

ANALYZING A TEXT

Years ago I was a freshman in college. (Yes, they had discovered fire then, but only just!) I took a course that was intended to teach me how to analyze literary texts. We started with poems, and the professor (he was also my TA, remarkably enough) passed out a step-by-step assignment sheet. I just found it, buried in a file folder, and it seemed useful. So I pass it along to you:

I. Object

Your object is to guide your reader to a full and relevant experience of the text. As you read your first draft, ask yourself: 'How does this statement help a reader to get what the text is expressing?'

II. Preparation

Questions to answer:

1. What does the text express? [I'd put it a different way -- what specific human issue or question does the text approach? I emphasize "specific." And your attention should be on *issues*, not plot elements. *Moby Dick* is "about" a fishing trip, but that's hardly the reason why pedantic teachers keep assigning it. Something more like "*Moby Dick* grapples with complex issues of power and belief, hung on the frame of a very simple plot." "Defining the issue" may take two or three hard, precise, coherent sentences. Skip the large "filosofizing" -- "Mankind has been troubled by love since the beginning of recorded time:" that sort of thing.]
2. How is the text organized? For example:
 - a. What is the dramatic situation and tone? What particular uses of language define the tone?
 - b. What metaphors and images do you find? How are they connected? Is there a dominant metaphor? What significance(s) is there to the order in which metaphors are presented?
 - c. How is the text organized as an experience to the ear? [It will help to read the text aloud, maybe even several times]. Note some peculiarities in what you hear when you read the text. Can you point to any arrangements of words or syllables which affect what you heard? In what ways do the arrangements of sound connect ideas or metaphors? In what ways do they work against the explicit "point" of a particular line or paragraph? [This is where rhyme and meter come in. But remember your work is to define expression, not to describe. If you point out a rhyme, you should offer some propositions about how that rhyme, how joining those two [or more] particular words leads to expression of ideas and situations. And remember that not all rhyme is end-rhyme. And if the terminology of scansion is available to you, use it -- or look it up.]

d. How is the plot shaped? What are the implications of the beginning and ending point of the text? What is the climactic or decisive "turning point" of the text, and what are the implications of this arrangement? Similar questions can and should be asked about characters, settings, and the angle from which the text is presented to us.

Be careful, here - the Summarizing Daemon will be lurking in wait for you. Retelling the story or summarizing the "facts" of a character's description is a waste of your time and mine. In fact, it's a bit of an insult to me - I have been reading for nearly 50 years now, so I really don't need your help with that.

2. How is the experience of the text shaped and qualified by these different modes of organization? Can you describe what is expressed through tone or metaphor or choices about plot, setting, point of view, and characterization? How must you adjust your provisional statement (that is, item #1) to fit what you have been discovering as you pay closer attention to particular aspects of the text?

III. Writing

1. Write an essay using what you have learned by asking the above and similar questions.
2. Under each general point in your essay, select one or two of the most telling examples, and support your statement by analyzing those examples *closely*.