QUESTIONS TO ASK AS YOU READ A TEXT

Below are some questions that will help you develop a more active and interrogative mode of reading. Not all of these questions will be appropriate for every text, of course, and sometimes the answers to appropriate questions still won’t yield potential theses.

Nonetheless, these questions provide a good starting place for close reading.

**For novels and short stories**

• What is the genre of the text? What are the conventions of that genre, and what do those conventions lead us to expect as readers? Are those expectations always realized? Is there a mix of genres (as there is, for example, in *Jane Eyre*, which is a gothic bildungsroman)? If so, how do the conventions of those different genres interact? (In the case of *Jane Eyre*, there’s a fraught interaction between development or “bildung” (which looks ahead to the future) and haunting (which implicates the past).)

• Is the narrator first- or third-person, omniscient or not? What does the narrator’s position suggest about the characters and events depicted in the text? How much do we know about the narrator? How reliable is he or she?

• Does anybody (narrator included) contradict himself or herself? How can we make sense of this contradiction? Does it mark a development, a response to a new environment, or something else?

• Is there a gap in the story—a secret or an event that is never depicted but only alluded to? What is the effect of such a gap on how we read the story? How can we analyze the gap without trying to fill it in? For example, in Henry James’ novel *The Turn* *of the Screw*, we are never informed of the substance of Quint’s horrifying crime against the children. Rather than trying to name the crime, we can instead analyze how the story’s gaps and secrets induce a “paranoid” mode of reading, whereby every detail seems to harbor deep, repressed meanings.

**For Poems**

• What kind of poem is this? What is the poem’s rhyme scheme? How does its rhyme scheme structure and dramatize the poem’s content?

• What kinds of relationships develop between rhymed words? Do rhymed words reinforce each others’ meanings or ironize them? For example, Alexander Pope’s poem, *The Rape of the Lock*, regularly pairs serious and trivial words, such as “despair” and “hair” to exemplify the intimacy of serious emotions and trivial circumstances in his mock-epic poem.

• Who is the speaker? What can we infer about his or her environment? Does his or her mood remain constant throughout the poem or does it change? What are the significant changes of mood and mind in the poem?

In the case of drama, you will likely ask a combination of questions relevant both to prose and to poetry. Finally, notice what kinds of questions are *not* listed above. For example: *what did the author intend*? In More often, however, you will not have enough evidence to speculate intelligently about the author’s intentions. In the absence of such evidence, orient your claims towards the text.