CHAPTER 2
The Role of Good Reading

Writing about literature begins, of course, with reading, so it stands to reason that good reading is the first step toward successful writing. But what exactly is “good reading”? Good reading is, generally speaking, not fast reading. In fact, often the best advice a student can receive about reading is to slow down. Reading well is all about paying attention, and you can’t pay attention if you’re texting a friend as you read or racing to get through an assignment and move on to “more important” things. If you make a point of giving yourself plenty of time and minimizing your distractions, you’ll get more out of your reading and probably enjoy it more as well.

THE VALUE OF REREADING

The best reading is often rereading, and the best readers are those who are willing to go back and reread a piece of literature again and again. It is not uncommon for professional literary critics—who are, after all, some of the most skilled readers—to read a particular poem, story, or play literally dozens of times before they feel equipped to write about it. And well-written literature rewards this willingness to reread, allowing readers to continue seeing new things with each reading. If you have a favorite book you return to over and over, or a favorite song you like to listen to again and again, you intuitively understand this truth. Realistically, of course, you will not have the time to read every assigned piece many times before discussing it in class or preparing to write about it, but you should not give up or feel frustrated if you fail to “get” a piece of literature on the first reading. Be prepared to go back and reread key sections, or even a whole work, if doing so could help with your understanding.

CRITICAL READING

The sort of reading that works best with imaginative literature—or any other complex writing—is sometimes called “active reading” or “critical reading,” though critical here implies not fault-finding but rather thoughtful consideration. Much of the reading we do in everyday life is passive and noncritical. We glance at street signs to see where we are; we check a sports Web site to find out how our favorite team is doing; we read packages for information about the products we use. And in general, we take in all this information passively, without questioning it or looking for deeper meaning. For many kinds of reading, this is perfectly appropriate. It would hardly make sense to ask, “Why is this Pine Street?” or “What do they mean when they say there are twelve ounces of soda in this can?” There is, however, another type of reading, one that involves asking critical questions and probing more deeply into the meaning of what we read, and this is the kind of reading most appropriate to imaginative literature (especially if we intend to discuss or write about that literature later).

THE MYTH OF “HIDDEN MEANING”

There is a persistent myth in literature classes that the purpose of reading is to scour a text for “hidden meaning.” Do not be taken in by this myth. In fact, many instructors dislike the phrase hidden meaning, which has unpleasant and inaccurate connotations. First, it suggests a sort of willful subterfuge on the part of the author; a deliberate attempt to make his or her work difficult to understand or to exclude the reader. Second, it makes the process of reading sound like digging for buried treasure rather than a systematic intellectual process. Finally, the phrase implies that a text has a single, true meaning and that communication and understanding move in one direction only: from the crafty author to the searching reader.

In truth, the meanings in literary texts are not hidden, and your job as a reader is not to root around for them. Rather, if a text is not immediately accessible to you, it is because you need to read more actively, and meaning will then emerge in a collaborative effort as you work with the text to create a consistent interpretation. (This is the basis of reader-response criticism, which is explained on pages 178–80.) Obviously, active reading requires effort. If you find this sort of reading hard, take that as a good sign. It means you’re paying the sort of attention that a well-crafted poem, story, or play requires of a reader. You also should not assume that English teachers have a key that allows them to unlock the one secret truth of a text. If, as is often the case, your instructor sees more or different meanings in a piece of literature than you do, this is because he or she is trained to read actively and has probably spent much more time than you have with literature in general and more time with the particular text assigned to you.
ACTIVE READING

Annotating

If the first suggestions for active reading are to slow down and to know that a second (or even a third) reading is in order; the next suggestion is to read with a pen or pencil in hand in order to annotate your text and take notes. If you look inside a literature textbook belonging to your instructor or to an advanced literature student, chances are you’ll see something of a mess—words and passages circled or underlined, comments and questions scrawled in the margins (technically called *marginalia*), and unexplained punctuation marks or other symbols decorating the pages. You should not interpret this as disrespect for the text or author or as a sign of a disordered mind. It is simply textual annotation, and it means that someone has been engaged in active reading. Perhaps an extreme example is the poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who was famous for annotating not only his own books but also those he borrowed from friends—a habit unlikely to secure a friendship—and his marginalia actually make up one entire volume of his collected works.

If you are not accustomed to textual annotation, it may be hard to know where to begin. There is no single, widely used system of annotation, and you will almost certainly begin to develop your own techniques as you practice active reading. Here, however, are a few tips to get you started:

- **Underline, circle, or otherwise highlight passages** that strike you as particularly important. These may be anything from single words to whole paragraphs—but stick to those points in the text that really stand out, the briefer and more specific, the better. Don’t worry that you need to find the most crucial parts of a poem, play, or story. Everyone sees things a little differently, so just note what makes an impression on you.

- **Make notes in the margins** as to why certain points strike you. Don’t just underline; jot down at least a word or two in the margin to remind yourself what you were thinking when you chose to highlight a particular point. It may seem obvious to you at the moment, but when you return to the text in two weeks to write your paper, you may not remember.

- **Ask questions of the text.** Perhaps the most important aspect of active reading is the practice of asking critical questions of a text. Nobody—not even the most experienced literary critic—understands everything about a literary text immediately, and noting where you are confused or doubtful is an important first step toward resolving any confusion. Types of questions are discussed a little later in this chapter, but for now just remember that any point of confusion is fair game, from character motivation (“Why would she do that?”), to cultural or historical references (“Where is Xanadu?”), to the definitions of individual words (“Meaning?”). Most likely, you will eventually want to propose some possible answers, but on a first reading of the text it’s enough to note that you have questions.

  - **Talk back to the text.** Occasionally, something in a literary text may strike you as suspicious, offensive, or just plain wrong. Just because a story, poem, or play appears in a textbook does not mean that its author is above criticism. Try to keep an open mind and realize that there may be an explanation that would satisfy your criticism, but if you think an author has made a misstep, don’t be afraid to make note of your opinion.

  - **Look for unusual features of language.** In creating a mood and making a point, literary works rely much more heavily than do purely informational texts on features of language such as style and imagery. As a reader of literature, then, you need to heighten your awareness of style. Look for patterns of images, repeated words or phrases, and any other unusual stylistic features—right down to idiosyncratic grammar or punctuation—and make note of them in your marginalia.

  - **Develop your own system of shorthand.** Annotating a text, while it obviously takes time, shouldn’t become a burden or slow your reading too much, so keep your notes and questions short and to the point. Sometimes all you need is an exclamation point to indicate an important passage. An underlined term combined with a question mark in the margin can remind you that you didn’t immediately understand what a word meant. Be creative, but try also to be consistent, so you’ll know later what you meant by a particular symbol or comment.

Student Jarrad Nunes was assigned to read Emily Dickinson’s poem “Because I could not stop for Death.” Here are some of the annotations he made as he read the poem:
EMILY DICKINSON [1830–1886]

Because I could not stop for Death

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries— and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

[1863; 1890]

Jarrad’s annotations cover everything from major points of content, like the personification of the character Death and the absence of overt religiosity, to small notations on style. He asks lots of questions and sometimes provides tentative answers. Having annotated the poem in this way, he was ready to participate in discussions both in the classroom and online, and later he had some good starting notes when he decided to write a paper on the poem.

Note Taking

It’s a good idea, especially if you are reading a difficult text or one about which you expect to be writing, to keep a notebook handy as you read, a place to make notes that would be too long or complex to fit in the margins. What should these notes contain? Essentially, they should be more extensive versions of your marginalia. Note any unusual repetitions or juxtapositions, as well as anything that surprises you or frustrates your expectations as you read. Note passages that seem particularly crucial, or particularly confusing (using page numbers, and perhaps placing an asterisk or other symbol in the margins), and write a few sentences explaining why these stood out for you. Ask plenty of questions, as explained later in this chapter.

You might want to use the same notebook that you keep with you in class so that you can make reference to your class notes while reading at home and bring the insights from your reading to your class discussions. In class, write down any information your instructor writes on the board or projects using PowerPoint or other presentation software. If he or she thought it was important enough to write down, you probably should too. Your class notes should include new terminology or vocabulary, as well as any point the instructor repeats more than once or twice. Also take note of comments by your classmates that seem especially salient to your evolving understanding of the literature, particularly points you disagree with or would not have thought of on your own. Just be sure to distinguish which ideas in your notes are yours and which you read or heard from someone else. It may be obvious to you now, but can you guarantee that a month from now, when you’re writing a paper, you’ll remember who produced that germ of insight?

Remember that the best note takers are not necessarily those who have amassed the most pages of notes at the end of the term. Good notes need not be well-reasoned paragraphs or even complete sentences. In fact, they seldom are. The key to taking good notes is to take them quickly, with minimal interruption to your reading or participation in a discussion. As with annotating texts, try to develop your own shorthand for note taking. Just be sure that you write enough to jog your memory when
you return to the notes days, weeks, or even months later. Try to be consistent in what and how you abbreviate. One specific piece of advice, though: it's a good idea to jot down page numbers in your notes, referring to the specific lines or passages under discussion. That way, you'll have no problem matching up the notes with the texts to which they refer.

Journal Keeping

You may be assigned to keep a reading journal for your class. Of course, you should follow your instructor's guidelines, but if you aren't sure what to write in a reading journal, think of it as a place to go a step further than you do in your annotations and notes. Try out possible answers, preferably several different ones, to the questions you have raised. Expand your ideas from single phrases and sentences into entire paragraphs, and see how they hold up under this deeper probing. Although a reading journal is substantially different from a personal journal or diary, it can at times contain reflections on any connections you make between a piece of literature and your own life and ideas. Some instructors ask students to respond to their readings with Web resources, including discussion boards, e-mail messages, or blog entries. These platforms allow you to build an archive of your responses so that you can easily return to them when you begin writing a draft of your paper; in addition, you can respond to other students as they develop their ideas. Here is an example of a Blackboard discussion board response to "Because I could not stop for Death":

**Forum:** Because I could not stop for Death  
**Date:** 10 Feb 2015 22:15  
**Author:** Nunes, Jarrad  
**Subject:** Hymn Meter

We read some Emily Dickinson poems in high school, and I remember my teacher saying that Emily Dickinson wrote all her poems in "hymnal stanzas," which are the typical meter used in hymns. My teacher used "Amazing Grace" as an example of a hymn in this style. "Because I could not stop for Death" follows this meter exactly, except in the first two lines of stanza 4, which reverses the scheme. According to Britannica Online, Dickinson was raised in a religious family, but she herself had a lot of questions and doubts about Christianity. It's notable that in this poem she never mentions God or associates death with heaven the way you might expect from a Christian.

Is this maybe a sign of her religious doubts? She must have grown up singing hymns and associating that particular rhythm with church. I wonder why someone who was skeptical about religion would write her poems in a form that is so strongly associated with the church.

In this brief response, the student explores questions about both form and content. He connects his reading of the poem with insights gleaned from both previous experience in high school and some online research.

This kind of response will serve Jarrad well when it's time to generate a thesis for his paper on the subject. Even if your instructor doesn't require online forum participation or a journal for your class, many students find keeping a journal a useful tool for getting more out of their reading, not to mention a wealth of material to draw from when they sit down to write a paper.

Using Reference Materials

Many students are reluctant to use the dictionary or encyclopedia while reading, thinking they should be able to figure out the meanings of words from their context and not wanting to interrupt their reading. But the simple truth is that not all words are definable from context alone, and you'll get much more out of your reading if you are willing to make the small effort involved in looking up unfamiliar words. If you are reading John Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" and you don't know what the word *valediction* means, you obviously start at a big disadvantage. A quick look in a dictionary would tell you that a valediction is a speech given at a time of parting (like the one a valedictorian gives at a graduation ceremony). Armed with that simple piece of information, you begin your reading of Donne's poem already knowing that it is about leaving someone or something, and understanding the poem becomes much simpler. Notice that the annotations for the Dickinson poem earlier in the chapter include a definition of *cornice*.

An encyclopedia like *Britannica Online* (an online subscription service available at most university libraries) can also be a useful tool. If, as you're reading Dickinson's poem, you want to read her biography, *Britannica Online* can provide biographical and cultural context for her life and work. Or, if you want to learn more about the meter of the poem, you could look up "hymnal stanza" to develop an understanding of its use, or "personification" to understand how the poet makes characters out of Death and Immortality. *Britannica Online* often provides a bibliography for further reading, so it can be a good place to start your research.
QUESTIONS FOR ACTIVE READING: FICTION

- The plot is, simply put, the series of events that transpire in a story. How would you summarize the plot of each story? What, if anything, makes it difficult to do so?
- Who, in your opinion, are the most sympathetic characters? Who are the most antagonistic? What kinds of information do we learn about the emotional lives of these characters? How do they grow, develop, or change their minds?
- What is the point of view of the story? If the author has chosen first-person or omniscient narration, what are the advantages and disadvantages of those choices?
- How would you describe the setting of each story? What details of setting contribute to the tone or atmosphere of the story?
- All good short stories use vivid physical details and images to bring the story to life. What details are most memorable to you? How do they affect your interpretation of the characters and events?
- What insights do you gather from this story? Do you learn something? Does the author challenge your value system? Do the characters undergo a transformation that is surprising, troubling, or inspiring, and what does that reveal about the story itself?

QUESTIONS FOR ACTIVE READING: POETRY

- Wallace Stevens once said that "the poem is the cry of its occasion." What occasion forced this poem into utterance? Why did the poet have to write it?
- Who is the main speaker of the poem? How would this poem sound if it were spoken from another perspective? For example, how would Robert Browning's dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess" (pages 64–65) sound if it were spoken by the Duke's guest?
- For whom is the speaker writing the poem? What evidence do you see for this reading?
- Imagery creates a sensory experience on the page. How does the poetry use imagery to make you feel the experience in the poem?
- How is the poem arranged on the page? How would you describe the shape of the stanzas? The shape of the lines? How long or short are the lines? Why does this matter to the content of the poem?
- Where do you see patterns of repetition? In shape, in language, in image? What effect does this achieve?
- What has the speaker realized (or not realized) by the end of the poem? Where does the poem take you, and how do you get there? Most poems include a turn, or an "aha" moment, when the poet makes a shift toward discovery.
- How would you describe the language of the poem? What kind of diction does the speaker use? What verb tense? What references?
QUESTIONS FOR ACTIVE READING: DRAMA

- What actually happens within the frame of the play? What transpired before the play started? What do you speculate will happen once the play is over?

- Every character has unique attributes and relationships with other characters. What do you learn about each character through their interaction with others? How do the characters speak? Do they use slang? A regional dialect? Does someone hesitate or speak in fits and starts? What do characters withhold or reveal through their dialogue?

- Setting can determine how characters act and what obstacles may stand in their way. What does the setting of the play reveal to you? For example, how does the setting in Susan Glaspell’s Trifles (pages 119–30)—an abandoned farmhouse in a farming community—affect the series of events in the play?

- Scenes are the building blocks of any dramatic text. Can you identify each scene? What does each one accomplish?

- Typically, dramatic texts establish tension right away. What is the central tension of the dramatic text? Where do you first learn of the tension or problem? Does it get resolved by the end of the play? If not, why not?

- You can tell a lot about a play based on how the writer manipulates time. How does time move in the play? Sequentially? Are there flashbacks? Speculations about the future? How long does it take for time to transpire in the play? How do you know?

- Are there moments of dramatic irony—that is, moments in which you as an audience member know something that the characters onstage do not? Why does the playwright create this gap in a character’s knowledge? How does it affect you as a viewer?

- What does this play reveal about the culture in which it was produced?

- What insights do you gather from this dramatic text? Does the play challenge your value system? Do the characters undergo a transformation that is surprising, troubling, or inspiring, and what does that reveal about the play itself?