinion about how and how well a writer writes – and then support that position with explanation and analysis, and references back to the writing. Below are a few examples of the first questions you should be asking of any text. Note that many of them are not “what” questions (though some are). “What” questions often lead to closed, yes/no or fact-based answers which don't generally lead us into further discussion or analysis on their own. Open-ended “how,” “why,” or “In what way” questions are much better for stimulating complex consideration of the relative effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a given text.

- Who wrote the work? When and where was it written? What's it about?
- Who appears to be the audience for the text. What clues in the text lead you to make that conclusion?
- Is there a primary argument made by the writer, and if so, what is it? What language indicates to you that it's the primary argument?
- In what ways does the author's own political or social agenda or moral position reinforce or undermine the effectiveness of the arguments being made, or even the writing as a whole?
- What kinds of evidence does the writer offer to support the position(s) put forth in the work? Does the support seem relevant to the points made? How?
- How convincing is the support and illustration - do you believe the work? Why (not)?
- Which other parts of the writing - the writing itself, not the ideas expressed in the work - are the most and least credible? Why?
- What does the author actually do with the writing at any given moment in order to achieve a particular rhetorical effect - in order to make us think or feel in a certain way?
- How does the author use imagery or colloquial language to reinforce his/her points?
- Does the structure of sentences and paragraphs and the overall organization guide you and help you follow the author's story or communicative intent? How?
- What are the strengths of the article? Is it difficult to read and understand? Why?
- Do you think the position this author is taking is fair or valid or reasonable given how s/he has constructed his/her arguments in the work? Why or why not?

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Additional focused question sets:

Here are some more specific questions you should be asking about form and rhetorical strategy in a work as you begin developing your own arguments about how and how well the writing in it performs as a piece of communication:

- WHAT IS THE WRITER'S "BIG IDEA" — HIS/HER MAIN CLAIM OR THESIS?
 1. Can you summarize the principal claim or the main idea of the work?
 2. Given that main claim or big idea driving the work, what assumptions—stated and unstated—are being made by the writer about the subject and the audience of the piece, and are they fair?

- WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT OR EVIDENCE IS OFFERED ON BEHALF OF THE CLAIM?
 1. Are the examples and the analogies relevant, and are they convincing?
 2. Do statistics and data, if they're used, seem accurate and complete? Are they manipulated to allow only for the writer's interpretation? Can they be interpreted differently?
 3. Are authorities or references cited in the work actually authorities on the subject, can they be regarded as impartial?
 4. Does the author consider ideas that are opposed to his or her own? How does s/he present them - as legitimate? Absurd? Partially correct? False?
 5. Are important terms satisfactorily defined?
 6. Is the logic valid and the reasoning sound?
 7. What kind of appeal is the writer making to the audience—emotional, ethical, moral, political, theocratic? Is this kind of appeal acceptable? Does it fit the subject?

- DOES THE WRITER—AND THE ARGUMENT—SEEM FAIR TO YOU?
 1. Are counterarguments adequately considered? Do they even need to be?
 2. Do you see evidence of dishonesty, or attempts by the writer to manipulate the audience?
 3. How does the writer establish the image of herself or himself that you sense in the writing—what style, tone, and voice has the writer chosen in order to convey the underlying "message" of the piece, and the position of the writer his- or herself?
 4. Do you react at an emotional level as you read? Does this reaction change at all throughout the text? Do you think that's the kind of response the writer is looking for? Why?

- CAN YOU CHARACTERIZE THE KIND OF WRITING THIS IS, AND THE TYPE OF LANGUAGE THAT'S BEING USED?
 1. Is the piece a polemic (an argument), an expository (an explanation) or descriptive piece, narrative (a story) or lyric (a song or poem)—or a blend of more than one of these?
 2. Is the language mostly concrete, or mostly abstract—does it deal mostly in things or ideas? Does this strategy work for the piece?
 3. In what mode does the writer develop his/her ideas? Narration? Description? Definition? Comparison? Analogy? Cause and Effect? Example? Why does the writer use these methods of development?
 4. Do the sentences and paragraphs have variety, balance, economy, complexity, poetry?
 5. Are there any patterns in the sentence structure? Can you make any connections between the patterns and the writer's purpose?
 6. Are devices of comparison used to convey or enhance meaning? Which tropes - similes, metaphors, personification, hyperbole, etc. does the writer use? When does s/he use them? Why?
 7. What kinds of symbol, image and metaphor does the writer deploy? Where? Why?
 8. Is there anything unusual in the writer's use of punctuation? What other techniques of emphasis (italics, capitals, underlining, ellipses, parentheses) does the writer use, and for what effects? Dashes to create a hasty breathlessness? Semi-colons for balance or contrast?
 9. Are important terms repeated throughout the text? Which ones, and why are they repeated?

10. Does the writer use devices of humor to communicate? Puns? Irony? Sarcasm? Understatement? Parody? Is the effect comic relief? Pleasure? Hysteria? Ridicule? Why, and to what effect?
11. Does the opening of the piece grab your attention with something colorful or controversial or compelling? Why does this make the paragraph more interesting? How does it help frame the rest of the piece?
12. Is the writing clear, the organization effective, the transitions between paragraphs and between ideas well built? Does the work make sense? Why (not)?

➤ WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN THE WRITING AND THE READER?

1. How do the specific language patterns that you've found relate to the ultimate meaning of the work?
2. What are you, as reader, being asked by the writer to do or believe? Why?
3. Is the intended audience of the piece clear? Who is that audience, and why has the writer chosen that audience for the piece?

➤ IF YOU WERE ASKED TO RESTATE THE WRITER'S INTENTION—HIS OR HER IMPLICIT AGENDA BEHIND THE PIECE OF WRITING—WHAT WOULD THAT BE?

1. Are you able, during your reading of the piece, to separate facts from judgments from opinions that the writer offers up?
2. Is there a political or emotional bias to the writing? What is it? Is it okay with you, as a reader?

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What should you do with the answers to all of these questions you're asking of the text?

Ultimately, your questions need to be “thesis-generating”: that is, they need to help you understand a work better, but then they need to help you write about it critically too. (They should also compel you to reach back into the work for specific textual evidence to support your conclusions.) This is the bottom line: Your answer to one or more of these critical questions, in the form of a straightforward declarative statement, can readily become a subjective position, a thesis argument for an essay-length examination of the work. That's the idea behind these sets of questions. Ideally, they should allow to you create a kind of argumentative platform on which you can construct an answer, a subjective position on how effective you think a given piece of writing is based on what you've seen the writer do with his/her language in the work.

Note again though that the purpose of these kinds of textual questions (about the effectiveness of given rhetorical strategies) is not to help you develop an opinion about a writer's ideas, or agree/disagree with them. All of these questions and others like them share a key common trait: they require a reader to look hard at the writing and then develop a hypothesis about how well it works at the level of communication. Taking your own position vis á vis the writer's position(s) is not the purpose of questions about strategy and form. The purpose is to help you look at how and how well something is built, and then to discuss the work in those terms.

Use these questions to help you focus on form and strategy in the text, not ideas. Use these questions to help you develop your own thesis positions about the strength or failure of a piece of writing based on how well it manipulates the rules of language, not on how good or bad the ideas or thematic content is. Ask questions and develop arguments about *the writing itself* – that's the purpose and use value of the critical question patterns on this sheet, and it's the best way for you to become a better reader and writer.

Questions and text on this sheet have been drawn and adapted from the following sources:

<http://www.writingcentre.ubc.ca/workshop/tools/rhet1.htm>
http://www.english.lsu.edu/English_UWriting/FILES/item34401.pdf
Current Issues and Enduring Questions, 8th ed, Barnett & Bedau