

Samantha Elkaim

ECI Final Paper

## Analysis: Reading for Writing

### **Step 1: What Is the Bottleneck to Learning in This Class?**

The bottleneck that we are focusing on is a reading issue that is often only detected in student writing. The failure to analyze fiction leads to essays that are superficial and merely quote the text assigned. When students fail to analyze a text they fail to interact with the text. Students believe that the meaning of a text is predetermined and fixed. Students put authors on a pedestal and see them as almighty beings. They do not see themselves as capable of interpreting an author's work. This may stem from being raised in a school system with standardized testing. They are accustomed to questions about a text having a right and a wrong answer and are hesitant to discuss writing beyond plot. Students often do not read with the purpose of analysis, their purpose is usually plot comprehension.

When students do not read the text in a critical way their writing and discussions in the classroom suffer. When asked about a text students will often reply with "I liked it" or "I didn't like it." Students feel like these are safe responses to a text and they understand that they will have different answers. In an in-class discussion students often cannot go beyond their like or dislike of a work. They are unable to clearly explain what elements contributed to their like or dislike of the text. Many students do not see or understand the multiple levels a text operates on and cannot analyze what they do not see. They are often not taught this skill. For readers who know what to look for in a text, reading for analysis can be simple. Students who do not know what to look for struggle to find content to analyze. Students who reread without a purpose are like people searching a room without knowing what they are looking for. While reading they are mainly focused on what the words are saying. They are unable to reread a piece of writing. They ignore the context and structure of the piece and do not consider how it may influence their understanding of the reading.

As a result, students turn in assignments that do not meet their teacher standards. When they include evidence in their writing, their analysis looks more like paraphrasing. Because their

analysis is mainly a retelling of the quote, students don't manage to create a strong argument and essays end up looking more like book reports.

In secondary school students are taught various mnemonics to remember how to write essays or short responses such as "RACE" (restate, answer, cite, explain). Students know that after the evidence they are supposed to include some sort of analysis or explanation but lack the reading skills to actually do so. Without an understanding of how to interact with the text, students will continue putting superficial analysis in their written work.

## **Step 2: How Does an Expert Do These Things?**

A strong analysis by an expert is firmly rooted in strong reading strategies. When an expert reads a piece of text they look at it from multiple angles. An expert may reread a chapter looking for how a specific character develops or how a symbol appears in multiple scenes in a story. They read a piece multiple times, once for comprehension and then several more times with different lenses. When a reader has a lens, they know what they are looking for. An expert may read a piece of work from a certain political viewpoint or in the context of when the piece was written. They think about how characters may be representative of larger political ideas or what Experts are confident in their opinions about a text, they know that if they can find the evidence they will be able to argue their viewpoint. Because experts put so much emphasis on reading and rereading, the writing part comes easier.

Experts have a toolkit of elements they can utilize during the rereading process. They set an intention before they begin to reread a text. An expert may look for any of these elements in their rereading:

- Conflict
- Context
- Characters
- Significant Moments
- The Ending
- Word Deployment

- Repetition
- Symbol

Experts may find one or more of these elements in the rereading process. They may look at how one element relates to another or relates to the larger theme of the piece of writing. As they continue to read varied texts they may even be able to see patterns over a span of multiple works within a genre or author. Analysis experts do not see the text as a static piece of work created by an author in a vacuum. Instead they see a series of tools and techniques being arranged to create a larger story. Experts see authors not as alchemists but as builders, using preset materials to build different structures.

### **Step 3: How Can These Tasks Be Explicitly Modeled?**

Students in the English classroom need to understand the thought process behind active reading. Students must understand that active readers ask multiple questions while reading. In order to model this we have broken down the different lenses someone might use to understand a text. Through various analogies and real world connections, students will understand how to focus on 8 key elements: repetition, the ending, context, conflict, characters, symbols, word deployment, and key moments. When students read a text and focus on at least one of the elements, they have a stronger foundation to analyze how one element relates to another or a larger theme.

The following are the real life examples that will be used to connect the elements to the analysis we do on an everyday basis:

**Conflict:** Understanding the nature of the conflict in a fiction text can also help reveal theme. When looking at conflict, students should not only consider what side of a conflict the protagonist represents, but also the antagonist. Not to mention the “smaller” conflicts of minor characters and plotlines. When interpreting conflict, a student must ask herself what larger message the author might be trying to articulate.

To model evaluating conflict, students can think about the movie *Finding Nemo*. In this animated film, a father searches the ocean for his lost son, Nemo, a clownfish who has been taken from his home. A central conflict in the movie is that Nemo has been taken from the ocean by humans to live a life in an office aquarium. Could the author also be saying something about man’s influence on nature? Or maybe this movie isn’t about man at all, and merely a story about a father’s love. Only by analyzing the conflict can an expert be sure.

**Context:** Context can refer to the time period and location in which a work was written, as well as to how words can mean different things when placed in different circumstances. External context will not factor in to every text, but it can be helpful to understand the milieu in which the piece was written in order to avoid developing false assumptions.

To better understand the importance of internal context to a work, the students can watch the following commercial:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ultPAIkFoRw>

This ad shows characters involved in two drastically different situations with the exact same words being said by the characters. In one, a car has been stolen, whereas in the other a car has been received as a gift. In these two situations the words “Oh my God!” and “You’ve got to be kidding,” take on vastly different meanings.

**Characters:** Students can struggle defining “who” a character is. Often students are hesitant to judge a character in a text, as they have been taught in real life to reserve judgement. But in fiction, the author attributes specific traits to characters so that readers have the clues necessary to make accurate judgements. Students need to develop confidence in those judgements. In this model, playing with Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head toys can help.

Changing costumes and accessories to the Potato Head toys changes “who they are.” Is Mrs. Potato Head a cop or a ballet dancer? Does she wear diamonds or a stethoscope? Is Mr. Potato Head a cowboy or a bank robber? Does he have a monocle or a mohawk? These quick changes change everything. Students must trust their instincts about the character traits they read in fiction, because they determine who each characters is. Does a character have a bellowing laugh or a giggle? Is she an animal lover or do dogs bark when she passes on the street? What do these things say about the character?

**Significant Moments:** Just like in a fiction text, a basketball game has moments that mean more than others. The ending may be the most important, as who has won and who has lost is now established, but there are also many smaller moments leading up to that ending that have contributed to the final outcome. But not all moments are created equal. There are many back-and-forth moments in a game that cancel each other out. But an injury to a star player could be a very big moment, just like the death of a main character in a story.

A three-point shot with a minute remaining, a blocked shot that changes momentum, a big play just before halftime. These could all be big moments that play heavily on the outcome of

a basketball game. Similarly, when the couple first meet and fall in love, or when the soldier decides he can no longer fight the war, or when the thief steals the jewels but spares the owner's life, could be key moments in fiction.

**The Ending:** The way a text ends often underscores or epitomizes the meaning of the story. By understanding and interpreting the ending of a story, students can be confident of their analysis as they move away from *like* and *dislike*. To model this skill, use the following two storylines:

Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess. This princess lived in a high tower and was never allowed to leave the protection of her father's castle. One day she decided to sneak out. When she finally left the castle, she met a handsome prince, fell in love, and lived happily ever after.

Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess. This princess lived in a high tower and was never allowed to leave the protection of her father's castle. One day she decided to sneak out. When she finally left the castle, she was eaten by a bear.

These two stories have identical plots except for the different endings. What might these stories be saying about betraying one's parents? What might they be saying about taking risks and following one's dreams? Students must determine how the different endings change the meaning of the stories.

**Word Deployment:** Words matter. Not only the words we use to describe something, but also the words we leave out. Good analytical readers pay attention to both. Having conversations about dating, can help students understand the importance of word deployment.

Consider the words we use and do not use while dating someone new. If a friend asks "was he cute?" and you reply "he has a good personality," it can be assumed the person is not all that attractive. You never said he was ugly - those words were left out - but because of the words you did use - "good personality" to describe appearance, it's a good bet the person is not attractive to you.

Another example is when a person you've just met "ghosts" you (doesn't reply to texts or calls). You might have had a great time on the first date and maybe you think things are going

well. But because the person is not answering - not using any words at all - you can be fairly sure she is just not that into you. However, if she replies to all of your messages and even starts conversations of her own, that is a clue that she is interested and wants to engage at a deeper level.

In literature the same rules apply, and students should learn to trust the words on the page. After all, the author chose those specific words on purpose. The same holds true when something is NOT being said in the text. Students should ask themselves what it means when something is left out. Often what isn't said is more powerful than what is.

**Repetition:** As songs often do with the use of a chorus, fiction texts will also repeat key words, phrases, or ideas in order to emphasize important points. If a text has a strong theme, it stands to reason the theme will come up more than once and (potentially) in different ways. The affect can be heavy-handed in some cases, but in others it helps to grasp the underlying message of the story.

In groups, students will name five songs that have a repeated chorus. Students will then decide how the verses of the song relate to the chorus. And vice-versa. Just as the repetition of the chorus of a song usually expresses its theme, repetition in fiction can often tip expert readers off to the text's main ideas.

**Finding Symbols:** Symbols play a big role in fiction. The indication of additional ideas and meaning is an effective way to subtly convey a message. Symbols in a text can represent a language all their own, much like emojis in text messages. And also similar to emojis, the interpretation of those symbols can have a drastic effect on understanding.

How many different ways can we interpret the meaning of emojis? Consider:



Is this money-mouth face good or bad? Positive or negative? Does it mean wealth or greed? Does it mean that a person has earned a lot of money or is solely focused on money? It can mean each of these things, and many more. While each emoji may have a common meaning, these meanings are not fixed and may change from person to person, from text to text.

Just like symbols in literature, emojis stand in for something else - the words they represent. In literature, a character might always be taking from others and never giving back. When this person is beaten up in the end, it might be interpreted as 'greed is bad.' However, if a

person has money and is always giving it away, and in the end finds love, it might be interpreted as ‘generosity is good.’ It all depends on the interpretation of the symbols.

#### **Step 4: How Will Students Practice These Skills and Get Feedback?**

Just as a carpenter does not use every tool in her toolbox for every job, an academic writer will not need to analyze every element for every assignment. The trick is to become proficient in all of them, and to be able to discern which elements are the most useful for each particular text and each particular essay. To become an expert, students must practice these skills with low-stake assignments, accompanied by feedback from their peers.

Once the tasks in Step 3 have been modeled and discussed, and the students are becoming familiar with the concepts of each textual element to be analyzed, it is time to practice on a short piece of fiction. Students will need to read the piece multiple times as they complete this step, so a story of less than 10 pages is recommended. It is also recommended to have a classroom discussion about offering quality feedback *before* beginning the sequence of assignments below.

With each element below, students will write out their responses and share them in small groups of 3 or 4. The other students will read the responses, and then ask questions and offer suggestions for improvement. The students repeat this step until each member of the group has been read and responded to. Students should then revise their responses based on the feedback. The updated responses are then shared with the group, receiving an additional round of feedback.

**Conflict:** What are the sources of tension in the text? What goals are attempting to be achieved? By whom?

Describe in detail as many types of conflict as possible, including internal (emotional) as well as external (physical). Be sure to outline both sides of each conflict, not just the side of the protagonist or the side you may “agree” with.

**Context:** For external context: What do you know about the time period the story was written in and/or is about? Are there differences in the norms and laws of today? If so, how do those differences affect the characters in the story?

For internal context: How does the setting in the story contribute to the actions and dialogue of the characters? How does the situation playing out in the story contribute to the actions and dialogue of the characters? If you changed either of these (setting or situation), would it have an effect on your understanding of the character’s actions and dialogue? How so?

**Characters:** Define the main characters. What are their attributes and goals? Why are they the way they are (how have their backstories “created” them)? If you were to change one major thing about a character’s past, would it change the story itself? How so?

Do you know anybody in “real life” who shares the same traits as any of the characters? How do those traits affect the way you see that person? If you were to change or remove those traits from that person, how would your views of that person change?

**Significant Moments:** Make an outline the text using only the most important events. Why was each of these events so important? How do these moments help you better understand who the characters are in the story? If you changed the outcome of any of these moments, would the story be the same? Why?

**The Ending:** What happens at the end of the story? Is there a moral or a message to be taken away? Do you think the author is trying to “say something?” If so, what?

Does the ending feel inevitable from the significant moments from above? Is there anything that feels “unearned,” or not believable, about the ending?

**Word Deployment:** Consider the ending and the significant moments you outlined above and determine how language was used in each part of the story. If a scene has dialogue, can you determine the tone and emotion of the characters? If the scene is exposition, can you determine the mood and pacing? In both, is there anything that feels “missing” or anything you can “read between the lines?”

#### **Step 4: How Will Students Practice These Skills and Get Feedback**

Students will practice understanding the purpose of each of the eight elements that have been modeled for them. During this low pressure phase, students will be asked to practice 1 of the 8 lenses using images, video clips, and short easy texts. The activities students will participate in are as follows:

**Finding repetition:** Students will identify and interpret repetition in songs to guess the title of the song.

**Identifying conflict:** Who is fighting who or what? Students will identify what different characters symbolize using frames from Toy Story, Star Wars, and an image of Superman punching Adolf Hitler.

**Looking at the ending:** Does the ending promote or discourage the events that have occurred? Students will make stories using a series of different beginnings, middles, and



ends. Students will mix up stories and read their creations. The class will interpret if the ending promotes or discourages the events that have occurred.

**Thinking about context:** Students will review the images of Jim Crow in the South.

What did 1953 look like? Students will then watch the short video of Dr. Seuss' *Sneetches* that was published in 1953. Students will be asked “What does this book say about differences?” “How could this relate to other events in 1953?”

**Find significant moments:** Significant moments are moments that change the course of events of the story. Students will be asked to think of a long game versus the highlight reel. The clips they pick for the highlight reel are the significant moments. Students will create their own highlight reel of moments that have changed the course of events in their life.

**Look at characters:** Characters are developed by combining traits. Authors can develop traits by using a characters actions or their outside appearance. Students will be given 3 character profiles and they will be responsible for figuring out how they will signal those traits in their characters

**Find symbols:** Students will match common symbols to the ideas that they represent.

**Look at word deployment:** Students will be given three words that are similar but have different connotations. They will have to make a sentence with each word pairing. They will present their sentences and explain how using each word affected the meaning of the sentence.

Students will be asked to determine the meaning behind elements through various activities using various types of media. By giving students the ability to practice in a low stakes environment I am giving them the ability to focus on the skill without worrying about issues with reading level. Students often see the big intimidating picture when it comes to English class, they focus on large essays or long readings. By breaking it up into small focused tasks, it encourages students with fixed mindsets about English to participate.

### **Step 5: What Will Motivate the Students?**

English is often seen as a subject that people either “get” or “don’t get.” They have a fixed mindset about their ability in all subjects. All students will be surveyed at the beginning of the semester to understand their mindset. The survey includes questions about students’ previous experience in English classrooms and how important they feel writing and reading are in their everyday life. Additional questions ask students about their willingness to participate even if they don’t know the answer and their opinion on students who work hard to achieve something. The survey lets a teacher to understand the students’ feelings about English and their understanding of their own intelligence. Understand how a class thinks allows for a teacher to reframe student thinking.

Teaching students elements to look for in literature can empower students who have considered themselves “bad” at English. By giving students the elements to look for, we are creating a “cheat sheet” for a foundation of literary analysis. Exposing the structure behind a writing can help students see connections they had previously not seen. These connections are the first step in literary analysis. No longer will they finish a reading without the ability to participate at least once in the discussion. Giving students a toolbox for reading unmask the confusion that surrounds reading in an English class.

### **Step 6: How Well Are Students Mastering These Learning Tasks?**

Mastery is less about an essay grade and more about student confidence. It is possible for students to master the 8 key elements and still write a bad essay. What the 8 key elements show students is how to interact with a text. Students should have the confidence to speak about what they are reading and the tools to point out not only that they enjoyed a text, but what they specifically enjoyed. By the end of the semester students should feel unafraid to discuss a text.

As a final assessment of their analysis skills students will be asked to read a text independently. Students will come together as a class to discuss major plot points and check for understanding. Students will be reminded of the eight elements that they have practiced and have had modeled for them. Then, students will be asked to reread the text with an intention of their choice. They will have to choose an intention from one of the eight elements that have been discussed. Students will write a short response where they explain an element that they enjoyed or found interesting in the story. They will be asked to explain what that element is and why they

enjoyed it. Students will participate in an in-class discussion where they share out their responses and other students can build off their responses.

Once the discussion has come to a close, students will be asked to write a one paragraph essay proposal. Students may write about any of the eight elements that they have learned. Students will have to explain what element they have chose, how that element has been presented in that text, and how it connects to another element or to a larger theme.

The short nature of this assignment will help students focus on what matters most, understanding how elements can come together to serve a purpose. Once students uncover the subtext that exists beyond the plot, they have built a foundation for analysis in their longer writing assignments. Students will conference with a teacher with their essay proposal. In this conference the teacher will be able to determine whether students are paraphrasing plot or displaying deeper insight of the text.