

Active Reading- Literature

In most college texts, you read to learn information. Ideas are presented linearly and there is an attempt by the author to be objective about them, or if it's an essay, to be clear when an opinion is being presented. You underline important sentences as you read and try to memorize key terms and concepts. Yet reading literature requires different skills. Literature is often not linear, and often to understand a work of literature, you have to reassemble the order of information as it is presented to you. Also, literature is subjective. It deals with emotions and inconsistencies in human action. Furthermore, it provokes different reactions in different readers. It is the reaction that literature provokes in you that you are trying to recognize and give words to. Keep in mind that your reaction to literature is not limited to your first impression; further analysis often yields new and subtler responses to the literature.

So when you read literature, your goal is to develop an interpretation of the text you are reading. Obviously, you need to understand what happens first, before you can form an interpretation. This fundamental understanding is what is known as literal reading. Yet, what you need to do is move from fact to interpretation, from literal reading to analytical reading. The process below outlines how to do that.

The reading process

Read with a pencil. Always have a pencil in your hand as you read. This way, you can circle words that you don't know, underline interesting sentences, draw arrows to important places, and write questions and comments in the margins or on another piece of paper.

Look up words you don't know. Vocabulary is one of the biggest barriers students have to understanding literature. Looking up the definition to words you don't know will not only help you to get more out of what you read, it will also increase your working vocabulary.

Identify plot, character, setting. This is the literal level of reading. Make sure you understand what happens in the text, where the action happens, and who the characters are. In longer works, it is helpful to keep a list of all the characters. If you are confused by an element of the plot point or action of one of the characters, make a note of it and bring up your question in class.

Identify point of view, style, theme. This is the analytical level of reading. Now look at how the text is written. Look at how point of view and style affect the piece. See how the themes are developed in the text. This is where you begin to interpret the text. Again, if you are unsure about anything, write that down and bring it up in class.

Relate text to other texts in the class. This also belongs to the analytical level of reading. Compare/contrast this text with others that you've read. Look at similarities/differences in characterization, point of view, style, and theme. What insights does the comparison give you?

Reread the text. If you have the time, you should always reread the text. In fact, a good reading of literature requires at least a second reading. On a second reading, you already know how the text ends, so you can focus on how the author gets there. You can pay special attention to the style and structure, and look at what the author left out of the text.

In *Literature and Its Writers*:

Guidelines for reading on pages 21-22

Questions for reading on page 23