

WAYS OF READING YOUR CLASSMATES' PAPERS

One way to become a better writer is to learn to be a better reader of your classmates' papers. In other words, diagnosing problems in your classmates' papers will help you see problems in your own. A good diagnostician of writing is, first and foremost, a sensitive and attentive reader, capable of reading a text in multiple and complex ways. You'll want to be able to read as what Virginia Woolf called a "common" reader—a person who is curious, responsive, and open to what lies on the page. You also need to read empathetically, in order to get to know the writer and the writer's processes. And finally, you need to read critically, so that you are able to analyze the argument and to gather the thoughts that will together form your response.

READING AS A COMMON READER

When you read as a common reader, you take note of the experience of reading: Are you interested? Bored? Confused? Enraged? Are you satisfied, even inspired by your reading? It's important when reading an essay to keep in touch with your responses as a common reader; these responses will point you in the direction of a paper's strengths and weaknesses. If you were confused, it's likely that the sentences or paragraphs have broken down; if you were moved, it's likely that the writer has written clearly and forcefully.

Moreover, keeping in touch with your "common reader" responses makes you less likely to jump too soon to criticism. Instead of looking at every word and turn of phrase to try to find what's wrong, you can allow the language and ideas of the paper to make their impression on you. Common readers are receptive to the writer's message. They suspend their disbelief, waiting until the end of the essay before they react critically. Keep close to your responses as a common reader; they will inform the more critical responses that you make later on.

PRACTICING COMMON READING SKILLS: THE WHERE & WHY TECHNIQUE

When you read a classmate's paper, keep track of what you're feeling. Then choose three feelings and submit them to the Where & Why Technique. In other words, if you were bored you'd 1) locate the place in the text that you felt bored (WHERE) and 2) explain the reason for your boredom (WHY). Be sure to note one positive feeling! Use this format:

- WHAT: (state the feeling)
- WHERE: (tell the writer where the feeling arose)
- WHY: Offer an explanation for why you felt that way.

READING TO GET TO KNOW THE WRITER

When you read a paper, you will need to give some of your attention to thinking about who the writer is. After all, you are working with an individual person, not simply with an individual paper. The paper can give you a wealth of information from which you can infer what is going on with the writer. As you read, ask yourself:

- Is the writer engaged with the paper?
- What is the writer's explicit purpose?
- What hidden assumptions or prejudices are implicit in the paper?
- What stance does the writer seem to be taking towards the audience?
- What assumptions (correct or incorrect) does the writer make about the writing process?
- What does the writer understand (or misunderstand) about academic writing?

These questions can prove very valuable. For example, consider the writer's explicit purpose—that is, the purpose that he declares in his thesis. Then consider whether or not the writer has another agenda—other purposes or assumptions that he never quite declares. Often the writer's hidden assumptions about his topic—or even about the writing process itself—can undermine an essay. In short, as a tutor or writing assistant you need to be sensitive not only to what's on the page, but also to what's been left off.

PRACTICING READING TO GET TO KNOW THE WRITER

While there are lots of questions you can ask as you try to get to know the writer, we're going to focus on two kinds of questions:

- What does the writer understand/misunderstand about academic writing? Here, you'll want to name two things that the writer knows/does well; then you'll want to name two things that the writer doesn't seem to understand or needs to work on.
- What assumptions are at work in this paper? Here, you'll want to point to an assumption that the writer makes explicitly in the paper, and respond to it; then you'll want to state an assumption that the writer has kept off the page, and respond to that.

READING TO RESPOND CRITICALLY

As you read an essay, part of your mind will be taking in what the writer is saying while another part is busy scrambling for how you might make a response. Several processes are going on as you formulate this

response:

- First, you're diagnosing the argument, noting what's strong and what's not. You're following the writer's argument, but you're also noting where the argument is going wrong, and you're beginning to hypothesize about why.
- Second, you're keeping a running list of what sorts of problems the paper has. Thesis problems? Check. Structural problems? Check. Trouble with paragraphs? Not really: internally they're not bad; they just don't seem to fit together to form an argument. Sentences? Tend to run on a bit. Some comma problems. A nice turn of phrase here and there. Having a checklist of things to look for helps you to formulate your formal response to the paper. Remember: you may have a different checklist for different papers. Your professor will let you know what things you should be especially looking for.

RESPONDING CRITICALLY TO YOUR CLASSMATES' PAPERS

While there are many questions you might ask as you form your critical responses, consider these in particular:

- Responding to the argument: What is the writer arguing, in a nutshell? (Restating the thesis can be useful, especially if the thesis isn't clear.) What is the most compelling point and why? What is the least compelling point and why?
- Responding to style: Do a stylistic analysis of your classmates' papers. In other words, find sentences that don't work and try to determine why. You can choose sentences from throughout the paper, or you can focus on the style of a single paragraph. Then consider: does the writer obey the principle of actor/action? Does the writer put the most important idea in the main clause of the sentence? Does the writer have bad habits, like overusing nominalizations, writing in the passive voice, or relying too much on "there are/it is" constructions?

EXTRA STEP: FORMING QUESTIONS

- Note that your classmates benefit not only from your comments but from your questions. Consider the issues that have come up in the various ways of reading, and turn these issues into questions. This practice will not only be useful for your classmates, but will also help you to improve your own methods of inquiry (an important step in the scholarly process).