



# THE WRITING PROCESS

## Guidelines for Critical Reading

When you read texts for academic classes—either fiction/literature or nonfiction—your job is to read in order to understand, interpret, and ultimately discuss an author’s work either orally or in writing. While fiction/literature and nonfiction have many different qualities, the first step is always to read carefully and critically. Critical reading is active reading: the search for meanings, connections, patterns as you go through the material. Making notes as you read can be the basis for analysis and interpretation when you write. Here are two outlines for critical reading, one for fiction/literature and one for nonfiction.

### READING FICTION/LITERATURE

#### General Guidelines

- read fiction/literature (poetry and drama) more than once
- read for the total experience of the work
- read slowly for the words, feelings, emotions, ideas
- underline key words, phrases, and passages
- take notes on responses, ideas, and questions that occur to you
- look up important words in the dictionary
- in poetry and drama especially, read aloud
- be open to new possibilities; do not reject that which can't be understood on the first reading

#### Ask Silent Questions about the Work

- What is the basic story or plot?
- Who are the characters? If there is a specific character speaking, who is the speaker and who is s/he addressing?
- What is the context or situation?
- Where is the action taking place?
- When is the action taking place? in what historical period, and at what point in the development of the story?
- Do you see a conflict, a matter that must be resolved, a goal that the characters are seeking?
- Do there seem to be themes and ideas which are implied, rather than being explicitly stated?

#### Consider the Major Literary Elements

- consider why the author chose to organize the narrative as s/he did
- study the characters, their qualities, conflicts, growth or decline
- consider how the themes are explored through action, description, and dialogue
- take note of any recurrent ideas
- give thought to the specific words that the author has chosen—the images, metaphors, similes, other language devices and patterns

## **Analyze the Relationships**

- How do the various elements of plot and subplot relate to each other and to the central theme of the work?
- How do the relationships among the characters illustrate and develop the theme of the work?
- How does the writer relate to the reader? through direct address? through an invitation to share her/his point of view? as a guide to the “life” of the narrative?
- How do you personally relate to the work? What emotions, thoughts, or questions are provoked in you?

## **READING NONFICTION**

### **Understand the Content**

- underline key sentences; circle key words
- take notes in the margin
- use a dictionary
- write a brief summary of main points

### **Evaluate the Content**

- trace the development of the argument or narrative
- look for logic; look for appeals to emotions
- look for consideration of both sides to the argument
- look for evidence, analysis, reasoning
- look for meaningful sources to support claims of fact

### **Evaluate Yourself**

- beware of your own biases for or against certain ideas
- evaluate whether your reactions are based on limited cultural attitudes
- consider your immediate responses; then evaluate whether you've made a hasty conclusion or reacted according to cultural assumptions of your own era or situation

### **Consider the Author and Historical Context**

- What is the author's authority to speak on the subject? personal experience? scholarly study? research?
- What is the motive behind the author's essay? self-justification? propaganda? information dissemination?
- Who was the original audience for the work?
- Where was it first published? in a book? magazine? as a lecture?
- What were the biases of the original audience?
- Do any elements of the historical period in which it was written explain elements of the work itself?