**READING AND WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE**

**Issue:** Literary analysis requires a particular kind of writing and attention to language. The following steps will help you through the process of reading a work of literature, interpreting it, and developing a well-considered opinion about it.

**Step #1: Reading for Pleasure and Context**
The main goal of reading literature is to enjoy it, so begin with an open mind, and expect to have some fun. Mark any lines that please or intrigue you; these markings may help you later as you search for evidence and consider your thesis. Additionally, if the piece is short, try reading it out loud. You may notice things (e.g. rhythm, alliteration, etc.) that you wouldn’t otherwise.

The other thing that you should achieve during a first reading is a sense of the context: what is going on in the piece? What is the setting? Who is speaking? What is the main conflict? If the piece is narrative, what is the sequence of events, including climax and resolution?

**Step #2: Interpretation**
At this point, you must look more closely at a poem or story to consider what it means. Remember that meaning consists both of an author’s intention (what s/he expects the reader to learn or feel) and a reader’s reaction (your thoughts and feelings about the text based on your own previous experience with literature and life). Given that readers come from a variety of backgrounds (and the author is not in the room to tell you the “answers”), it is likewise important to remember that interpretations vary; there is no single right or wrong answer. Instead, you must devise a reasonable interpretation and support your argument with evidence from the text.

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<tr>
<th>Questions for Prose</th>
<th>Questions for Poetry</th>
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<td>How is the conflict resolved? Is there a set outcome, or is it left for the reader to decide?</td>
<td>Which images/metaphors are important? What do they connote/suggest?</td>
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<td>Do you relate to the characters? How do you feel? Contemptuous? Empathetic?</td>
<td>What is the tone of the piece?</td>
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<td>What is the effect of the point of view? Could this story be told from a different perspective?</td>
<td>How do the rhythm and sound affect the poem’s tone and meaning?</td>
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<td>What is the title’s meaning?</td>
<td>Is rhyme important? Is line break important?</td>
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<td>What commentary does this piece give about human life?</td>
<td>What thoughts or feelings does the poem leave you with?</td>
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Step #3: Evaluation
This is your chance to develop your opinion about a work—it is your chance to judge it. Good general questions include: Does the writer convey her/his perspective well? Do you agree or disagree with this perspective? In either case, is the perspective worth considering?

In order to respond to these broad concerns, consider the following, more specific questions:
1) How do literary devices (i.e., character, mood, tone, metaphor, etc.) work in this piece?
2) Do these devices work well together? Do they unite in some common purpose?
3) Does the piece make you question your feelings or assumptions about the world?
4) Does the work stimulate you? Does it provide intellectual challenge?
5) In the end, do you enjoy the piece? Was it pleasurable to read?

Step #4: Planning Your Essay
Before you begin writing, make sure that you understand your purpose. Literary assignments vary; yours may highlight any one of the above steps. For example:
1) A response paper asks you to consider your own reaction to a work.
2) A paper that asks “What’s it about?” wants you to interpret possible meanings.
3) An opinion paper seeks evaluation—and you must follow all three of the above steps in order to achieve it.

The following are suggestions for literary topics:
- Compare and contrast two literary works.
- Compare and contrast two characters.
- Consider a theme (e.g., shame, loyalty, old age, etc.) within a work or between two works.
- Examine one element of a work (e.g., metaphor, tone, character, point of view, etc.).
- Use the lens of critical theory (e.g., feminist, multi-culturalism) to explore your text.
- Analyze a character’s psychological condition and/or reasons for doing something.
- Consider the author’s biography in relation to his/her work.

General guidelines for writing about literature:
- Underline or italicize the names of full works. Put quotation marks around titles for single poems or short stories.
- Use the present tense when you talk about a story/poem. Only use the past tense if you discuss a particular historical event that occurred before the text’s main action.
- Use MLA guidelines to cite sources from primary and secondary sources. Cite author names and page numbers within the paper and conclude with a Works Cited page.

* With thanks to Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing, by Kirszner and Mandell