Critical Reading Across the Curriculum

Critical Reading Across the Curriculum

Volume 1: Humanities

Edited by Robert DiYanni and Anton Borst

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Preface

Critical reading is a term frequently invoked throughout academia; much less often is it explained. What are the steps and procedures that constitute this complex process? How can those steps and procedures be articulated to help teachers in the upper secondary and introductory college classroom explain them to, and practice them with, their students? Critical reading skills are not something we can assume our students – at any level – possess, and however effective we may be as critical readers ourselves, *teaching* the skills of critical reading is another matter entirely. Veteran teachers may rely on their experience and expertise in showing students how to read critically in their fields, but even the best teachers sometimes face challenges in translating their internalized practices into explicit strategies for their students.

To address this problem, we invited scholar-teachers from across the humanities to describe what they do as critical readers themselves. We asked them to demonstrate and apply the strategies and frameworks they typically use, and to explain what they do to help their students develop critical reading skills. *Critical Reading Across the Curriculum* is the result of their responses to that invitation.

The book's thirteen essays weave together various thematic threads, perhaps the most important of which is the connection between critical reading and writing. A number of contributors suggest that to teach critical reading effectively students need to write regularly in response to their reading. This writing can take the form of short reflections, annotations and marginalia, and analyses and arguments that range in length from a few sentences to full-term research papers.

In the title of his essay, "Reciprocal Acts: Reading and Writing," Pat Hoy identifies the close and necessary relationship between reading and writing, deftly mingling them himself while laying out in careful detail how to teach these intertwined processes. Like Pat Hoy, other contributors offer assignments linking reading and writing, such as Thomas Kitts, Anton Borst, and Amy Hamlin, whose essays concern reading pop songs, digital reading practices, and creating and editing art history content on Wikipedia, respectively.

A second common theme is connecting critical reading skills with the world outside the classroom. In his essay on reading religious texts, Thomas Petriano emphasizes the transformative value of critical reading, whatever his students' status as religious believers. Lawrence Scanlon shows how rhetoric lies at the heart of his students' everyday interactions in school, at home, and online. And in her essay on using gender studies as a model for critical reading, Pamela Burger challenges students to read gender construction through increasingly complex texts, including the photographs of contemporary feminist artists Melanie Pullen and Cindy Sherman.

A third shared theme among our contributors is the importance of context in critical reading, especially of making contextual connections. Robert DiYanni raises issues of context in his consideration of E. B. White's *New Yorker* piece about the 1969 moon landing, and additionally in a set of exercises on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. In his essay on teaching history, Michael Hogan argues for the centrality of understanding historical documents in terms of the social and political conditions that produced them. Adrian Barlow demonstrates the importance of invoking multiple contexts – literary, historical, social, cultural, and political – for analyzing and interpreting literature. And Anton Borst reflects on how to help students navigate – and critically engage – the digital context through which much of their reading is now mediated.

Pervading the book's essays is an emphasis on strategies for helping students attend and focus, techniques essential for getting students to re-read and reflect, to re-think and re-consider. Focusing their attention in these ways enables students to analyze and interpret texts – it allows them to begin thinking critically about what they read. Our authors explain how to make valid inferences from texts based on careful noticing of words and phrases, of details and images, of claims and supporting evidence. They provide guidance in comparing and contrasting texts in order to produce effective critical analysis.

In attending to each of these aspects of critical reading, contributors consistently emphasize the importance of questions in critical reading and critical reasoning. In his piece on reading film, William Costanzo links analytical questions to various theoretical approaches to film, including formal, cultural, and genre analysis. In his approach to the critical reading of philosophical texts, Matt Statler demonstrates Socratic questioning through a critical reading of Plato's *Meno*. Adrian Barlow develops a series of increasingly complex interpretive questions based on close reading, contextual reading, and comparative analysis of related texts. And in his essay on digital reading, Anton Borst questions the idea of the digital native in order to critically engage technology's impact on student reading practices.

Reading as dialogue, debate, and engaged conversation permeates the work gathered here. In his essay on theater, Louis Scheeder argues for the importance of argument in drama, highlighting the ways dialogue and debate dramatize a play's conflicts and concepts, and how William Shakespeare's iambic pentameter verse line provides essential keys to understanding the "thinking" of his characters. Adrian Barlow demonstrates how critical conversations between texts can produce effective readings of literature, a method also applied to the reading of images in the essays of Pat Hoy, Amy Hamlin, Pamela Burger, and William Costanzo. Thomas Petriano describes the reading of religious texts as a fundamentally dialogic act. And Robert DiYanni explains how critical reading requires both listening to and talking back to texts, engaging with them through reflection and dialogue.

Related to our contributors' emphasis on critical reading as conversation with texts and authors is a repeated emphasis on collaboration. Michael Hogan's essay on teaching history and Pat Hoy's on the reciprocity of reading and writing illustrate powerfully the ways students can work together to develop a critical understanding of texts. Other contributors also indicate ways for students to collaborate productively. Lawrence Scanlon's exercises – requiring students to do rhetorical analysis of paired texts of verse, prose, and speech – lend themselves well to collaborative engagement, as do the detailed exercises in William Costanzo's essay on the critical reading of films, Pamela Burger's essay on reading gender, and Amy Hamlin's piece on reading art history.

An overarching concern expressed throughout these essays is with the meaning of the term "critical reading." Our contributors uncover layers of implication in the term and demonstrate stunning variations in its application. All of them, however, understand the necessity for regular and sustained practice in developing critical reading skills. And so the essays in this book offer an abundance of inventive exercises and imaginative activities through which students may practice the various skills, techniques, and strategies of critical reading. These exercises, moreover, can be adapted and applied to a wide range of disciplines across the curriculum.

Teachers ourselves, our pedagogy has been greatly enriched through exploring the pedagogical perspectives of colleagues in humanities disciplines other than our own. The essays of the dedicated practitioners collected here reveal a careful attention to the craft of teaching critical reading. We hope you too may benefit from their experience, their insights, and their pedagogical expertise.

Robert DiYanni
Anton Borst

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1

Reading Responsively, Reading Responsibly

An Approach to Critical Reading

Robert DiYanni

Critical reading, like critical thinking, is a term much bandied about by educators from elementary education through university study. Like critical thinking, critical reading means different things to different people. What critical reading is and why it matters are genuine educational concerns because reading is a foundational skill for successful learning at every level of schooling; to succeed academically students need to become active, engaged, critical readers. The ability to read critically – to analyze a text, understand its logic, evaluate its evidence, interpret it creatively, and ask searching questions of it – is essential for higher-order thinking. Skill in critical reading builds students' confidence, enriches their understanding of the world, and enables their successful educational progress. Critical reading informs academic writing, particularly analysis and argument, inquiry and exploration – modes of writing required across academic disciplines.

In this essay I explain what critical reading involves, demonstrate applied critical reading in practice, and provide an approach to teaching students how to become critical readers. Framing this work, contextualizing and amplifying it, are discussions of responsible, responsive, and reflective reading.

We begin, though, by considering what critical reading is and is not, identifying some common student misconceptions.

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Being Critical

Students sometimes think their goal in reading is to agree or disagree with a text – to argue and take a stand vis-à-vis its author's idea or claim. Their understanding of "critical" is limited to "critique" and "criticism," to judging a text, to showing what's wrong with it, identifying its limitations and biases. That more complex work, important as it is, however, comes later, after the initial effort to comprehend what a text says. The first goal of critical reading is to understand. Students achieve understanding through learning to analyze texts carefully and thoroughly. They demonstrate understanding of texts by summarizing and paraphrasing them accurately in writing. These representations of texts need to be done respectfully and responsibly before students engage in any kind of critical challenge to them.

Critical reading focuses not only on what a text says but also on how it says what it does. In teaching our students to read critically, we first teach them to analyze a text's language and selection of detail, its genre, imagery, and form. We teach them to see how sentences and paragraphs are connected grammatically and conceptually, how writers create meaning through their selection of diction and detail, through their choices with respect to organization and development of idea. This fundamental work, however, though necessary, is not sufficient. We must teach our students something more as well.

The larger goals of critical reading include recognizing a writer's purpose, understanding his or her idea, identifying tone, evaluating evidence and reasoning, and recognizing a writer's perspective, position, and bias. Our teaching strategies should focus on helping students see what a writer says through how it is said. And those strategies should also include how well a writer's evidence supports his or her claims. These considerations are fundamental for reading critically in all disciplines.

To do this analytical work well, however, students need to overcome initial resistance to a text, the impulse to contradict, counter, or otherwise challenge it. To develop into effective and productive critical readers, students need at first to remain open to what a text offers. The performance artist/actor Matthew Goulish provides one approach to this kind of textual receptiveness. In his essay "Criticism" from *39 Microlectures* (2000), Goulish suggests that when we encounter any work of art, including imaginative works of all kinds (and by extension any verbal text), we should look for "moments of exhilaration." These special moments of textual encounter may be provoked by something exciting, engaging, or striking in a text, something that stirs our feelings, spurs our thinking, sparks our imagination. Here is how Goulish puts it:

> We may then look to each work of art not for its faults and shortcomings, but for its moments of exhilaration, in an effort to bring our own imperfections into sympathetic vibration with these moments, and thus effect a creative change in ourselves. These moments will, of course, be somewhat subjective, so that if we don't find one immediately, we will out of respect look again … In this way we will treat the work of art, in the words of South African composer Kevin Volans, not as an object in this world but as a window into another world. If we can articulate one window's particular exhilaration, we may open a way to inspire a change in ourselves, so that we may value and work from these recognitions. (p. 45)

This way of engaging with a text requires avoiding the tendency to find something wrong with it, something to criticize. Instead, we seek something that's right with the work, something exhilarating, anything at all that might prove useful – a vivid detail we admire, a discernible pattern that aids our understanding, an assertion that provokes our thinking, a question we begin answering for ourselves. Through these "moments of exhilaration" we establish a personal relationship with the text in ways that can lead to "a creative change in ourselves." The kinds of "recognitions" that arise from openness to a text or work are recognitions as much about ourselves as they are about what we read.

The concept of "moments of exhilaration" can stimulate students' engagement with a text, animating their thinking about it, opening for them metaphorical "windows into other worlds." Students' moments of exhilaration can provide ways into a text for them, a start toward finding something of value in it, something to extend their thinking, deepen their feeling, enrich their experience. By inviting students to identify, explain, and explore their exhilarating moments reading texts, we highlight their responsibility and validate their textual engagements.

We can and should demonstrate for our students the experience Goulish describes by sharing with them our own exhilarating moments of reading. What excites us about a text we have assigned? What have we ourselves found exhilarating about it? Why did we choose to read it in the first place? What possibilities for creative change might it offer our students when they read it in the open and attentive way Goulish suggests?

Responsible Reading, Responsive Reading

Goulish's advocacy of receptiveness to a work's promising possibilities constitutes one aspect of what we might call "responsible reading," an attitude toward texts and works that goes beyond responding to them subjectively, one that moves, instead, toward being accountable to them, toward a standpoint that Robert Scholes, in *Protocols of Reading* (1990), describes as "an ethic of reading" (p. 90). Part of this reading ethic involves the responsibility to give a text and its author their due. Our students need to hear out authors and texts, letting them have their say, whether they agree with an author's views or not, whether a text's ideas are accessible or difficult, regardless of who wrote a text, when it was written, or why. We need, in short, to encourage students to respect the integrity of texts, to read them responsibly. Henry David Thoreau, perhaps, has said it best: "Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written" (*Walden*, 1854/1983, p. 403).

This is a foundational principle of critical reading.

In reading responsibly we assume that a text possesses meaning. We give it, from this perspective, the benefit of the doubt. Our goal as ethical readers is to understand what a text means and to accurately represent that meaning in verbal or written form. In reading responsibly we try faithfully to follow an author's line of reasoning and to understand his or her perspective even when – especially when – the author's ideas, concepts, values, and perspectives differ from our own.

Once students have learned to read responsibly by attending carefully to texts, they can begin to assume authority over their reading, exercising power by talking back to the texts they read. They can balance giving texts a fair hearing with offering a judgment and critique earned through thoughtful, reflective analytical reading. In first listening and then responding to texts, students make them their own.

To produce something both respectful of the text and responsive to it that is distinctively the reader's own, George Steiner advocates writing in response to the texts we read. In "The Uncommon Reader" (1996), he suggests that reading responsibly requires that we be "answerable to the text" (p. 6). Our answerability includes both our response to the text and our responsibility for it; it requires an "answerable reciprocity" (p. 6) such that our critical engagement with a text results in a form of commerce with it, a textual dialogue, which can be best established through annotation and marginalia. Steiner suggests that in writing annotations, readers become servants of the text. Through annotation we attempt to elucidate the text for ourselves, to understand it, comprehend it. Marginalia, on the other hand, have not looked very carefully … look again, look again!" (1874, pp. 369–370).

Only after spending days and then weeks examining that single specimen was Scudder allowed to compare it with others that Agassiz brought him. Along the way, Scudder learned how to look with scrupulous attention to detail, and how to prepare himself to see things he didn't expect to see. There are lessons here, for sure, not the least of which is that learning to look requires persistence and perseverance. Patient, deliberate noticing gives students a chance to see more, think about what they see, and thus have something more to say about it.

Establishing Connections

Observing textual details and features, whatever the nature of our "text," however, is not enough. To read critically, students must also make connections among the details they notice. We should encourage them to look for two kinds of connections: (1) connections among textual details; (2) connections between the writer's text and their own lives and world. (And, of course, for non-verbal texts, connections among their basic elements, whether visual or aural, experiential or conceptual.)

For example, in reading the following couplet, which concludes Shakespeare's Sonnet 29, we would invite students to look for connections between and among the details of its two lines:

> For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
> That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

And so, they connect the "I" of the second line with the "thy" of the first. They relate the speaker's self to his beloved, whose "sweet love" he remembers. They relate the past tense of "remembered" to the present of "scorn to change." They contrast the literal wealth of kings with the metaphorical wealth of the speaker's love. From these related details, which also include rhyme and iambic pentameter, students can begin to think about meaning. We might ask them to explain the relationship between the couplet's two lines as a guide to its meaning, and to consider the couplet's meaning in relation to the meaning of the sonnet overall.

The connections we establish among observations move us toward meaning; those connections provide the basis for preliminary thinking about implications – about what those observed details might suggest or signify. Establishing and understanding relationships between and among details, and then between and among parts of a text, is crucial for critical reading.

Considering connections between text and world authenticates the work of critical reading, making it personally meaningful and valuable. And so with Shakespeare's couplet, students might think about how their experience of being unhappy or even depressed can change dramatically with the remembrance of someone they love, with the evocation of the beloved's image, such that nothing can compare with the value and power of that love.

Making Inferences

Establishing connections among textual details prepares us to make inferences about texts. One of the most important things we can do for our students is to help them make reliable inferences. We need to encourage them to make the inferential leap from the details they notice and connect. And we need to remind them that their inferences should be grounded in and supported by the details they observe and the connections they establish – textual evidence in short. When they make inferences, students should reasonably conclude that something is the case based on evidence – on what they have observed, and on connections between and among their observations. They need to learn that their inferences, however, may be correct or incorrect, or partly correct, and that inferences are hypotheses that need to be tested.

All disciplinary study requires making sound inferences. Scientists are expert inference makers. The scientific theories they develop out of the laws they devise are based upon their observations, which they test and confirm or disconfirm. They are inference-based extrapolations into the unknown from the observed data. In *The Meaning of It All* (1998), Richard Feynman calls them good guesses that have held up as true so far. Those good-guess inferences that determine the theory could be proven inadequate; they might be shown later to be slightly or even completely wrong. But they are the best inferences that can be made at the time – and thus they constitute current scientific knowledge. The guessing and estimating, the extrapolations from observation – the inference-making leading to laws and theories – all are essential for doing science.

Historical investigation follows an analogous process, mostly using primary and secondary source documents, rather than experiments, as evidence upon which to develop conclusions through reasoning inductively about particular instances and arriving at general principles. The particular details of history – historical facts, data, and other forms of information – provide the evidence for the development of inferences and theories of historical explanation.

Both scientific experimentation and historical analysis, however, may begin, and often actually do begin, with a theory or an idea – that is, with a generalization the investigator sets out to test by finding evidence that either supports or falsifies it. In this case, the process of thought moves from a general idea or concept to specific supporting evidence. Thus, thinking, including scientific and historical thinking, typically involves interplay between inductive and deductive reasoning, moving back and forth between them repeatedly in a looping, recursive process.

Our students need to understand this reciprocal process of investigative thinking. They need to know that they themselves do this in their everyday lives, and that this thinking process is formalized and deepened through academic study. We might suggest to them, in fact, that gaining confidence and competence in making inferences is essential for critical reading and critical thinking. Inference-making is a turning point in the critical reading/thinking process, one that pivots from the basic skills of observing and connecting to the deeper skills of concluding and evaluating.

Drawing Conclusions and Considering Values

Thinking about the inferences we make in analyzing a text leads us toward developing a conclusion about it, an interpretation. We should help students understand, first, that an interpretation must be grounded in textual evidence – in the observations and connections they make about it and in the inferences they draw from what they have noticed and related. We also need to help them understand that the interpretive conclusions they make are tentative and provisional. Their interpretations can change. Like the theories scientists develop and the theoretical models historians employ, a textual interpretation is subject to revision. It can change based on the re-reading of a piece, on a reader's having thought more about it, on having discussed it with others, on relating it to other texts and life experiences. Textual interpretations are always subject to modification.

So, too, are evaluations of texts. Students are inclined to evaluate. They like to offer opinions, to judge. We can capitalize on those tendencies by helping them understand what evaluation can mean for critical reading.

Evaluation consists of two different kinds of assessment: (1) a judgment about a work's achievement, including the power and persuasiveness of its ideas; (2) a consideration of the values the work reflects and/or embodies. In the first sense of evaluation, in evaluating an idea, for example, we consider its accuracy as a description, its validity as an argument, its persuasiveness and interest as a proposal, its credibility as an imaginative construction. Evaluation depends on interpretation, on understanding. Our understanding of a work's idea influences our evaluative judgment of it. That's why understanding a text is so important and why we need to work our students hard to determine what a text means, signifies, suggests for them.

In another type of "evaluation," we assess the social, cultural, political, religious, and other values reflected in a work; in the process, we bring our own values into play. Considering those kinds of values in a work brings students to a better understanding of their own. We need to help students understand that their social values reflect their beliefs and customs, that their cultural values are shaped by their racial, ethnic, and family heritage, and that these values are also affected by gender and language. These aspects of evaluation can help students move beyond thinking of evaluation as making a judgment about a text's quality, whether it is "good" or "interesting" – or not – to think more deeply about how texts endorse or reflect a wide range of cultural and other values.

An additional point about values is that as our values change, the ways we evaluate particular texts, objects, processes, artworks, and the like can change as well. We may have found Hawthorne's or Melville's fiction, for example, or the paintings of Picasso, unappealing when we were high school or college students only to discover their allure later in life. The history of taste represents one large-scale example of evaluative shifts. The music of Johann Sebastian Bach was not appreciated nearly as fully in his lifetime as it is today. The work of many women writers, painters, and religious and philosophical thinkers was long neglected. We need to help students understand that evaluation is dynamic rather than static, provisional rather than final.

Demonstration – E. B. White on the Moonwalk

We can demonstrate the process of responsible, reflective critical reading with a close look at E. B. White's paragraph about the first moonwalk, written for *The New Yorker* in 1969. White read his sixth and final draft over the phone to the magazine's editor. All six drafts can be found in the appendix to a biography of White by Scott Elledge (1986). We will use the critical reading framework to demonstrate how students might engage with a text, and what we could help them notice about White's achievement in his nine-sentence paragraph. The sentences have been numbered for ease of reference.

Notes and Comment

E. B. White

> [1]The moon, it turns out, is a great place for men. [2] One-sixth gravity must be a lot of fun, and when Armstrong and Aldrin went into their bouncy little dance, like two happy children, it was a moment not only of triumph but of gaiety. [3] The moon, on the other hand, is a poor place for flags. [4] Ours looked stiff and awkward, trying to float on the breeze that does not blow. [5] (There must be a lesson here somewhere.) [6] It is traditional, of course, for explorers to plant the flag, but it struck us, as we watched with awe and admiration and pride, that our two fellows were universal men, not national men, and should have been equipped accordingly. [7] Like every great river and every great sea, the moon belongs to none and belongs to all. [8] It still holds the key to madness, still controls the tides that lap on shores everywhere, still guards the lovers who kiss in every land under no banner but the sky. [9] What a pity that in our moment of triumph we did not forswear the familiar Iwo Jima scene and plant instead a device acceptable to all: a limp white handkerchief, perhaps, symbol of the common cold, which, like the moon, affects us all, unites us all.

White – Observations

We can begin by asking students what they see on the page: a single paragraph that begins with a brief sentence and ends with a much longer one. We might invite them to notice the length of White's sentences throughout the paragraph. They will find that his sentences vary quite a bit in length, that White intersperses his three very short sentences between longer ones. The varied sentence lengths avoid monotony, while aiding the paragraph's fluency. The longer sentences make room for complexity of thought.

We can ask about the function of White's opening sentences. "What do those initial sentences do?" we should ask them. The first sentence does two things: it makes an assertion; it creates surprise. Who would have thought (the surprise) that the moon (of all places) is "a great place for men"? Reading this sentence attentively, we wonder why White says what he does. We ask ourselves: "How" is the moon great for men? White's second sentence answers that question by positing two explanations: first, it is a place of "triumph"; second, it is a place of "gaiety," with White describing the two astronauts, Armstrong and Aldrin, as "happy children" doing a "bouncy little dance."

White – Conclusions and Values

What conclusions might our students make about White's paragraph? Foremost, we would want them to understand (from sentence 7) that it's not just the moon that provokes this paradoxical idea, but nature more generally: "every great river and every great sea." This universalizing concept is further developed and illustrated in sentence 8, which relies on familiar associations of the moon with madness and love, while recognizing as well the moon's physical influence on the watery tides "everywhere." We should help students see how White brings back the image of the flag in an implied comparison with the sky, the "banner" under which lovers kiss "in every land." We are given, thus, another kind of banner, a universal banner of blue, to contrast with the national banner of the stars and stripes.

White's final sentence is a tour de force in its range of reference, its re-collection of images and ideas that come before, and in its stunning control of phrase and rhythm. Those images and that rhythm collect and connect earlier descriptive details, enforcing and solidifying White's notion that in emphasizing the moon landing as a human triumph, we miss a chance to see its larger human implications, that it remains an exciting yet imperfect achievement for humankind. In emphasizing its national American accomplishment, we miss an opportunity to see its universal human significance.

White's paragraph about the moon landing acknowledges the amazing accomplishment it was. White sees the moon landing as a tribute to human ingenuity as well as to American triumphalism. And yet for all the feat's triumphant success, White adduces other considerations beyond the values associated with either a national or a broader human achievement. He invites his readers, instead, to consider another way of thinking about the meaning of the moon landing.

He conveys these larger ideas with two related details at the end of his paragraph: his reference to the "familiar Iwo Jima scene" and his suggestion to replace the American flag with a white handkerchief, symbol of "the common cold." White refers to the iconic picture of American soldiers hoisting the flag after defeating the Japanese in World War II on the strategic Pacific island of Iwo Jima. He connects the moon landing to the important American victory only to suggest that there are other values at stake in the moon landing, and that there are other ways to think about the significance of what was achieved that day in 1969, different symbols by which that achievement might be represented, remembered, and revered.

An additional aspect of critical reading is thinking about the author's idea and evidence – whether or not we accept what is said and why, whether we agree or disagree, and why. In reading a text critically, we consider whether to accept, reject, or qualify what the writer says – and what form that qualification might take. The following exercise invites students to engage in this process of critical evaluation: to consider the extent to which they find White's argument persuasive and the extent to which it stimulates them to think about the larger issues he raises about nationalism and universalism.

Exercise: Further Considerations of White's Moonwalk Paragraph

1 Consider the historical context of the paragraph, first in relation to White's reference to Iwo Jima, and then in relation to the time in which it was written. How was White's little piece received at the time? How did it compare with the many other pieces written about the moon landing, in newspapers and magazines and books? What larger cultural and political implications does White's moon landing paragraph have for thinking about nationalism and internationalism? How have the issues of nationalism and internationalism played out historically since 1969?

2 Why do you think White included the sentence in parentheses: "(There must be a lesson here somewhere.)"? How would you characterize the tone of this sentence? How effective is this sentence? What "lesson(s)" do you draw from White's paragraph? To what extent do you agree with the lesson(s) the paragraph presents? Why?

3 In her book *Leaving Orbit*, Margaret Lazarus Dean notes that when they landed on the moon, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin not only planted an American flag, but also left a plaque with these words: "Here men from the planet Earth first set foot upon the moon July 1969, A.D. We came in peace for all mankind." How does this information affect your interpretation of and response to White's moon landing paragraph?

4 What title might you provide for White's piece? Explain why you gave it that title.

Application – Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

We can apply our critical reading approach and framework – observation, connection, inference, conclusion, and values – to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The paragraphs are numbered for ease of reference.

The Gettysburg Address

> [1] Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

> [2] Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives, that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.
>
> [3] But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate – we can not hallow – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.
>
> [4] It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have, thus far, so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

A Bit of Context

A few basic facts. First, Lincoln's speech was delivered in approximately two minutes. Second, there are five versions of the speech extant in various US libraries, including the Library of Congress, which owns two of these versions. The variant copies include minor differences in wording and punctuation. Some versions use dashes in places that others use commas. Some add a word here and there – for example in the last sentence where the version reprinted here has "that government of the people," one of the other variant versions adds the word "this": "that this government of the people." And third, a number of books have been written about this speech – its writing, delivery, rhetoric, and reception.

A Suite of Exercises

The following set of exercises employs the framework we applied to E. B. White's moonwalk paragraph. The exercises that highlight observations and connections invite a close look at Lincoln's language, especially his diction and syntax. The exercises on inferences and conclusions raise questions about his religious and historical allusions and also about his omissions. The exercises on conclusions and values include further variants on these topics, while inviting consideration of the rhetorical appeals of Lincoln's speech and the moral and cultural values it espouses. Using the framework of observations, connections, inferences, conclusions, and values, students can work productively through the Gettysburg Address. We can begin by asking students what they notice in Lincoln's language, especially his syntax and diction.

Exercise – Observations

1 What effect results from the varied lengths of Lincoln's sentences? Why might it be important for him to keep some sentences short – given the occasion of his speech and the fact that it is a speech?
2 Read the speech aloud, one paragraph at a time, slowly. What is noticeable about Lincoln's diction, or choice of words? At what level of formality does he pitch his language? Why?
3 What pronouns are emphasized? Who are the "we" and "us" that Lincoln refers to?
4 What historical references does Lincoln include and why do you think he includes them?
5 What does Lincoln avoid mentioning in his speech? What does he leave out, and why, given the historical context of the speech, the place where Lincoln delivered it, and what happened there? Consider the larger historical context and implications of what could have been included but wasn't.

Exercise – Connections

1 What patterns of repetition (and variation) does Lincoln employ? What effects do those repetitions of word, phrase, and clause create? More specifically, which particular words are repeated – and with what effects? Which single word (in various forms) occurs most frequently in the speech? Why is that word so important to Lincoln?
2 What negative words are included in the speech? What is their function, their purpose? What point does Lincoln make by means of negation?
3 Consider the importance of the words "conceived," "consecrate," and "devotion." What was conceived? What is being consecrated? What kind of devotion is Lincoln advocating? With what concepts – what ideas – does Lincoln link these three terms?
4 How do the connections made between these words and the concepts Lincoln evokes convey the spirit and the values Lincoln celebrates in the speech?

5 What other kinds of connections can you see and make among the details and/or the language of the speech?

Exercise – Inferences

1 What inferences might be made from the observations and connections we have made?
2 Why might Lincoln have kept the speech exceedingly brief?
3 Why might he have invoked the founding fathers and Declaration of Independence?
4 Why might he have chosen to avoid mentioning contentious political issues?

Exercise – Conclusions and Values

1 How does reading the speech aloud help you notice things not readily apparent when it is read silently? How does what you notice through listening to yourself or someone else read it aloud nudge your thinking about its purpose and its meaning?
2 What ideas begin to form as you make inferences about the speech?
3 What is the value of contrast and analogy for Lincoln in the speech? Why do you think Lincoln valued an ability to use language effectively?
4 What political, cultural, and religious values does the speech reflect?
5 What kinds of appeals does Lincoln make to his audience? What ultimate value drives Lincoln's rhetorical purpose?

These guided questions use the critical reading framework to direct students' attention to the formal diction and balanced syntax of Lincoln's speech and to repetitions of phrase and clause, which, taken together, create its majestic tone. Students can work in pairs or small groups, perhaps after doing some preliminary independent work on the exercises. They can share their observations and their questions, their inferences and provisional conclusions about the purpose, concepts, and effects of Lincoln's speech.

It's important for them to notice that Lincoln omits references to northerners and southerners, to victories and defeats, to slavery and states' rights. It's also important for them to see how often the word "dedicate" is used, and why. They need to see how the association of "dedicate" with religious language such as "consecrate" and "hallow" emphasizes reconciliation and a high moral purpose. It's important, as well, for them to discover the references to the Declaration of Independence that serve Lincoln's rhetorical and historical purpose to preserve the union and its form of government.

Our role is to guide students' critical reading – their understanding and interpretation, as well as their reflection about the significance and the underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object" (*Walden*, 1854/1983, p. 403). Laying the foundation for that kind of critical reading for our students begins with us. When we are successful in helping them grow as critical readers, our students develop the skills and habits of mind that enable them to become responsible, reflective readers, critical thinkers, and life-long learners. What more can we teachers do for our students than this?

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Reciprocal Acts

Reading and Writing

Pat C. Hoy II

A Story of Necessity

Almost a decade ago, I discovered that students were paying primary attention only to the *personal* connections they made when reading assigned written texts; they showed little interest in the larger body of ideas or the way those ideas were presented. It's almost as if the writers' ideas weren't important – didn't matter to the students. They were interested only in "cherry picking" something they could immediately and directly connect with their own experience or with the requirement at hand. Their habits led to hasty conclusions about meaning – to an erasure of central parts of the text under consideration. Diverted by a single-minded effort to find one defining *point*, they routinely ignored the larger *network of complementary ideas* inherent in the text.

Instead of learning to reason from evidence, most students had learned to take shortcuts, moving habitually from thesis to highly selected evidence – leaving out contradictions, challenges, complications. The learned emphasis had been not on rigorous analysis and interpretation of evidence but on a fact-based, highly structured response: thesis, propositions, examples.

All of us know that the examination of evidence rarely leads to certainty or to a thesis that can, out of necessity, be proved; it leads instead to discovery, to ideas that must, like the evidence itself, be continually reassessed and re-conceptualized to represent more accurately whatever truth the evidence

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