**Reading Critically**

If you want to judge a novel, you should ask whether it will lead you along a path whose end is different from its beginning, whether its characters have motivations and ambitions and hang-ups that are recognizably human, and whether those motivations and ambitions and hang-ups give rise to the novel’s crisis and situations.

**First Stage of Reading - The First Level of Inquiry: Grammar-Stage Reading (getting the facts)**

1. Pre-read a book. Before you began to read the book, read the title page, the back cover, the introduction and table of contents/chapter titles. This puts you “in the picture” before you begin to read. Note any facts learned from the book’s cover or introduction that will help you read the book as the author intended. The table of contents/chapter titles will tell you how the story will unfold as a series of separate, brief events.
2. Do not automatically read the preface. Read the preface if it was written by the author (or translator); otherwise you’ll get an interpretation of the book before you’ve had a chance to form your own ideas.
3. When you first read through a book, don’t feel that you must grasp completely every point that the writer is making. If you find yourself puzzled by certain section, or not completely sure what the author means by a particular term, make a note, including the page and paragraph (you may want to use sticky notes) and keep on going. You will have a chance to come back to that confusing section later. The secret to reading a difficult book is simply this: keep reading. You don’t have to “get it all” the very first time through. Don’t stop to look up unfamiliar words unless you absolutely must. Write them down and look them up when you finish the chapter. If you don’t understand what you’re reading, don’t stop; scribble the question and keep going.
4. Don’t take extensive notes on the first reading. First reading notes tend to be far too detailed. You’ll find yourself writing down too many observations that seem important but later prove to be irrelevant and all the note taking will slow you down. Instead, stop at the end of each chapter (or substantial section) and jot down a few sentences in your journal. These sentences should summarize the chapter’s contents, main assertions, the most notable events and what you have learned.
5. As you read, use your journal to jot down questions that come to your mind. Record your reactions, questions, thoughts, disagreements or agreements with the writer. Indicate sections to be reread and the questions you have. Scribble down any ideas, phrases, or sentences that strike you, reflections or connected thoughts that the book brings to your mind. These questions, disagreements, and reflection should be visually distinct from your summary of the book’s contents. It is important to note page numbers beside your comments. Leave very wide margins on either side of your paragraphs for making comments later. This is the most important part of reading a book.
6. Keep a list of characters as you read, their names, their positions, and their relationships to each other; maybe a genealogical table.
7. After reading the book, the chapter summaries will be an outline of the book. You will want to be able to answer the following questions:
   1. Who is(are) the central character(s) in this book?
   2. What is the book’s most important event?
   3. Is there some point in the book where the characters change?
   4. Glance back through the list of major events that you’ve jotted down for each chapter and try to identify the most central and life-changing of them all. Does something happen that makes everyone behave differently?
   5. Which character is most affected?
8. The goal of this stage of reading is to know *what* the author says.

**Second Stage of Reading/Inquiry: Logic-Stage Reading** **(Evaluating)**

1. Go back and reread those sections of the book that you identified as difficult or interesting. You’ll probably be able to make better sense of them now that you completed the book. Look back through your written comments: do they tend to cluster around certain parts of the book? If so, glance back through those pages as well. Finally, reread your summaries. Can you identify which chapter contains the book’s climax, the center of the writer’s argument, or the author’s own summary of the work? Reread that particular section of the book is well.
2. Next, answer questions about how the writer has put his words together. Sight particular sentences, even paragraphs. These notes will be more detailed than those first reading notes, sense by now you have a clear idea of which parts of the book are most worthy of your attention.
3. Ask:
   1. Why did the author write this book?
   2. What did he or she set out to do?
      1. layout facts,
      2. convince you of the truth in a set of deductions,
      3. give you an emotional experience,
      4. present a dilemma to be faced?
4. Now ask:
   1. How well did the writer succeed?
   2. Did s/he successfully carry out her/his intention?
   3. If not, why? Where did s/he fall short?
   4. Are her/his facts unproven, proofs inadequate, or are emotional scenes flat?
   5. What parts of the book did I find convincing; which ones left me and moved?
   6. If you are reading nonfiction, you would now begin to analyze the writer’s argument:
      1. What idea is she trying to convince you of?
      2. What evidence does he give you for believing this argument?
   7. When you evaluate nonfiction you ask: Am I persuaded?
   8. When you evaluate fiction, you are invited to enter another world. You will ask:
      1. Am I transported?
      2. Do I see, feel, hear this other world?
      3. Can I sympathize with the people who live there?
      4. Do I understand their wants and desires and problems?
      5. Or am I left unmoved?
   9. **What does the central character (or characters) want? What is standing in his (or her) way? And what strategy does he (or she) pursue in order to overcome this block?**
   10. Generally, a deeper, more essential need or want lies beneath this surface desire. You can often get at this deeper motivation by asking the second question: *What’s standing in the way?*
   11. Is a *person* keeping the hero/ine from achieving his/her deepest wants? If so, is that person a “villain” in the sense, an evildoer who wishes to do another character harm? Or is the “villain” simply another character with a deep want of his/her own that happens to be at cross-purposes with the hero/ines’s need?
   12. The block in the hero/ine’s way doesn’t have to be a person. A collection of circumstances, a malign force that constantly pushes her in the wrong direction, an impersonal set of events that have united to complicate her life-these can also keep a character from getting what she wants. The novelist’s world may demonstrate that human beings are always at the mercy of a flawed, fallen creationor an uncaring, mechanical universe in which they are as insignificant as flies.
   13. Once you’ve identified, at least tentatively, a character’s wants and the “block” that keeps him/her from fulfilling them, you can begin to answer the third question: What *strategy or strategies* does the character follow to overcome the difficulties that stand in his way? Does he bulldoze his way through the opposition, using strength or wealth to overcome his difficulties? Does he manipulate, scheme, or plan? Does he exercise intelligence? Grit his teeth and keep on going? Buckle under the pressure, wilt and die? This strategy produces the plot of the novel.
   14. Characters have always longed for escape, freedom, an ideal existence, control of their lives. Some want to find the *inherent* meaning of life, not the meaning imposed on him by the corporations that have already constructed the story of his life for him. What keeps him from discovering this meaning? Does he manage to find it in the end?
   15. Where is the story set?
   16. Are there important images or metaphors?
5. In your journal write the answer to the following questions (some may not apply to all novels).

**Is the novel a** “**fable” or a** “**chronicle”?** A chronicle takes place in a world like our own. The author tells us how people behave, moment by moment, in lives governed by the same rules that regulate our own lives. These writers convince us that every emotion stems from a cause, every action from a reaction. They produce “chronicles”-stories set in our own universe. Other novelists use fables to transport us into a place where different laws apply. Then consider one of the following three questions:

If this novel is set in our world-a chronicle-*how* does the writer show us reality? Does she try to convince us that her world is real through the careful presentation of physical detail-the meals people eat, the cut and color of their clothes, the landscape that surrounds them, or through the interactions with others? Or does she focus instead on **psychological** detail: the processes of the mind, the rise and fall of emotions, the slow discovery of motivations?

If the writer presents a fantastic world, what is his or her intent?

Is she writing *allegorically*? In an allegory, the writer establishes a one-to-one correspondence between some part of her story (a character, an event, a place) and some other, literal reality.

In the absence of allegory, is the writer of fables *speculating*? In this case the fantastic elements don’t have a one-to-one correspondence to our world; instead, the oddness of the unfamiliar surroundings represents ideas taken to their extreme to demonstrate their potential danger.

Is the novel primarily realistic, but with a few fantastic elements? If so, you cannot simply classify it as a “fable.” When a writer brings fantastical elements into an otherwise realistic tale, he is illustrating a real phenomenon that is too powerful to be described in realistic terms. Can you identify this phenomenon?

The goal of the logic-stage inquiry is to think critically and to understand *why* and *how* the author says what s/he says.

**The Third Level of Inquiry: Rhetoric-Stage Reading (Forming your own opinion)**

The final stage of reading-your rhetoric-stage pass through the book-has a third goal. Now you know *what*, *why* and *how*. The final question is: *So What*?

What does this writer want me to do?

What does this writer want me to believe?

What does this writer want me to experience?

Am I convinced that I must do, or believe, what the writer wants me to do or believe?

Have I experienced what the writer wants me to experience?

If not, *why*?

Uninformed opinions are easy to come by. But thinking through someone else’s argument, agreeing with it for specific, well-articulated reasons, or disagreeing with it because you’re able to find holes in the writer’s argument, or because the writer left out facts which s/he should have considered and weren’t that different.

The rhetoric stage follows the logic stage for this very reason. The good reader bases his opinion on intelligent and analysis, not mere unthinking reaction.

The journal is an excellent logic stage tool. But in the rhetoric stage of inquiry, you need something more. Rhetoric is the heart of clear, precise communication, and persuasion also involves two people. In your case, one of those people is the book’s author: the book is communicating an idea to you, persuading you of something. But for you to articulate your own ideas clearly back to the book, you need to bring someone else into the process.

Your answers to the logic-stage questions should begin to reveal the ideas at the core of each novel. During the rhetoric stage, you’ll try to decide whether you agree with those ideas or not. These great novels differ so widely-and your own approach to them will depend so heavily on your own philosophy of life, your religious beliefs, your experience at work and play and family life-specific discussion topics are hard to come by.

However, the ideas to discuss in the rhetoric stage of novel reading are about the nature of human experience. What are people like? What guides and shapes them? Are we free? If not what binds and restricts us? What is the ideal man or woman like? *Is* there such a thing as an ideal man or woman-or does this idea itself suggest some transcendent “truth” that is only an illusion?

**Do you sympathize with the characters? Which one(s), and why?** Can you find some point of empathy (emotional or intellectual identification) with each major character? Do I like him/her? dislike? feel sorry for? pity? The characters’ dilemma, or their reaction to it, must provoke some kind of recognition; even in the oddest and most maniacal character, there should be something that we acknowledge.

In a great novel, even the evildoers possess some emotion or motivation that also exists in the reader. The novel’s bad guy is a villain not because he is a monster, but because some real quality has been distorted and exaggerated until it turns destructive. In the same way, a heroine should not possess undiluted goodness; such a character would be unrecognizable. Her greatness should result from her triumph over flaws that we recognize, and might even share. If she fails to triumph, we should feel that her failure could be our own; were we in her shoes, we too might succumb.

Try to identify the character quality that allows you to sympathize with each character. Do you feel this quality in yourself or observe it in others? In the novel, is this quality distorted, or exaggerated, or somehow twisted away from the norm? What opposing tendency destroys it, or stands in the way of its full flowering? Do you recognize that contrary impulse in yourself as well?

And then consider: the writer selected this quality as the character’s central defining characteristic. Is the writer making a statement, through that selection, about the human condition-about the universal longings that all humans share, and the opposition that we all face as we try to fulfill those cravings?

What does the setting of the book tell you about the way human beings are shaped?

Does the time the writer lived affect him? (Gender bias, reflection of social customs)

**Is there an argument in the book?** What exactly is the writer telling you? The primary purpose of most novelist is to lead you through an experience, not necessarily to convince you of a point. But in many novels, there *is* an idea. The writer, in describing the life of one particular character, is making a statement about the human condition in general.

**Do you agree?** Now you can ask yourself that ultimate question: Is this work *true*? Does the experience create an emotion in me? Is it consistent with universal truths? My core values? Or is it merely emotionally leading?

Here you should consider two senses of the word *true*. A novel that is convincing, vivid, engaging, carefully written so that each detail corresponds to reality, a novel that draws you into its world and keeps you interested in the fates of its characters-that novel is *real*, resonating with our own experience of the world. But a work can be true in this sense and still present an idea about what human experience *should* be that is opposite to our own convictions.

Or a work can vividly portray one aspect of human existence while suggesting that this is the only level on which humans can live. Or a story can suggest that there *is* no “should be”-nothing to strive for beyond what we see, nothing to believe in beyond what is. These ideas we may strenuously reject while still finding the book itself “believable.” So in what sense is the book *true*?

Related to this is one final question: What is fiction *meant* to do? Why are you reading a novel at all? Are you expecting to find out some truth about human nature? Should a novel reveal some difficult, hard-to-face truth about ourselves? Do novels show the inevitable end of certain paths? Or are they, instead, agents of moral change? Do they show us models so that we can amend our ways? This ideathat fiction provides us with a modelitself has a certain assumption behind it: There is some standard of human behavior which applies to all of us, in all cultures, and our quest in life is to uncover it.

The novel gives us a way to become aware of and explore our own beliefs through the lives of the story’s characters and their dilemmas.