

Developing a New Generation of Scholars: “Search and Re-search”

Reader Response and Writing in the Literature Classroom

The following examples illustrate how questions at differing levels of cognition can be constructed to help students *develop* and *exercise* skill in critical thinking as they are prompted to read, reflect upon, and write about primary texts.

(Examples of questions appropriate to freshman-level writing appear in the chapter.)

An early question for a sophomore survey course (in this case, Survey of British Literature) may focus on *application* and *analysis*:

Choose any two aspects of life that Sir Thomas More presents in *Utopia*.

To what extent do these Utopian ideals appear to reflect and/or depart from English life in More’s time? Cite and document specific examples, drawing from class notes as well as introductory historical background presented in your anthology. What effects on contemporary U.S. society might you predict if the Utopian practices you discuss were to be put into effect here at this point in history? On what evidence (readily recognized even by those who might disagree with your conclusions) do you base your predictions?

A later question for this same course may call for more complex integration of literary/rhetorical theory into the analysis:

Choose two literary selections classified as “British” literature that show the press or influence of a culture not specifically “English.” In each instance, how is the non-English culture portrayed? Cite specific examples, analyzing the author’s choice of words as well as the images evoked. Is any culture presented overtly or subtly as “other”? What historical occurrences and position/vantage point of the author may account for the cultural representations you note?

An advanced course in the major may begin with an essay topic that requires *comparison-contrast*:

In a 28 Nov. 1961 letter to literary critic John Hawkes, Flannery O'Connor wrote, “I feel more of a kinship with [Nathaniel Hawthorne] than with any other American” (CW 1157). If you consider only “Young Goodman Brown” by Hawthorne and only the stories and essay by O'Connor that we have discussed in the course thus far, to what extent can you see a Hawthorne-O'Connor kinship in the literature? Discuss and document three specific examples from O'Connor to illustrate.

Later questions for upper division and graduate level courses appropriately involve “higher order” thinking that requires *in-depth analysis, synthesis, and critical evaluation*:

“Chapter One of *The Violent Bear It Away* appeared first in an 8 Oct. 1955 issue of *New World Writing* under the title “You Can’t t Be Any Poorer than Dead.” Considering the words “poor” and “dead” in a spiritual, not just physical sense, discuss Chapter One first as a “stand alone” story. How effective? Substantiate with specific, concrete detail. Then considering the novel/novella as a whole within the genre conventions of Modernism, take a position about the degree to which O’Connor’s reframing her story within the novel genre is either more or less effective than the short story.

The key is to frame increasingly complex questions for writing assignments both over time and from one academic level to another, but to do so gradually so that students have ample opportunity to practice and refine their critical thinking skills.