



‘The Ingenious Reader’ - promoting literary analysis skills and creativity

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What we, as teachers, are supposed to foster and promote is the ability of our students to see the world in their own, independent way, and to express this vision in an optimal form for others to perceive it, (no matter whether this vision is shared or rejected by the target audience). To say it simpler, we should teach our students *to understand and to be understood*. Literature gives them a unique chance to experience virtually the joys and the sorrows of the word, and to express their attitude to this diversity in a way, which might not only expose their personal uniqueness, but prove their critical abilities as smart readers and creative interpreters. This is what we define as the main goal of our Internet contest ‘The Ingenious Reader’ («Вдумчивый интерпретатор») - a competition of students’ critical essays on fictional or publicist works by English-language writers.

General approaches to writing a critical analysis and useful tips

The idea behind the competition is getting the contestants to compete in finding the balance between their original vision of a literary work and the proper verbal expression of this vision (the former is treated as its support). Thus, students are encouraged to put into practice their knowledge of interpretation theory, elements of fiction (plot, subject and theme, characters and ways of characterization, image and imagery, etc.), expressive means and stylistic devices.

The following general approaches are recommended to our contestants as ‘rules of game’:

When writing about a literary work, take into consideration the difference between a plot summary and a critical analysis. A plot summary begins with no point of view; it merely recapitulates the facts. A critical analysis takes a viewpoint and attempts to prove its validity. Your task is to explain and evaluate.

Mind that you are writing to a well-informed reader. Your audience has considerable knowledge of the subject about which you are writing.

Start analyzing the text in terms of composition (beginning, middle and end) to get a clearer sense of its movement. Ask yourself what each chapter (paragraph) accomplishes. Read closely the initial description of the text. Look for repeated words and ideas. Ponder well the final paragraph. Do not forget about the title and an epigraph, if any.

If length is a problem, concentrate on shorter passages to explore the text in details.

Your analysis of the passages can fall into several stages [Peck 1995:5]:

- a) A short statement of what the passage is about
 - b) A search for an opposition or tension within the passage
 - c) Analysis of the details of the passage, possibly relating them to the opposition already noted
 - d) Analysis of the relations of the passage to the text as a whole
 - e) A search for anything distinctive about the passage, particularly in the area of style
- Following the procedure step by step you will achieve a sufficiently complex sense of the whole work.

Analyze each element of a literary work (plot, subject, theme, characterization, setting, point of view, and tone as an aspect of point of view, imagery), bearing in mind its organic integrity.

Pay close attention to the form of the work. Try to understand why the author chooses to write in the way he does. Take into consideration the author's choice of sounds, words, and sentence patterns.

Focus on the implied plane of the work, found in word connotations.

Discuss the view of life the work reveals, what the author values and what he condemns.

The aim of interpretation is to name the meaning of the text examined. This meaning is elusive of precise description. A work of art always involves the interrelation of the real and the imagined, and its perception needs a creative effort. The task of a creative text is to display the contradictory plurality of its conclusions, setting the reader free to choose. In this sense a creative text is always an Open work [Eco 1996: 140]. Different readers will bring to it their own preconceptions and values. Their responses to a literary work are subjective. Words and images evoke various personal associations, stirring different trains of thought and feeling. Historical context is also important to interpretation. Textual meaning changes through time, and from this viewpoint the history of interpretation is a history of re-interpretations of the canonical texts. The ingenious reader rewrites every work, imposing upon it a new grid of interpretation and in this sense literary communication is a meeting or even a battle of minds.

From this it does not follow that a text means anything a reader wants it to mean. The variations in readings are not anarchic. There is a difference between a variant interpretation and overinterpretation: to avoid the danger of the latter any reader should check his guess at every level of the text. So we may say that the properties of the text itself set limits to the range of interpretation. Interpretation depends upon the reader's competence in language, his or her world knowledge, and the cultural conventions that language has produced. It demands of the reader both

linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge, sensitiveness to art and inner maturity. People who know how to read literature become better capable of attending to what other people say and feel: Responsiveness thus is ‘an indispensable part of a fully developed personality’ [Arnold, 2010].

Tips on Readability

- Before beginning to write, think of various points in the outline, make up your mind what you want to say under the headings and gradually expand each heading into a paragraph.
- Identify a problem of interpretation, raising a specific question about the text. If your essay lacks a strong thesis, you will have nothing to assert. To come up with the thesis, get in the habit of *how* and *why* questions which are rather interpretative than dryly descriptive.
- A thesis statement should not be too broad, too specific or self-evident. You may also write a one-paragraph ‘promise’ of what your paper is going to be.
- An essay consists of a number of paragraphs. All the sentences in each of the paragraph should be closely connected and deal with the same topic. As part of a larger unit, a paragraph should fit into it, showing some reference to preceding and following paragraphs by introducing a series of ideas or by summing up a collection of statements. This means that a paragraph may have not only a topic sentence but also a linking sentence which takes up the thread of previous paragraphs or which frames the thesis to be developed in the text. Define topic sentences and transition sentences in each of the paragraphs.
- Mind the length of paragraphs. Long paragraphs send off alarms in most readers’ minds; very short paragraphs suggest insubstantiality and flightiness. A long succession of medium-length paragraphs proves monotonous. Vary your pace alive and vital. Pay attention to the variety of structure in paragraphs too.
- There are three main parts in the essay – the beginning, the body, and the end.
- The opening paragraph should appear to be natural. It can also be direct. Arrest the readers’ attention with the very first sentence. There are many ways of beginning the essay, for example, general reflection, a quotation or a question that the composition will answer. You may also frame the thesis at the beginning of your work.
- The middle section of the essay consists of the development of the opener’s thesis. Study the text and record all the textual evidence you have discovered to prove the thesis you have worked out. Organize them into logically connected groups (characterization, setting, point of view etc.) and analyze how they interconnect. Choose the sequence in which to present them.
- The ending of your essay should prove to the reader that the subject has been nicely rounded off and the whole is finished. Because your conclusion is the final idea that your reader will take from the work, it should be as grasping as the

- opening paragraph. Get your final point in sharp focus – rephrase the thesis, re-emphasize its validity, refer in some way to the opening paragraph, or generalize.
- Stick to the motto: “Assert and support”. Offer the careful argumentation to make your position convincing. Range back and forth through the plot in pursuit of textual evidence. Use the details of the plot to demonstrate a point: it is the larger significance of these details that concerns you, not the details for their sake. Summarize the meaning of the textual evidence presented in all paragraphs and tie the evidence to the main thesis of the essay. Argue by generalization and refer to examples and quotations from the text. If you quote, analyze what you quote. The format of the whole paragraph should be ‘text\analysis\conclusion’ (Peck). Try to predict and answer the disagreements and questions that your reader might have about interpretation.
 - Write clearly and effectively. Choose the right words carefully, knowing the right word can sometimes replace phrases or even sentences.
 - Oratory should never be asked to substitute for accuracy and truth. Avoid passive structures, ‘there is/there are’ sentences, clichés, and vague qualifiers, such as ‘interesting’, ‘important’, or ‘unusual’.
 - As pretentiousness is a stumbling block for beginning writers, ‘don’t use words you don’t understand, tackle problems that are too big for you, or write sentences you can’t explain; it is more important to make sense than to make a big, empty impression’ [Bain, Beauty, and Hunter 1995: 2162].
 - Emphasize through position and proportion. A rhetorical principle is that required stress to be given to important elements in an essay at the expense of less important elements. Emphasis may be given to an idea in various parts of an essay. Emphasize words by repeating them or by placing them at the beginning or end of the sentence. Provide variety in the length of the sentences. After a number of long sentences introduce a short one to make the reader focus on the idea it contains. Use other kinds of emphasis, for example, through parallels and contrasts, or through imagery.
 - You will probably revise several drafts before preparing a final version.

Below there are some examples of skilful use of textual analysis techniques demonstrated by our contestants: *effective openers* (used to get the reader involved into the discussion, to frame the theme and support it with an epithet, a quotation and generalization); interpretation of *stylistic devices* used by the author; attention to the *details* and their *symbolic meanings* crucial for understanding the title and the characters, *reviewing skills*, etc.:

- 1) *You will not grasp her with your mind
Or cover with a common label,
For Russia is one of a kind -
Believe in her, if you are able...*

Fyodor Tyutchev
(A. Liberman "Russian Life")

Of course, everyone has heard of the Russian soul. It is that strange, mystical quality which enables Russians to claim that they are more spiritual than Westerners. A person's soul is the key to a person's identity and behaviour. But what is it exactly? Soul... What do we imply by the Russian soul? Is it our everlasting sentimentality, sensitivity, and guilt or our stubbornness, fatalism and sudden unmotivated cruelty? The Russian soul manifests itself in Russian literature. As Virginia Woolf says, "It is the soul that is the chief character of Russian fiction". This quotation may be treated as the theme of the essay "The Russian Point of View" (Anton Shatalov, Herzen University, *Literary Analysis of "The Russian Point of View" by V. Woolf*)

2) <The story begins with the description of a hotel where the American wife and her husband stay. This descriptive paragraph occupies a strong position of the beginning. Everything seems to be ideal with the characters: a cozy room on the second floor, a lovely view from the window, but the author's description of rain evokes a mood of sadness. To bring this air of melancholy home to his reader, Hemingway introduces parallel constructions: "*The rain dripped from the palm trees. ... in a long line in the rain*". The nouns *rain, pools, and sea* belong to one semantic field – that of *water*, which comes to be associated with inevitability. Indeed, one cannot hide from the rain. Water is everywhere: it is on the ground, it is pouring from the heavens as though the nature were weeping for something. Alliteration, namely the repetition of the sounds -r-and -l-(*Rain dripped from the palm trees, the sea broke in a long line in the rain*), brings the necessary measured rhythm into the utterance, imitates the sound of rain.> (Alexandra Metsavas, Herzen University, *Literary Analysis of "Cat in the Rain" by E.Hemingway*)

3) <...Susan Hill introduces a symbolic detail - the green leather hat box in which Lizzie and Clara try to find the mother's will. The girls always thought this mysterious box might contain something precious. But after the funeral they opened it and found their own things: "*now it had been exposed and it was nothing, after all, a hollow drum <...>, they found only their own birth certificates and some school reports, but nothing that went back into her past, or was connected only with her rather than with all of them*". The detail aims at forming the image of Mrs. Murgatroyd. The illusion of a cruel boring woman disappears. And here she is, a frail, weak, unhappy but loving mother, under the mask of a strong and powerful woman. Lizzie and Clara's eyes were as if 'covered with sand' for a long time. They understand their mother only now after years, after her life ended. "Sand" implies the illusions, mistakes and misunderstanding of those who are close>. (Yulia Voronina, Volkhov Affiliate of Herzen University, *Literary Analysis of "Sand" by S. Hill*)

4) <The roots of the conflict between the characters lie in their different attitude to things, different tempers and motivations, and particularly, in their attitude to cinema. Rosa's attitude is much more serious than that of Andrew. For him it was just a sort of fun. He was going to "*enjoy himself*", and nothing more. But for Rosa it was a way to go one stair up in

the world, may be even the means of self-development. Moreover, it was not by chance that she “surveyed the dim amphitheatre in the hope of recognizing some of her acquaintances”. She wanted to be seen in the dress circle and to keep the track of events.

The title of the story is suggestive. It helps us to single out the theme: some people are not content to live in obscurity, and their aim is to go one stair up in the world by any means> (*Elena Makarenko, Severodvinsk Affiliate of Pomor State University named after M.V.Lomonosov, Literary Analysis of “One stair up” by C.Nairne*)

5) <The essay on the story «Dry September» by W. Faulkner is done quite well on the whole. It is thoughtful, competent, carefully organized, grammatically correct and interesting for reading. The interpreter covers all the elements necessary for text understanding, including a hypertheme and microthemes, the plot, the meaning of the title, the explanation of stylistic devices (<...>their role in particular episodes and their connection with the theme), the description of characters and the analysis of their behaviour. The interpreter illustrates and supports his opinions by giving the examples from the text. He comes to important conclusions by examining the language in details and finding out the features that reflect this or that thought of the writer. He studies a manner of speaking as a way of characterization.

The author possesses good knowledge of terminology and some methods necessary for interpretation. He analyzes <...> not only epithets, similes and antitheses but also such an important stylistic device as polysyndeton in the final scene. However, it would be remarkable to mention that this device does not only reveal Negro’s despair but also increases the rhythm, makes the atmosphere tenser and tenser...> (*Yulia Voronkova, Leningrad State University named after A.S.Pushkin, Essay Review*)

The examples taken from our contestants' essays and reviews demonstrate the objectives of interpretative work with literary texts as well as our students' potential for thinking and learning.

As the competition “The Ingenious Reader” started only 2 years ago, we are «beginners» and would be really glad to have more students from different higher schools to participate. We will also appreciate opinions or a piece of advice from those, developing the same or similar practice. Still, this practice seems a good way to help young people to sharpen their senses, to uncover their hidden creative abilities, and, in the long run, to enter this complex world around them without any fear.

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