



# IS 101: Asking Questions, Making Choices

## A GUIDE TO CRITICAL READING

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### PERCEPTION

Effective critical reading really depends upon how we view the world around us. Each of us makes sense of what we see using information that we gather from previous experiences. We construct the beliefs and knowledge we hold from these experiences. We organize, interpret and file the sensations we experience and thereby form lenses through which we perceive future information. For example, if a person develops a skin rash, irritated eyes, and a headache on repeated occasions after swimming, this experience may well affect how he or she views swimming as an activity. Moreover, this experience contributes to how that individual constructs his or her beliefs about this activity, which may be expressed in statements such as, “Swimming makes people sick” or “Those who choose to swim are foolishly taking part in a waste of time.” If these beliefs remain unchallenged by new experiences or unexamined by the individual, then they become fixed as a part of the individual’s constructed knowledge, a “fact” about the world: “Swimming is a harmful activity.” So, as you begin to critically read, think about how the lenses of your beliefs and knowledge affect how you interpret the ideas on the page. Now let’s take a close look at the process itself.

## WHAT IS CRITICAL READING?

“Critical reading” is a term used to describe the kind of deeply engaged reading expected of students in college. It depends upon our being intellectually wide awake while we read, reading on the lines, between the lines, and beyond the lines as we make sense of the text. Reading on the lines means that we decode what the actual text says to find the meaning. Reading between the lines involves looking for the meaning implied by the language of the text, how the actual meaning can have alternate or deeper meanings within a larger context. This kind of reading may relate to the period or culture in which the text takes place or to the occasion for its being written, and it certainly relates to our own experiences—the context in which we are reading the text and the experiences we have had that relate to the text. Reading beyond the lines prompts us to think about how the text can have a deeper meaning applied to the world at large. As we do so, we think carefully about what words and sentences mean, how ideas connect, and how the larger concepts contained in the text fit into various contexts both in the world of the text and in our own worlds as readers.

While each one of us shares human experiences in common with other people, we also have accumulated a specific personal combination of experiences, beliefs, and knowledge. Each of us uses both of these sets of information to create a unique web of meaning as he or she reads any text. It is important, therefore, for any critical reader to take notes in the text and on separate sheets of paper as he or she reads in order to record personal reactions, questions, and interpretations. By doing so, the reader constructs a record of his or her own web of meaning as it is made.

This kind of reading is very different from the surface reading we do when we skim a magazine article or glance over a cereal box. It may even differ from the reading process that you used to read textbooks and other materials in high school. Critical reading requires close, sustained attention, thorough reading and re-reading of the text,

and jotting down reactions, ideas, and questions as they occur. It also involves stopping to look up new words rather than reading over them.

Since this process is somewhat intense, it is wise to read chunks of the text, focusing attention completely on what's there. Read for a short period of time—about 20 minutes works well for many readers. Then, stop and allow yourself to absorb the meaning of what you have read. Make notes about the thread of the narrative (who are the characters and what are they doing that seems significant); the motivations, flaws, and misunderstandings that drive the action; the patterns of images, actions, themes, and ideas that you identify from one chunk to the next; the questions or responses raised by that critical voice in your head that reads along with you. It is a good idea to use a system of symbols to mark what kind of note you are making. For example, a question mark for questions, an exclamation point for responses, an asterisk for important ideas, etc.

After you have finished every three or four chunks, stop for a moment to think about the larger issues and questions raised by the text. What key ideas or questions does the author urge you to consider? What patterns of ideas, images, or actions reinforce these key ideas? Make notes of what you discern here. Some large questions are included at the end of this document to help you get inside a few of the key issues that Barbara Kingsolver explores in *Animal Dreams*. Use these questions as a comparative guide against which to check your own notes AFTER you have finished reading this novel.

### **Textual Evidence**

Critical reading, thinking, and writing processes don't stop here. Once you as a reader have determined what you believe to be the text's total meaning and reflected a bit on its implications, you are then ready to respond to the text in a variety of ways. Whatever the form of your response—whether in class discussion, formal argument, or

written reflection—you will need to use evidence drawn from the text to support WHY you hold a certain point of view. Note here that your marginal notes in the text as well as the other longer reading notes you have made about ideas that seem significant will provide crucial information to help you explain and support your viewpoint. For example, think about the larger implications concerning vocation pointed up in the following passage in which Cosima explains to her father the reason she went to medical school:

“No. I thought it would be an impressive thing to do. But I don’t think it was a plan that really grew out of my life. I can’t remember ever thinking it would be all that delightful to look down people’s throats and into their nasty infected ears and their gall bladders” (161).

Your own response may take a form like the following:

When she makes the choice to go to medical school, Cosima thinks only about the impression she will make on other people. She appears to have made this decision to fulfill some sensed demand from her father, who is a physician, to continue in the family business and to choose a profession that shows she is better than the folks in Grace.

In your own mind, you believe this statement is valid, even obvious, but remember that others do not share your particular reading lenses, so you will need to provide textual evidence along with a supporting explanation for your assertion:

Since you want to focus on the central idea of vocation, you will want to look in the text for evidence that supports your assertions about this central idea, evidence that you cite in support of your assertions. Thus, the passage of the book quoted above offers an opportunity to ask a number of questions, and the above response becomes incomplete without posing such questions.

After asking critical questions about how Cosima responds to the concept of vocation, you discover a number of textual passages in the book that you can use to support your assertion. You decide to focus your assertion more specifically. Below is a revised version of your assertion:

In one of her first extended conversations with her father after she returns to Grace, Cosima answers for him the question of why she went to medical school, asserting that she does not “think it was a plan that really grew out of [her] life” (161). Here she provides an important clue to her view of vocation. One’s calling must be particular to the individual and not undertaken to please someone else. By the end of the book, this understanding becomes clearer for Cosima as she reads from Father Fernando Cardenal’s observation that “you learn to read so you can identify the reality in which you live, so that you can become a protagonist of history rather than a spectator” (334). As she applies this understanding to her own life, she realizes that throughout her life she has been living in a fictional family context created by her father, one that she only learns to read accurately at the end of the novel: “He was doing exactly the opposite of setting himself apart. He was proving that we belonged here” (290). And as a part of this deeper understanding, she recognizes more clearly her own vocation as a science teacher.

Note that the above example contains three parts, sometimes called **The 1-2-3 Rule**: 1) the assertion itself, 2) textual evidence and explanation in support of the assertion, and 3) a direct statement of how the evidence reveals the significance of the assertion. All three parts of this equation must be present for the critical response to be complete. Putting forward a connected, supported series of assertions coherently—whether in discussion or in writing—is one of the essential skills we will work on in IS 101.

### **A FINAL NOTE ABOUT TEXTUAL AUTHORITY**

For various reasons—lack of confidence, laziness, lack of knowledge—high school students often first look to outside sources such as *Cliff’s Notes*, *Spark Notes*, *Monarch*

*Notes*, or other sources which provide interpretive readings of texts when these texts are assigned to be read. Sometimes students even use these sources as substitutes or short-cuts for reading the actual primary text itself. While this approach may achieve some successful results in high school, it is inadequate and unacceptable in college-level work, particularly in a liberal arts college which focuses on the use of critical process in learning.

These outside sources are tempting to use in part because they contain an authoritative view and voice, a confident textual authority. The voices in these texts proclaim, “This work means THIS and here’s why.” Instead of simply accepting the prescriptive authority of these sources, which present the meaning of the text rather than a meaning (yes, texts can have more than one valid meaning), our focus in IS 101 and in other Wartburg courses will be placed on developing our own authoritative readings of the texts we read. If we read each text carefully, using the reading and annotation processes detailed above, think carefully about how and why we respond to the text as we do, and use the 1-2-3 Rule in expressing our viewpoints, each of our responses can contain just as much authority as any outside published interpretation. More importantly, our responses possess the distinctive strength of being authentic, of being “ours,” rather than someone else’s belief. In short, the point is not reaching the destination of getting the assignment done by whatever means, but rather the journey itself—HOW we go about making sense of the texts we read.

As each of you begins to engage in critical reading and thinking, don’t worry if you feel unsure of your abilities. As with any process, these also require practice. During your college experience in this first year, we will work together in this class and in others to sharpen your critical skills and abilities.

### Some LARGE Questions about *Animal Dreams*

1. From the beginning of the novel, we are shown the close sisterly relationship between Codi and Hallie. Yet, as their lives progress they discover that they are different. In what ways do they differ and what prompts these differences?
2. Throughout most of her life, Codi has been disengaged from or dislocated within the world, preferring flight to any kind of connection or rootedness. What about her personal history contributes to this approach to the world around her? What prompts her to change this approach?
3. A larger theme in this novel concerns the relationship between humans and the natural world. How do the cultural stories of the people who settle Grace, the Pueblo people of Santa Rosalia, and the humans in the Garden of Eden influence current culture and behavior in the novel?
4. Memory, amnesia, and identity form a second large theme in this book. Thinking about the members of the Noline family, how do memory, amnesia, and identity shape their lives? What significant understandings emerge for them about themselves and the other members of their family as each reflects upon what he or she remembers, what has been forgotten, and who he or she is?