ENGL 293: American Gilded Ages
Provocation Question 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 questions, both as a way of engaging with what we’re reading, and to providing starting points for writing projects.

Assignment description

Since provocation questions are so important to engaging critically with anything you read, you’ll be responsible for writing a substantive provocation question about one of the course readings each week. These provocation questions will provide a jumping-off point for the close reading assignments you’ll write over the course of the semester, as well as for class discussion.

Submission instructions

Sign up
At the beginning of the semester, log into Sakai and sign up for a weekly group. Your group will determine when you post your question.

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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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<tr>
<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 guide on the following pages to compose your provocation question.

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

Grading

Provocation 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 provocation questions; I will average the top ten.
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 provocation question comes in.

How to write a provocation 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.

Once you've described in 2-4 sentences what you observed in your reading, pose your question. It should be a why or a how question that addresses what is happening in the text. You don't need to have an answer to your question, although you should have a few ideas.

Some example provocation questions

The first three paragraphs of the story describe the external scene in great detail. The baby is “tattered” and “soiled,” and he has “an attitude of earnest attention” (819). What does the initial description of the baby establish about the story’s physical and social setting? What is the effect of this detailed but detached narrative style?

The description of the pretty baby and his toy repeatedly emphasizes property and property rights. The baby is the “owner” of the toy who draws “his property suddenly behind him as if it were menaced.” When asked, the pretty baby says, “My ma-ma buyed it,” and “It’s mine! It’s mine,” “his voice in the treble of outraged rights (820-821). What’s the effect of putting so much emphasis on ownership, property and property rights in an dispute among babies?

The baby in the story is described in a variety of different ways, many of them having to do with war, particularly in the final paragraphs. The baby is a “small vandal” and a “small barbarian” who “has at last succeeded in achieving his rights” (821). These descriptions seem to conflict with common expectations about babies. How does this conflict relate to the story’s title?

How not to disturb the author’s ghost

Note that the last question to avoid is very similar to the first example provocation question above. Framing something in terms of why an author did something a certain way is often tempting, but that sort of question doesn’t get us very far. Since we usually can’t ask the author him or herself, all we can do is speculate, which isn’t all that helpful. And even if we could ask the author, the answer would just be the beginning of a series of more important questions: Do we think the author’s answer is supported by the details of the text? How, if at all, does this change our reading of the text? Ultimately, what the author might have to say is less important than how what’s happening on the page affects the way we read and engage with the text, and that’s what you want your questions to focus on.