WRIT 100: Pretty Hurts
Analytic Questions Assignment

One good way to begin a writing task is by asking questions. These questions can begin as personal responses (Do I like this? Why or why not?) or comprehension questions (What does this mean? What else do I need to know here?), but your goal should be to move from internally focused questions to questions that will help you discuss what you’re reading with other people in your disciplinary community (your classmates, your professors, other scholars who study similar subjects). This semester, we will get in the habit of asking analytic questions, both as a way of engaging with what we’re reading, and to providing starting points for writing projects.

Assignment description

Since analytic questions are so important to engaging critically with anything you read, you’ll be responsible for writing a substantive analytic question about one of the course readings each week. In class, we’ll focus on two types of analytic questions: close reading questions and critical questions. While we’ll often close read secondary sources and think critically about literary sources, in general, we’ll begin by asking close reading questions when discussing a literary text, and critical questions when discussing secondary theoretical or historical texts.

Submission instructions

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<tr>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Posts questions about Tuesday's reading assignment</th>
<th>Submits questions by midnight on Monday</th>
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<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Posts questions about Thursday's reading</td>
<td>Submits questions by midnight on Wednesday</td>
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Every week, you will

- Write your question
  Use the guides on the following pages to compose your analytic question.

- Post your question
  On the day and time assigned to your group, post your analytic question as a blog comment on the appropriate entry. Feel free respond to your classmates’ analytic questions in the comments.

Grading

Analytic questions are worth two points each and will be graded on a check plus/check/check minus basis (a check plus is equal to 2 points, a check to 1.3 points, and a check minus to 0.7 points). Over the course of the semester, you will submit eleven analytic questions; I will average the top ten.
Close reading questions

What close reading questions do

As we’ve discussed, the first step in the close reading process is reading carefully and paying attention to details and individual words, rather than jumping straight to interpretation. In other words, instead of starting by asking what a text means, focus first on what it says, and then, once you’ve figured that out, begin to ask why a text says what it says, why it says something in a particular way, and what the effect of saying something in that way might be. That’s where the close reading question comes in.

How to write a close reading question

Remember that your question is intended to help you analyze the reading. As such, it should be substantial, detailed, and specific. It should pose one of the why or how questions that you ask after you’ve completed a careful close reading of a text.

Begin with several sentences (at least 2, but no more than 4) that describe what you noticed in your reading that led you to ask your question. Be specific and detailed in describing the situation as clearly as you can. If your question is prompted by contextual or historical information, include that in your description, but remember, your question should focus primarily on what’s happening on the page. Include any relevant short quotations that show the words or phrases that are important to your observations, but be judicious with your use of quotation. The analytic question should demonstrate your ideas and queries; it should not repeat large sections of the text. Be sure to cite page numbers for each quotation in parentheses after the quotation marks.

Some example close reading questions

The first two pages of the novel tell the same story three times, but each time more and more textual features are omitted, until in the final paragraph all of the letters run together into one long jumble. What difference does the presence of punctuation and spaces make in the reading experience? How does beginning the book in this way affect the reader’s expectations about how to read the novel?

The third and fourth pages of the novel tell the reader the whole story of the book. The passage concludes by claiming “There is really nothing more to say—except why” (6). What is the difference between the “why” the narrator cites at the end of the passage and the story that she tells in the preceding paragraphs? How does beginning the book by giving away the entire plot affect the reader’s expectations about how to read the novel?

The repeated story that begins the novel is the text of a simple and familiar children’s book. The sentences are short, and the vocabulary is very basic: “See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane?” (3). How does the form of this passage structure our expectations about the rest of the novel?

The first line of the introductory passage, “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941,” has two clauses, both of which are expletive constructions (5). This structure seems unnecessarily complicated or indirect, particularly in comparison to the simple and straightforward structure of the previous passage (“See Jane. She has a red dress” [3]). In this first sentence, what is “quiet” and who is keeping it quiet? How does the structure of this sentence relate to the rest of the passage?

Questions to avoid

Again, provocation questions are intended to provoke discussion. This means that they should require considerably more than a yes or no answer. Other types of questions that are not appropriate for analytic questions include:

Questions that are a matter of taste or opinion

Doesn’t this story make you sad? Do you identify with Pecola’s image issues?

Questions of fact or definition

What are “CCC camps”?

Questions beyond the scope of the text

What happens to Jane after she plays with her friend? Does Claudia ever recover from what happens to Pecola?

Questions that are clearly answered by the text

What happens to Pecola’s baby?

Questions only the author’s ghost can answer

Why did Morrison write about such a depressing subject? Why did Morrison start the book with the same passage repeated three times?
Critical questions

What critical questions do

When reading historical, theoretical or critical texts, you may find that it’s more important to engage with what the text argues or claims, rather than with the how and why of the textual details. While a close reading question asks about how specific details might relate to our interpretation of a text, a critical question asks about how and why an argument works, what its implications or limitations might be, and how it relates to other similar arguments.

How to write a critical question

Like a close reading question, a critical question should be specific and detailed. It should point to a specific place in the text where the author is making an interesting, controversial, or even suspect claim.

You should begin by describing that claim in 1-2 sentences, using only your own words. When summarizing an argument, direct quotation is a crutch that you should try to avoid: if you cannot re-state a claim in your own words, without relying on the author’s language at all, there’s a good chance you don’t fully understand the claim yet.

After you have summarized the claim that interests you (and included a page number citation after the summary), write a sentence or two explaining what you find notable about this particular claim. What drew your attention to this part of the argument? Was the vocabulary or structure interesting or unusual? Is the claim unexpected or extreme? Is it a particularly important part of the argument? What makes you view it as important?

Finally, ask a question that extends your observations about what you found interesting in the claim you chose. You might ask about structure—how the claim relates to the argument as a whole, or where it fits into a larger debate. Or you might ask about evidence—does the evidence support this claim, what evidence might be added to the argument to better support it, or what evidence might undermine or disprove the claim. You might ask about how the claim can be extended beyond the argument, or whether it breaks down when it’s extended in such a way.

Example critical questions

Your critical question might look like the two below, although there are many other forms your question could take:

John Smith claims at the end of his essay that all cats should be euthanized because they wreak havoc on local wildlife. This seems like a pretty extreme position to take, especially since Smith notes that cats often keep disease rates low in places with large rodent populations. What evidence might Smith have offered to more fully support this claim?

Before making his case for a cat-free society, John Smith argues that there is a large body of research about the cultural importance of cats. His discussion of this research is extensive and often eloquent. What function does this section serve in the overall structure of the argument?

Critical questions to avoid

The guidelines about inappropriate question topics for close reading questions apply to critical questions, as well. You should avoid asking questions that can be easily and definitively answered, and should aim for questions that will provoke discussion and even debate among your classmates.