find very difficult: it does not make a frustrating text easier but rather shows how apparently easy aspects of stories, poems, or plays are actually rich with significance.

I have used “The New Title” with great success teaching everything from Renaissance plays to postmodern novels. Every time I do it, I find that students talk and listen and learn from one another. They are surprised that the titles chosen by their classmates differ so much from their own. They laugh at the funny titles and compliment the insightful ones. And they learn that they each approach the text with their own invisible subtitles.

The Descriptive Word

Erwin Rosinberg

An exercise that both solicits and questions students’ preexisting ideas about a literary genre or period.

Genre: any
Course Level: any
Student Difficulty: easy or moderate
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: any
Semester Time: first day and last day
Writing Component: none
Close Reading: none
Estimated Time: 10 to 20 minutes

EXERCISE

Disrupt some of the usual opening-day classroom protocols by instead engaging directly with what students may already know about the course’s topic. Choose a key term that the course will revisit and refine throughout the semester, and ask students to share any descriptive words that immediately come to mind. In a period-based course, you might ask students what adjectives they would associate with the medieval period, the Renaissance, the Victorian era, and so forth; in a genre course or a topic-based course, you could ask them to think about how they would describe the ideas and images suggested by, for example, “Gothic” or “Romance.”
You can further encourage and direct your students’ feedback by asking them to think beyond literature to other forms of expression that they associate with the period or genre under examination, such as art, architecture, or music. It’s helpful to reassure students that you’re simply soliciting their preexisting impressions, which may come from anywhere: a Hollywood film about medieval knights, a television serial set in Victorian London, an abstract painting they once saw in a museum.

Keep track of your students’ responses on the board. As they continue to contribute descriptive words, begin grouping their thoughts into categories of affinity, linking similar responses to one another. Ultimately, you can use the variety of responses generated to show that periods and genres are not monolithic entities and that students will be engaged in confronting the complexities and contradictions inherent in their assumptions throughout the semester.

This exercise is also worth returning to on the last day of class as a way of demonstrating to students what they have learned, both individually and collectively, about the topic at hand. Remind students of their initial impressions of the key term you selected at the beginning of the semester, and ask them to reconsider their earlier responses: Do the descriptive words that first came to mind still apply? How have their impressions of the period or genre evolved in response to the course material? What unexpected new impressions have the texts generated?

REFLECTIONS

I find this exercise valuable for two reasons: first, it gets students in the habit of talking on the first day of class, and second, it encourages students to let go of the idea that studying literature is about “locking in” particular definitions or creating airtight aesthetic and historical categories. By asking them to contribute the knowledge they already bring to a course from a variety of cultural sources, and to see how their own assumptions may differ from those of their classmates, you can begin to give your students a sense of the course material as a living body of work, however much it may be rooted in the past.

I use this exercise most frequently in my courses on modernist literature. I ask students for adjectives that communicate what “modern” or “modernism” mean to them. Most often, the descriptive terms they contribute tend to fall into two main categories, almost perfectly in contradiction with one another: some students associate modernism with a pared-down aesthetic, using adjectives like “simplified,” “direct,” or “minimalist,” while others convey a sense (or a fear) of challenge and intricacy, using adjectives like “fragmented,” “dense,” and “difficult.” After the board is covered with an array of terms, I ask students to reflect upon the definitional categories they have
created. How is it that both groups of terms can be equally relevant to the study of modernism? Does modernism still cohere as a movement or a period if it is grounded in such contradictory aesthetics? Such complex questions, generated from the students’ own insights, provide a rich entry into the semester’s reading.

Student feedback may also prompt questions that move beyond aesthetic complication, addressing the social and cultural circumstances of literary production as well. For example, in one course students offered the terms “avant-garde” and “democratic” in response to my query about modernism. Again, both ideas are relevant, since modernist writing frequently finds itself answering to charges of exclusivity or elitism while, at times, advocating a radically egalitarian social renewal. We continued to address this apparent contradiction throughout the semester. Indeed, the efficacy of this exercise lies, I believe, in foregrounding contradiction rather than ignoring it. Our definitions of literary periods and genres only remain “true” if they also remain open to complexity and revision, and so soliciting and discussing students’ preexisting definitions helps set an agenda for literary study as a continued act of discovery.

The Common Thread

Simon Grote

A versatile exercise in comparative thinking that enables students to analyze multiple texts when time is short.

Genre: any
Course Level: any
Student Difficulty: moderate
Teacher Preparation: medium
Class Size: any
Semester Time: early, midterm, last day
Writing Component: in class
Close Reading: low to medium
Estimated Time: 20 to 60 minutes