Sharon Flitterman-King

The Role of the Response Journal in Active Reading

... I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning—and yet it must be—Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections—However it may be, O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!

John Keats

It is thinking...[that] makes what we read ours. We are of the ruminating kind, and it is not enough to cram ourselves with a great load of collections; unless we chew them over again they will not give us strength and nourishment.

John Locke

I remember reading Wuthering Heights sometime in graduate school and being carried away by the windswept moors, feeling vividly the heathy swells and the long grass and the wind roaring through the firs. Something in the language of the novel was making me respond—but what? How could Emily Bronte’s words transport me to another time and place? And why did I find her fictive illusion so compelling? I remember, too, reading The Mill on the Floss and surrendering easily to Maggie Tulliver’s childhood world. In those early chapters I was conveyed, almost effortlessly it seemed, to the banks of the river Floss. But somewhere in the middle of the novel I felt my reading experience change. I was no longer lulled by daydreams; I felt myself watching, expecting, making moral judgments about the characters and their actions. Something had intervened, some critical distance. George Eliot had changed her descriptions to make me experience her fictional setting in a new, more removed way.

And then I read Tess of the d’Urbervilles. Here was landscape altogether different: bleak hillside and barren turf, endless, aching miles of rockstrewn heath, and Tess herself journeying fruitlessly. Tess’s frustrated journeys across the Wessex downs were reflected in my own labored reading experience as I made my way through what seemed like interminable pages of descriptive prose. I was intrigued by my experiences of these different fictive landscapes, curious about what was happening in the language of the texts. I wondered what caused me to inhabit these fictional places in such diverse and varied ways.

My dissertation grew out of these first early glimmerings, these first felt responses to the texts. From attending to my own experience as I read, from observing what was happening to me as I inhabited each fictional place, I began to wonder about setting in the novel, about the relations between an author’s world view and the kind of fictive landscape he or she creates, about what shapes our own reading experience as we imaginatively enter a world made out of language. But it has always been important for me to remember that I didn’t begin there—with critical analysis and figuring out. I had started with a feeling about the literature—a response in the pit of my stomach, or circling around my heart, or prodding at the intuitive part of my mind—a feeling that wasn’t thought out, contemplated, analyzed. Sensations for me were the source, the place where I began.

I know that for me, engaging fully with a text means responding with all my mental powers, all parts of myself—my unconscious, intuitive, irrational, or felt sense as well as my more reasoned, analytic, critical sense. Because of this I realize that I am beginning to define the reading process in much the same way that Sondra Perl defines the writing process, as a recursive movement, a shuttling back and forth from felt sense to critical distance, from irrational, gut response to analyzed or reasoned reaction. In “Understanding Composing” (1980), Perl suggests that “the shuttling back-and-forth movements of the composing process, the move from sense to words and from words to sense, from inner experience to outer judgment and from judgment back to experience” are two parts of the same basic process, and that “together they form the alternating mental postures writers assume as they move through the act of composing” (p. 369).

It has become increasingly clear to me that this same shuttling back-and-forth movement takes place when we read. Sometimes we are understanding the words on the page with our felt sense, our inner ear attuned to the rhythms of the prose, our imagination responding to images of light and air, our unconscious reaching after memories, associations; at other
times we are standing back, figuring out, trying to analyze how the language does what it does, how it means the things it means. This dual nature is best expressed for me in the subtle linguistic distinction between apprehending and comprehending. Apprehend—to grasp mentally—comes from the Latin apprehendere, to lay hold on, or seize. It characterizes perception and does not really imply full understanding. Comprehend, on the other hand (which the dictionary also defines as to grasp mentally) comes from comprehendere, the prefix com- suggesting a coming together in the mind. This latter word is more inclusive of full mental powers and stresses the attainment of full understanding. The distinct ways of knowing that are reflected in these two related words represent different modes of access; they are like two parts of a dance that we as readers go through when we encounter written words. At moments in our reading we are apprehending, just getting hold of something, but not quite able to articulate it. This happens when we surrender to sensations and exercise Keats’s “negative capability”: we find ourselves “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” and we remain “content with half knowledge.” At other times we find ourselves reaching out for understanding as we try to comprehend—to make meaning of—the word or phrase or sentence on the page in front of us.

The meaning we make as we read comes from this dual process, this shifting back and forth between different modes of understanding. As readers, we are continually making meaning in this recursive way—responding with our senses and our intuition at the same time we are analyzing, figuring out, making rational sense of what we unconsciously perceive. And both parts of the process are essential; we cannot neglect John Keats’s “Life of Sensations” any more than we can ignore John Locke’s necessary ruminations. We have to make room for all kinds of responses—in our writing and in our reading.

**As readers, we are continually making meaning in this recursive way—responding with our senses and our intuition at the same time we are analyzing, figuring out...**

Glenn, a student in my Freshman Literature course, provides us with a good example; his “first responses” to some of the assigned poems will illustrate how fruitful, new directions can emerge. One of the assigned poems was Byron’s “She Walks in Beauty,” the first four lines of which read:

*She walks in beauty, like the night*  
*Of cloudless climes and starry skies;*  
*And all that’s best of dark and bright*  
*Meet in her aspect and her eyes*

At first, Glenn found this poem alienating. In his response journal he had written:

*This is corny poetry. It’s so sweet that it’s totally sickening. A little too cutsey for me. It sounds like something written for young children. Why does he put her up on a pedestal?*

What’s interesting to me is that in these few lines I see Glenn moving from a rather naive evaluation of Byron’s poem to a question that goes right to the poem’s heart. He recognizes that there is something troubling about Byron’s attitude to this dark beauty—she seems mysterious, unattainable, and maybe even a little frightening. The tone of worshipful

**continued on next page**
The Role of the Response Journal in Active Reading

continued from previous page

longing puzzles Glenn. His question enables him to continue working with an intriguing and complicated poem which at first seemed gooshy and useless.

My own response journal helped me, too, begin to understand the poem (which I have always found somewhat puzzling). My random “first thoughts” read:

I hear longing here. This feels like a poem to an unattainable woman, someone the poet admires, but cannot hope to have. ‘Like the night’ makes me think of the mystery that darkness is. I see her somewhere high above, chaste and pure like the moon...I like the way darkness suggests purity and innocence here, a reversal of the usual associations we give it. That makes the poem interesting to me.

I included this bit from my own response journal to illustrate how using writing to probe my responses has made me more capable of reading and teaching literature that I am unsure of or unfamiliar with. I value the insights I gain when I rely on my pen to tell me things I didn’t know I knew, to draw from me speculations that will enable me to “teach” a poem better (that is, to have a fuller understanding of the poem so I can more easily guide students to draw out their own responses).

Two more entries from Glenn’s response journal will further illustrate my point. After reading William Blake’s “London,” Glenn had written:

This is a cheery one. Can’t he find anything a little bit more optimistic to write about London? Why does he have such an outlook of desolation? He conveys a strong sense of unrighteousness from the city of London. Was it that bad?

Glenn finds Blake’s view of London pessimistic; perhaps Blake’s “marks of weakness, marks of woe”—the chimney-sweeper’s cry, the “black’ning church,” the hapless soldier’s sigh, the blood that “runs down palace walls”—convey that feeling to him. He clearly feels the poem’s mood and wonders about the relationship between Blake’s poetic expression and the “real” London that the poem embodies. Glenn’s question, “Was it that bad?” might lead him to explore what Blake is doing here with language, with rhythm and image and rhyme, as he transforms the real London into this poetic statement.

I am interested, too, in Glenn’s observation that Blake “conveys a strong sense of unrighteousness from the city of London.” His syntax is mangled; unrighteousness is a made-up word. Glenn seems to be groping for something, for language that will capture and express the sensations that Blake’s poem triggers in him. (Perhaps the image of the “black’ning church” makes him think of London as an unholy place—it’s not entirely clear to me.) The awkward construction suggests that Glenn is searching for a way to articulate what he’s feeling. But because he doesn’t have to worry in his journal about accuracy and correctness, he’s free to experiment with language as he discovers what it is he wants to say about Blake’s poem.

The response journal gives us room for informal writing, for speculative, exploratory thinking. It gives us access to our inchoate responses so that we can move on to a more “comprehending” interpretation of a text.

By his next entry Glenn adds a new dimension to his thinking, finds another way to talk about Blake’s poem (and it comes, surprisingly, in an entry on a poem by Wordsworth). In response to “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge” Glenn writes:

“Westminster Bridge” is a much more pleasant poem to read. The images it presents are that of beauty and peace. It is so different from the savagery of “London”—yet it’s approximately the same time and place.

That word savagery—how it captures the fierceness and brutality of Blake’s world. It’s as if while Glenn is writing about Wordsworth he continues to explore his thoughts and feelings about Blake; they come more sharply into focus. Glenn can now go back to his initial entry to see how the “unrighteousness” he felt might be connected to this new discovery. He can begin to build an argument about Blake’s poem, working from his initial feeling about its desolation and supporting it with these new thoughts.

Or he can extend the comparison that he is making between Blake’s and Wordsworth’s poems. He can go back to Blake’s poem and ask himself, “What words in this poem make it feel savage?” Similarly, he can look more closely at “Westminster Bridge” to examine why it feels pleasant. Does the peacefulness come from the poem’s rhythm, the sound of it, with its s’s and l’s (as in “The river glideth at his own sweet will”)? Or is the poem’s beauty reflected in the “ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples” that lie “all bright and glittering in the smokeless air”?
My point in this discussion of “first thoughts” is simply that they don’t have to be right or true or great—the fact that they are is enough. The response journal gives us room for informal writing, for speculative, exploratory thinking. It gives us access to our inchoate responses so that we can move on to a more “comprehending” interpretation of a text. It lets us rest midst “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” in order that we may achieve a deeper understanding, a fuller comprehension.

The second suggestion in the guidelines, “Make connections with your own experience,” can provide another valuable entry into the reading. Sometimes literature can trigger memories and associations that nourish or enrich our understanding of a text. Those first “felt” responses—those associations with personal or private experience—may have nothing to do with the text, but they can provide a deeper sense of what the text is speaking of. I think of my own recent re-reading of Jane Eyre: my notebook is full of private musings about my own “development,” my varied ways of being-in-the-world. As I reflect about experiences I’ve had, both personal and professional—the challenges to assert myself—I understand more keenly the struggles that Jane Eyre engages in. Writing about myself in my journal fosters a kind of connection-making with the text; I begin to develop an interpretation of Jane Eyre based on my lived and felt experience. And writing about the self in a response journal can often lead to a finished essay that is stronger for its having been written from the self. (This exciting distinction between writing about the self and from the self was first made by a student. She felt that speculating about her personal life in her journal enabled her to write a formal essay that was more genuine because it was deeply felt.)

If the journal taps the intuitive, unconscious, or personal response, the more formal essay can use that awareness in surprising ways. An essay on Sons and Lovers written by David, a student in another freshman course, can illustrate what I mean. David had started out being not very interested in the essay topics I’d suggested: he didn’t really want to explore the different love relationships in the novel; an analysis of the three women in Paul Morel’s life didn’t particularly appeal to him, nor did a study of Lawrence’s imagery.

But his response journal helped him find a topic. Early on I had asked the class to list in their response journals all of the questions that came to mind as they read Sons and Lovers. One of David’s questions was, “What makes Gertrude and Walter stay together? Why doesn’t she just leave him?” And then he had begun some personal, exploratory writing examining the joys and tensions in his own family: he loved his father, and they got along pretty well, but somehow when his father was away on business trips everyone, and especially his mother, seemed to relax. Still, they missed him—him, his jokes; and when he returned, things always seemed better, more right. In spite of the squabbling, things somehow felt safer when his father was back home.

David had begun to find a point of entry into the novel, some issue that interested him, to which he could begin to make a personal connection. When I asked the students to choose a character from the novel and write a “meditation” in their journals—a monologue of that character’s thoughts, from the inside—David chose Gertrude Morel. In the meditation he had Gertrude thinking about Walter, what a pain he was, but how he’d made her laugh when they were courting. She thought about their fights, but also about the comfort of having him there, a man in the house. With Walter, things were known; there was some security, for what it was worth.

These journal entries helped enough that by the time David began to write his essay he had found a focus. His topic for the essay about Sons and Lovers was “The Love of Gertrude and Walter Morel.” Here is an excerpt from David’s introduction:

In D. H. Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers the feelings between Gertrude and Walter could be considered spiteful; however, there is a strong bond between them. Theirs is a love-hate relationship. In spite of the pros and cons, their marriage gives them a feeling of security. Throughout most of the book, Lawrence’s treatment of his father brings out Walter’s negative traits. There is something else, however, an unconscious realization that Walter is a necessary part of the family, especially to Gertrude. She needs him for her peace of mind.

The “feeling of security” that David finds in the Morel household, the idea that Walter was “a necessary part of the family” and that Gertrude needed him “for her peace of mind”—these are all insights that David discovered by exploring his feelings about his own family—the fights, the tensions and the love.

Another example from later in David’s essay will further illustrate:

...Life for the family was certainly more enjoyable when [Walter] was not in the house, but they needed to know that he was around. The family would have been in a much sadder state if he were dead. This was apparent when he had the accident in the mines. He was very bad off and when it was apparent that he was going to get better, “the whole family sighed with relief, and proceeded to live happily.”

David quotes those lines from Lawrence’s text that have continued on next page
The Role of the Response Journal in Active Reading

continued from previous page

some resonance for him. The sigh of relief the Morel family feels echoes the familiar sigh in David’s household when their father returns from being on the road. David didn’t work with this comparison directly in his journal—those pages were for his private musings. But when it came time for him to write his essay he could engage the task with energy and conviction because he had found a way to get involved. And although David’s essay makes no mention of his personal experience (it is, in fact, an analytic discussion of the text), it clearly benefits from the connections he could make with his own life and concerns. Writing in his journal enabled him to connect the objective text with who he is, to tap wells of personal experience in order to find something to say about a work of literature.

Another example will demonstrate how the response journal, by providing an arena for speculation, for wonderings and questionings, can make the reader “cry aloud” with solutions to complex problems. I am thinking here of Matthew, a student in Freshman English, who used his journal vigorously to speculate about Hamlet’s inability to act. Why was Hamlet so indecisive, why couldn’t he make up his mind to do something, Matthew wondered. He wrote often in his response journal—reflections on Hamlet’s intelligence, on his delight in abstraction, on his tendency to generalize. He discovered similarities between Hamlet’s being a philosopher and his own pleasure in abstract thought. He began to speculate about the things that troubled Hamlet. “Hamlet seeks truth,” he wrote, “both truth about father and—what? What are the larger questions he is trying to answer?” And then he listed some of Hamlet’s question in his own words:

I.i. Why did Ma marry Unc Claudius? Why do people fake being grieved? Why aren’t they grieved? Why can’t I demonstrate grief more prominently?

I.ii. Why do I find the earth so boring, so worthless?


III. How could Ma have gone from Dad to Unc? What is death? What happens to our bodies, our souls?

Later, speculating about why Hamlet does not act, Matthew wrote:

...Too much trouble? I don’t know. Perhaps he’s just biding his time for the perfect moment... I just see him as a mass of indecision. He’s never sure he’s thought of all the possible consequences and prepared for all of them.

And finally, reflecting on his own difficulty in getting started on his paper, he scrawled:

Well, what is it in Hamlet’s character that makes him similar to me? Why is it that he is as able to resolve and as unable to act? He wants the perfect moment. I want the perfect topic. Revenge and a paper have lasting consequences.

By the time Matthew was ready to write his essay he had developed an answer to the questions he had posed for himself. Here is an excerpt from the conclusion to his essay, “On Hamlet’s Inaction”:

The feeling that he needs to be extremely careful, I believe, is the one which stands in the way of Hamlet’s action. It stems from his universal, abstract way of thinking... When he is suddenly presented with the task of revenge, he places his vengeance in the list containing death, lust, man, appearance, and other universal ideas he has been considering. He begins to think of revenge as a cosmic duty he must fulfill in obligation to the dead. ... Since he feels this is an important far-reaching action he must take, he wants to make it perfect. He is waiting for the perfect moment to take his revenge. He thinks the act through carefully, and predicts all the possible consequences. Because of his intelligence, he derives a certain satisfaction from the thinking process itself, as he does from tricking Claudius into revealing his guilt. He forgets that his careful consideration of his task is not an end, but a prelude to action.

By wondering with his pen, examining the various equivocations that precede action (“the perfect moment”), Matthew was able to write an essay of great originality, full of vitality and genuine voice. His musings in his response journal gave his writing strength and vigor, adding personal conviction to his formal, finished piece.

Reading as Inquiry: The Double-Entry Notebook

The exploratory writing that Matthew did in his response journal enabled him to be an active reader: it allowed him “to search into or range over” the literature “for the purpose of discovery.” There are many ways to cultivate this habit of active reading. The examples I have given so far focus on the first faint glimmerings of thought, the unconscious, intuitive, speculative response. I want to close with some examples of
another kind of journal, one which can be used to foster an attentiveness to language and can develop the exhilarating habit of reading closely.

In The Making of Meaning, Ann Berthoff describes a particularly effective strategy for developing attentiveness to language—the double-entry notebook. Here is her description of the double-entry format:

On the right side reading notes, direct quotations, observational notes, fragments, lists, images—verbal and visual—are recorded; on the other (facing) side, notes about those notes, summaries, formulations, aphorisms, editorial suggestions, revisions, comments on comment are written. (1981, p. 45)

In some sense more prescriptive than the open-ended journal, the double-entry notebook paradoxically can offer greater range: the discipline of noticing specifics, of attending to language, can link the speculations directly to the text, can ground observation and reflection in the details of a given work.

I have experimented with variations on this double-entry principle. In one instance I changed the directions slightly to take advantage of both felt response and critical thought. We were reading an essay from N. Scott Momaday’s The Way to Rainy Mountain in my freshman composition course, and I asked everyone to draw a line down the center of their journals, leaving the left side for words, phrases, sentences from the text, the right side for speculations about those notions. In this initial listing we simply pointed to things that struck us, for whatever reason, without stopping to figure out why we had selected them. Then we went back to the text and looked more closely at the words or phrases that we’d chosen, asking why they struck us, what they added to the meaning of the passage, what they made us think of, how they worked in the context of the piece. These more analytic speculations we recorded on the right side of our journals. My own list included:

“preeminently” (“But warfare for the Kiowas was preeminently a matter of disposition.”)
“grim, unremitting” (“... and they never understood the grim, unremitting advance of the U.S. Cavalry.”)
“long, rambling prayers” (“She made long, rambling prayers out of suffering and hope.”)

Re-reading my list I asked myself, “Why did I point to that? What is it about that phrase that intrigues me?” Next to “grim, unremitting,” I wrote:

The right side of the page gave us room to think analytically, to “chew over” our collections, and to link our ruminations to specific moments in the text. It allowed us to wonder in relation to the language, to speculate about how words work, to discover, in a sense, how meaning is made. By tapping first the intuitive or felt response (“I like that phrase”), then encouraging a closer, analytic look (“What is it about the phrase that intrigues me?”), this particular double-entry strategy embraces both kinds of mental powers. It does not emphasize feeling at the expense of analysis; neither does it ignore the felt or intuited response for the sake of “comprehension.” This is only one of a number of possible uses for the double-entry notebook. It isn’t always necessary to explain or analyze your “felt responses.” But if the product you are seeking is an analytic essay, one which looks at language and how it means, this particular strategy can be very effective.

What I like about the double-entry notebook is that it allows students to trust themselves. It encourages them to rely on their own responses to the reading, on what strikes them as interesting or significant, rather than wait for the teacher to point out the “important” passages. As Leah wrote at the end of an assignment sequence which included using a double-entry notebook in connection with an excerpt from Charles Darwin’s journal, kept while he was a naturalist on the HMS Beagle, “I really got to know the author without looking it all up in the Encyclopedia Britannica.” Leah is expressing here what I see as the real value of the response journal—its capacity to initiate reading-as-discovery. The double-entry journal, especially, facilitates this making of meaning by fostering careful, attentive reading; it encourages interpretation by cultivating the powers of observation and reflection.

I want to close with a few examples from two students’ responses to Darwin’s essay, “Galapagos Archipelago: The Great Tortoises,” because I think they illustrate how active reading nurtures attentiveness, curiosity, and investment—in effect, produces thinking. Darwin’s essay was short, so I asked the class to read it over once, to get the lay of the land. Leah’s initial response was disengaged:

My first impression of Darwin was not too great. ...I read this excerpt from his personal journal as a textbook...The way Darwin writes was a little

continued on next page
The Role of the Response Journal in Active Reading

continued from previous page

I mean it seemed he would quite frequently interrupt his main thoughts and add something—I felt totally uncalcled for or really didn’t have anything to do with the subject. Also some of the vocab was strangely placed.

After this initial reading, I asked the class to read the piece a second time, making entries in a double-entry journal. Leah’s entries went like this, with Darwin’s words on the left, and Leah’s on the right:

| The few dull-colored birds cared no more for me, than they did for the great tortoises | Just seems odd and out of place—why would he have to say something about birds when he’s talking about turtles? |
| lichen that hangs in tresses from the boughs of the trees | Only heard tresses in context with hair, e.g., her hair fell in tresses on her bare shoulders |
| and greedily swallows great mouthfuls at the rate of about ten in a minute | How in the hell did he figure this one out? He went into the water (under water) and counted their gulps? |

What I like is the care with which Leah is beginning to read, asking questions that are linked specifically to Darwin’s language. She is exploring Darwin’s powers of observation and analogy, his poetic nature, his curious mind; she is wondering what kind of person would notice the variety of creatures around him, or would examine how many gulps a turtle takes. She is noticing, too, that Darwin’s language is poetic, not the dry, observational stuff that she associates with scientific inquiry (“lichen hanging in tresses”—she’d never thought of flora that way). Leah is letting her responses to Darwin’s language tell her something about the man.

When it came time for Leah to write her formal essay about “The Great Tortoises,” she had benefited from the careful, attentive reading her double-entry notebook had fostered. She had found a new appreciation for the man “who helped make it clear for people who did not know anything about nature understand the mysteries of life.”

Another student, Vicki, underscores the point. Vicki came to Darwin fully expecting to be bored, prepared to find “the cardboard scientist introduced to me in a state high school text.” Instead, the double-entry notebook gave her access to the man by inviting her to look closely at his language. Vicki was interested in images, and so the “vivid pictures” Darwin made appealed to her. She noted when he wrote “truncated cones were extraordinarily numerous,” remarking in her journal, “I loved the way these five words sounded together. I had to read it over again. I would have said there were a whole bunch of volcanoes.” And, like Leah, Vicki noticed “tresses from the boughs of trees,” and commented, “I have never before had such a pretty picture of a tortoise eating berries from the boughs of trees.”

In her formal essay about Darwin, Vicki hints at the change in attitude she experienced as a result of reading carefully: “I was immediately ready for a dry, scientific writing when I saw the name Darwin. Instead, Darwin thrilled me with his personality.” And in the body of her essay she integrates those aspects of Darwin’s language that appealed to her:

The use of clever and advanced vocabulary, such as he used to describe “black truncated cones,” “Cyclopean scene,” and “antediluvian animals,” served to create the beautiful pictures, scenery, and surroundings that Darwin himself was exposed to. I especially enjoyed picturing a scene of the tortoises eating “the pale green filamentous lichen that hangs in tresses from the boughs of trees.”

And in her conclusion, Vicki acknowledges the added insight that reading with a pen in hand provided her. “I would have never thought such a writing would ever interest me,” she says.

Instead of merely understanding what I had read and being able to follow it, I gained an insight as to what I thought of Charles Darwin. I can now vividly picture Charles and the tortoises amidst the deep earth tones . . .

And now as I write I hear Leah’s words echoing in my mind: “You know what was neat about the reading assignment,” she said to me, “is that before, I always used to read like for a test, to remember the numbers, the dates and things. Those were what I underlined. But I like the idea of underlining what strikes me, what I notice. That’s neat.” I think of how, in our dramatic rendering of the text in class, Leah had read aloud from Darwin’s journal as a blown-out valley girl (“I mean, like, it was really ‘astonishing,’ what I saw”). She had gotten some sense of the mood of wonder and astonishment in Darwin’s piece, and had made her own meaning out of his prose. His language, his metaphor, transformed the world for her, rendered it remarkable, as he himself had seen it. Darwin’s meaning had become Leah’s meaning through his language and her attending to it.

And that is ultimately, I think, the real value of the response journal—it enables us to make meaning as we read, to be actively involved in our own learning process. It takes
reading out of the realm of passive behavior and makes it into a vital activity. Using response journals in my teaching has taught me one important thing—that active readers are attentive readers, and attentive readers soon become engaged and willing learners.

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References


Response Journal Guidelines

- First thoughts. Take some time to write down anything that comes to you in relation to the text—your initial reactions or responses. Do some focused freewriting in response to what you’ve read. If the reading bores you, write that down. If you’re intrigued by certain statements, if you’re attracted to characters or issues or problems, write that down. Just write! Try to take at least 5 minutes to write something whenever you’ve finished an assignment, or when you’ve put your book down for a break. Keep your journal close by when you read. You may want to write something that strikes you, rather than wait until you’re finished.

- Make connections with your own experience. What does the reading make you think of? Does it remind you of anything or anyone? Make connections with other texts or concepts or events. Do you see any similarities between this material and other books you’ve read? Does it bring to mind other issues or contexts that are somehow related?

- Ask yourself questions about the text: What perplexes you about some passage or some point that the writer is making? Try beginning, “I wonder why...” or “I’m having trouble understanding how...” or “It perplexes me that...” or “I was surprised when...”

- Try agreeing with the writer. Think of all the things you can say to support his or her ideas. Or try arguing with the writer. On what points, or about what issues, do you disagree? Think of your journal as a place to carry on a dialogue with the writer or with the text. Speak to him or her. Ask questions, and have the writer answer back. See what happens when you imagine yourself in his or her shoes.

- Write down words, images, phrases, details that strike you. Speculate about them. Why are they there? What do they add? Why did you notice them? You might try dividing your notebook page in half, and copying words from the text onto the left side, writing your own responses on the right. On a first reading you might simply put checks in the margin where the passages intrigue you; on the second reading you can choose the most interesting to speculate about.

- Identify the author’s point of view, his or her attitude toward what he or she is saying. Ask yourself how this perspective or attitude shapes the way the writer presents the material, develops the thesis or main idea. How do you think the author feels about the ideas he or she is presenting, the story being told?

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