

## *How to Approach Reading Assignments Critically*

The writing process is not a "stand alone" exercise. Before we can begin to write about something, we need some inspiration, which comes in the form of our "reading," and "reading" can take several forms which we will be discussing in this class as well.

### READING

The first image we imagine when we hear the word "READ" is one that involves a book, a newspaper, or some form of printed work which has been created by someone's writing.

### WRITTEN WORD

But not only is this not the only form of "reading" we perform, it is not even the most common, especially as a result of technology developments.

With heavy demands on time, fewer people actually sit down on a daily basis and "read" the newspaper in its entirety to get their information about what is happening on the local scene in their communities and surrounding areas as well as around the world. Rather, most people are lucky if they can squeeze in a half hour or so to tune in to the local news program on television, or possibly in the car on the radio, or even checking the online newspapers or blurbs of interest posted on MSN, Yahoo, or any main server web page.

Although this version of "reading" involves a minimal amount of scanning headlines on the internet, for the most part, we are "reading" images.

### TELEVISION and INTERNET

Likewise, we find ourselves 'reading' the images in magazines, television programs, commercials, even movies as we "read" what is occurring in the pictured images and storylines we see.

### MAGAZINE GLOSSIES

Another form of "reading" we perform on a regular basis involves our interaction with family, friends, co-workers, even the person who sells you your morning cup of coffee or

cola. We "read" the actions and speech, tone and attitude of people we interact with, picking up on both obvious and subtle body language.

## RELATIONSHIPS

These are some of the forms "reading" takes, and all serve as inspiration to the process of Critical Thinking.

## THINKING

By responding to the many experiences encountered as part of the university community, you will be strengthening your critical analysis skills by "thinking" about what you are "reading". This is a process we perform naturally, but let's take an in-depth look at this process, pausing to reflect on what we are *really* reading, breaking down what a writer, magazine ad, commercial, image, even our best friend, is "saying". These are things we will use the opportunity of class discussion to bounce observations and opinions off each other.

You will, therefore, get to know each other fairly well during group conversations and these discussions are an important part of your writing process as they will provide much of the material you will use in your writing.

Not everyone will have the same opinion about the variety of topics we discuss, but we must respect everyone's right to their opinion and be open-minded enough to listen. It is the ability to view an issue from all its sides which provides the means to find the strengths and weaknesses in our own logic.

It is this "reading" and "thinking" that must take place before we begin "writing". Once we have taken in information via our "reading" techniques, we proceed to the SECOND STEP in our preparation, which is THINKING, and our group discussion, in the studio and on the discussion board, will help us in the phase of processing the information.

Let's, for a moment, consider:

What is *CRITICAL THINKING*?

- asking questions
- finding an explanation of motives or causes -- an explanation of how things came to be
- imagining and valuing points of view different from one's own
- strengthens, refines, enlarges, or reshapes one's ideas in view of other perspectives

- open and skeptical: receptive to new ideas
- careful to test those ideas against previous experience and knowledge
- getting out of your own skin and seeing the world from multiple perspectives

Let's experiment. Read the following poem by Theodore Roethke, *My Papa's Waltz*. While reading, jot down images, words, thoughts that come to mind.

*The whiskey on your breath  
Could make a small boy dizzy;  
But I hung on like death:  
Such waltzing was not easy.*

*We romped until the pans  
Slid from the kitchen shelf;  
My mother's countenance  
Could not unfrown itself.*

*The hand that held my wrist  
Was battered on one knuckle;  
At every step you missed  
My right ear scraped a buckle.*

*You beat time on my head  
With a palm caked hard by dirt,  
Then waltzed me off to bed  
Still clinging to your shirt.*

Looking at the notes you have taken, consider the following:

- ✿ How much of our interpretation is connected with our own experience as well as our society's interpretation of fathers, press coverage of "dead-beat" dads, "positive" parenting, and the sensitivity of fathers?
- ✿ Our culture doesn't associate good, loving families with drinking or even with the suggestion of physical roughness. Have these images affected your reaction?
- ✿ We are left with some pretty rigid categories for "good" and "bad" parents: How parents should look, talk, and behave toward their children. Did you categorize the characters in the poem?
- ✿ We use these categories as "mental pigeonholes" that help us sort out and evaluate our experiences quickly, almost before we're consciously aware of them.

- ✿ They provide a useful shorthand - and while they help us make practical decisions in everyday life, they also impose their rigidity on our thinking and thus limit our ability to understand the complexity of our experience.

Have you ever considered your writing as a form of arguing? We all argue from the time we are toddlers and said our first "no". Now, however, to have a successful argument, we have to have a solid base to build our argument on and make a credible point.

Unlike parents who tell their children "Because I said so!," it's not going to convince anyone if we simply make that statement to defend our point of view. It doesn't work when our parents said it to us and it won't work when we are trying to convince someone of our "take", or opinion, on a situation.

You were using your critical thinking skills when you analyzed "My Papa's Waltz".

You noticed the importance of Roethke's words as he described his memory:

- ✿ "waltzing", "romped" - not unpleasant words
- ✿ "Hung on like death", "make a small boy dizzy" - words of excitement
- ✿ "Batter", "scraped", "Beat" - words of roughness, suggesting abuse

Roethke combines all these words to create a picture of mixed emotions, very much like the mixed feelings he himself had recalling the experience.

These are the things you did as you dissected Rothke's poem.

When we are directed to "read actively", what exactly are we being asked to do?

- ✿ Question what you read. Just because it's in written form or even in a textbook, doesn't mean it's the truth.
- ✿ Remain a skeptic: if some little alarm goes off in your head after you read, see, or hear something it's probably your first clue that you subconsciously disagree and should investigate why; what about it struck you as "odd".
- ✿ Question the credentials of the author, especially as we begin to obtain more and more of our information from the internet. As college students, you need to know how to access academic sources to define your arguments, not just random internet websites, such as blogs or boards with unreliable statistics, even Wikipedia -- a good place to start, but unfortunately not reliable or credible.

Now you may begin your...

## WRITING