

Comp Quickreads

CSULA Department of English

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Engaging with Texts

Encouraging Active Reading and Inquiry

- Before beginning a new reading, especially one in a new genre, it is important to create the context for the reading. Why are students being asked to read this text? What kinds of questions might they have? What might prove difficult to them?
- Encourage students to read actively, making notes and carrying on a conversation with the text.
- Encourage students to record their initial impressions and questions immediately after reading. What were they thinking about at the end? What did they find satisfying? What did they find unsatisfying? What questions do they still have?
- Encourage students to relate the “knowledge” of the text to what they already know. What did they read that was new? What was surprising? How has the “knowledge” of the text altered their thinking?
- Encourage (or require) students to prepare “authentic” questions for sharing with the class. An “authentic” question is the student’s own question—one in which he or she is invested and to which he or she is likely to persist in seeking answers.

We spend a lot of time in the English Department thinking about texts, whether they are in the form of a physical book written by a famous writer or in the form of the world as a text. We teach texts and produce texts. We require students to read texts and we hope that they will produce texts of their own. Given our passion for texts, is it any wonder that our composition courses focus on helping students engage with texts. In fact, our recent revision of the ENGL 096 scoring guide associates strong writing with meaningful and appropriate “engagement” with texts and adequate or inadequate writing with routine or minimal “response” to texts. But what exactly is the nature of that engagement? What are we asking students to do?

At least part of what we expect students to *do* is very mechanical. Quotation, paraphrase, and summary, the differences between them and their appropriate uses often occupy parts of several class meetings and feature prominently on learning objectives for first-year writing courses. Then there is the arcane and seemingly impenetrable world of citation and proper bibliographic format. MLA, APA, Chicago, ACS, CBE, ASCE, IEEE, AIM, AIP and other equally mysterious conventions probably strike students as cruel and perverse. Certainly some part, perhaps an inordinate part, of what we expect students to *do* with texts is mere machinery.

We also expect students to be capable information gatherers. Texts represent repositories of information, data that students hopefully transform into knowledge. But as students become more experienced readers and writers, they hopefully become more analytical and critical as both readers and writers. Texts that stood before as irrefutable in their authority might

be subjected to increasing skepticism when viewed against a background of contradictory texts, conflicting perspectives and controversy over what counts as “fact.” Once the bulwark of unthinking deference has been breached, texts become less and less pronouncements from on high and more and more lived rhetorical documents governed by the very real human concerns of purpose, audience and conventions. It is finally at this stage that we encounter something that looks familiar to experienced readers and writers.

Rather than asking what we expect students to do with texts, perhaps we should have started by asking what *we* do with texts, or even more simply, why we read. Readers might respond that they read because they want to know, learn, feel, experience. “There is no frigate like a book,” according to Emily Dickenson. Perhaps the pleasure we derive from reading comes from the raising and satisfying of this curiosity that appears at the center of our reading experience. Reading, as Peter Brooks notes, might be tied up with desire, a kind of “epistemophilia” that motivates us to become involved and invested in the text.

Curiosity it seems is at the center of our reading experience. Without curiosity and the pleasure that goes with it, students will struggle to move from passively “responding” to texts to actively “engaging,” becoming entangled in and grappling with texts. Active reading strategies can help students enter into a conversation with the text. We can also help by modeling the kinds of conversations we have with texts, and by facilitating the kinds of conversations we want to have about texts. Most important though might be helping students recognize their own curiosity and the pleasures of asking the right question.