

Some Tips on Reading and Writing for Literary Studies

Apart from reading for pleasure, we can distinguish between three main categories of reading:

- 1 – getting it done with view to discussion,
- 2 – reading as a preliminary to writing (reading for a theme),
- 3 – close reading.

These require different levels of engagement and outside help.

1 – getting it done with view to discussion:

- i. Use a pencil to make the text yours: underline passages, make marginal notes, exclamation/question marks, and jot down longer ideas in blank spaces inside book covers. The idea is to interact with the book, which is your primary tool, so get the most out of it.
- ii. Understand what the text is about: use a dictionary, use the notes in the book. However, don't let this slow you down; sometimes you can get the gist of a passage without knowing the meaning of a particular word.
- iii. With texts from a remote period, familiar words may have a different meaning – use the *Oxford English Dictionary (O.E.D.)* to get chronologically correct meanings.
- v. Such texts often have an unfamiliar cadence – most of the words may be familiar, but understanding may be slowed down by word order, rhythm or sentence length.
- vi. It is best to give yourselves time – 1-2 hour stretches – to 'get into' the narrative, especially at the beginning.
- vi. It is best to finish the reading rather than get bogged down and only do half or one third of it.

2 – reading as a preliminary to writing (reading for a thesis):

- i. The idea is that you have read the text a first time, quite quickly, perhaps, for class. As you come to elaborate a critical project, you will come up with a relatively amorphous theme, or topic.
- ii. Go back to the text, and read it a second time, looking out for places that relate to your theme; make careful notes, producing a random list of manifestations of your theme.
- iii. Now, you need to move from a theme/topic to a thesis. A thesis tells your reader what you are going to be writing about, in the form of a claim, a statement.
For instance: 'Domestic detail is an important aspect of *Robinson Crusoe* because it contributes to the literary realism of the narrative'.
A thesis directs and limits what you will include in your essay; it makes a promise to your reader.
- iv. With your thesis in hand, review the notes you made during your second reading. Identify the passages that are most useful for your purpose, which is demonstrating your thesis.
- v. At this point, you are moving to an outline. You can categorize your chosen passages according to list of points that you will make to demonstrate your thesis. This is your rough outline.

3 – close reading:

- i. This is mainly for passages that you analyze for oral reports or papers, but if you have time, it will enrich your preparation for class discussion.
- ii. Here, you will consult the dictionary frequently, checking chronologically correct usage and etymology (*O.E.D.*).
- iii. You will certainly use other reference books:
 - a – to check characters*
 - mythological, classical or biblical – the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* is a good one-stop reference book, and a good place to start; other dictionaries/encyclopedias;
 - historical or contemporary – general or historical encyclopedias; for England/Britain – *Dictionary of National Biography*;
 - b – to check intertextualities* with and references to other books, (e.g. the Bible) – *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, a Bible concordance;
 - c – to check concepts* – perhaps start with index of a general encyclopedia, or specialized dictionaries or encyclopedias, or any authors associated with the concept.

You can also use the internet for any of these categories – a google search usually comes up with some information. BUT WATCH OUT!

The internet is a highly UNSTABLE and UNVERIFIABLE environment. Make sure you are convinced of the authority of the person or institution that is posting the information – a page posted by a high-school English class, for example, would not be an acceptable source. However, it could well provide you with the links you need. It is important to develop an internet ‘nose’ if you want to use this medium in an academic setting.
- iv. This is where reading is most thorough: make extensive notes. You can often re-use these in your essay – if you feel inspired to write a paragraph – go for it! Remember to cry out EUREKA!

4 – back to writing:

- i. Now, if you are writing a paper, go back to your rough outline (see above). Rework this thoroughly, producing your working outline: usually a list of points and sub-points which will demonstrate your thesis, with an indication of the passages that you will use as textual evidence.
- ii. If you find that your thesis is not working, go back and change your thesis, re-select passages if necessary (it is not always necessary to find new passages – your close reading of certain passages may have pointed you in the direction of a new thesis).
- iii. Pay attention to the logical flow of ideas. Transition from point to point should not require your reader to stop and think it through – YOU do the thinking and lead your reader through the points you are making.
- iv. Next, write your essay – your thorough preparation will certainly have made your task easier.