

The Role of Active Reading in Interpreting & Writing About Texts^[1]

Based on a Tri-Fold Model for Reading and Inquiry: The *Trivium*

Grammar Stage ⇒ What?	Logic Stage ⇒ How?	Rhetoric Stage: Why, or So What?
Acquiring Information	Evaluating Information	Interpreting Information
1 st read	Subsequent Readings	Subsequent readings
Non-Critical reading	Active, “recursive” reading	Active, “recursive” reading
Skills: notation, summary	Skills: evaluation, analysis See “Tool Kit”	Skills: interpretation, argumentation
“Taste”	“Swallow”	“Digest”

Terms Defined:

Active Reading Defined Reading can either be passive or active. “Passive [or *non-critical*] reading is a process of absorption. *Active reading* is a process of interpretation and reflection, whereby a reader constructs meaning, establishes significance, and reflects on the limits of his or her understanding. Active readers are often conscious of their moves and can describe them” (Salvatori 128). Active reading is “recursive”—“a reading that returns the reader to a previously covered terrain. A deeper, more thorough, interpretation” (128). Because good writing about literature depends on good reading of it, this is the kind of skilled reading we need to develop and hone for this course.

☞ Components of *active reading*:

- a) Slow down and know that a second (or even a third) reading is in order.
- b) In the preliminary, “grammar” stage, read with a pen or pencil in hand in order to **notate** your text.
- c) Upon subsequent, more studied readings – the logic and rhetoric stages – begin to furnish the work with explanatory / interpretive notes (**annotation**) as you embark the process of 1) judging the merit of a work’s claims (evaluation); 2) assessing how the parts of the work fit into the whole (analysis); and 3) forming an interpretive position about the meaning, significance, and relevance of the work as a whole (argumentation).
- d) To facilitate your understanding at all levels, **ask questions – basic or “practical” as well as theoretical or “interpretive”** – and begin to **respond to them in writing**.

1) **Notational System**: “a pattern of marks readers employ during the reading process to remember certain elements of a text and record their reactions to these elements. Such notations function as a method of retrieval, allowing readers to return to a text, recall their first impressions, move beyond, and complicate the.” Readers who employ a system of notation find themselves reading more actively and respond better in class discussion (and on quizzes!), since while they read they actively engage themselves in the process of thinking about and writing to a text. (Salvatori 19)

☞ Suggestions for developing a system of notation (adapted from Gardner, 5-6)

- a) Underline, circle, or otherwise highlight passages that strike you as particularly important and relevant.
- b) Make notes in the margins as to why certain points strike you.
- c) Look for unusual features of language.
- d) Look for and take note of recurring motifs, words, symbols, images.
- e) Develop a system of shorthand and coded symbols (i.e., ? for question or confusion; ! for a surprising idea, something unexpected; (☆) to make something stand out).

2) **Annotation**: furnishing a literary work with explanatory notes; responding to a text with the goal of interpreting, establishing, and constructing meaning. You might annotate a significant passage or two, focusing on how isolated and salient places in the text form larger patterns of meaning.

3) **Interpretive Questions**: “If you are reading well, your textual annotations and notes will probably be full of

questions. Some of these may be simple inquiries of fact, the sort of thing that can be answered by asking your instructor or doing some quick research. But ideally, many of your questions will be more complex and meaty than that, the sort of probing queries that may have multiple, complex, or even contradictory answers. These are the questions that will provoke you and your classmates to think still more critically about the literature you have read. You need not worry—at least not at first—about finding answers to all your questions. As you work more with the text, discussing it with your instructor and peers, writing about it, and reading other related texts, you will begin to respond to the most important of the issues you've raised. And even if you never form a satisfactory answer to some questions, they will have served their purpose if they have made you think or in some way frame your interpretation of the text (Gardner 7-13).

Basic queries, remember, have definitive, generally simple answers and are often grounded in “literal,” surface-level meanings of a text; there is little complexity and depth. Theoretical or interpretive questions require more lengthy, in-depth responses that are not conclusive but matters of “lawyer-like” persuasion and evidence-based argumentation. Until you have answered all the basic questions about the text (such as “What is taking place?” “Who is this about?” and so forth), you will not be able to answer the interpretive or theoretical ones with complexity and nuance. Nor will you be able to achieve the level of specificity and depth that produces sharp analytical and argumentative writing.

Some Interpretive Questions:

- a) *Questions about the text:* These questions might focus on issues such as genre, structure, language, style, the presence of certain images, etc.
- b) *Questions about the author:* Questioning how an author's age, gender, religious beliefs, family structure, and other factors might have an impact on the writer's expression and may lend relevant critical insight to the study of a particular text.
- c) *Questions about the cultural context:* Questioning how a particular time and place, the wider social and cultural context of the author's life and its influence on the production of the text, inform or even challenge our understanding of the text.
- d) *Questions about the reader:* This type of questioning takes into account how different readers may filter the same text—through personal associations, emotions, shared cultural experience—and with different outcomes. It is worthwhile, for example, to consider the difference (and implications) in how a work's originally intended audience may have responded to a text versus how the text affects its contemporary readers.

It is crucial at all stages of the reading process to respond to questions through “informal” writing. The goal here is two-fold: (1) to discover meaning by responding to a question that makes you “rethink” and “reread” a text and your initial responses to it; and (2) to climb the level of specificity, both in your questioning and writing, in order to move from a more “obvious” to more complex examination of the text at hand. Oftentimes you will find that this informal writing leads you to discover a “driving question” (the key question or “problem” your essay will address), the findings of which you will present in your paper in the form of the thesis idea (see handout on “Thesis Construction”).

[1] Material adapted and cited directly from Janet Gardner's *Writing About Literature* and Mariolina Salvatori's *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty*