

Suggestions for Using *You Are What You Read* in a Seminar for First-Year College Students

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Why Learn to Read Well?

I wrote *You Are What You Read* to show how learning to read confidently and skillfully enhances our lives and helps us enjoy life more completely. I argue that reading well hones our powers of observation and enhances our capacity for thinking well, skills highly important in all aspects of life. I remind readers that we read with multiple goals—for information, enjoyment, self-gratification, self-advancement; to be instructed, entertained, moved, inspired. *You Are What You Read* attempts to help readers achieve these goals.

Preface

The preface highlights another significant value of reading well, especially the reading of literature: the value of learning to read well lies in the *pleasures* it brings, the *knowledge* it affords, and the *imaginative enlargement* of life it yields. Learning to read well is not as hard as people might think. Each of the book's chapters describes one or more ways to achieve this goal. Each chapter illustrates how reading can heighten our appreciation of living.

Chapter One—Reading and Questioning

In this chapter, readers are invited *to look* at texts, their contours and shapes, and *listen* to them and hear their voices. Readers are encouraged to slow their reading down—to savor what they see and hear and feel. Observation—noticing—is the key to understanding. It's also the key to developing students' own thinking about their reading. And the key to improving their ability to make observations about what they read is to slow down, be deliberate and deliberative.

Encourage students also to re-read. They might do this with the first text they encounter in the book—Kenko's paragraph-essay. It might be read aloud—one sentence at a time by different students, one after another. Students might also be invited—perhaps required—to write their own paragraph-length essay imitating Kenko, sentence by sentence, saving the central idea, thesis, claim for the final sentence. In analyzing Kenko's piece, students should identify, with the instructor's help, the function of each sentence, so they can match the function of each of their

sentences as they write on their own topics.

Other work in this initial chapter focuses on various kinds of contexts—a writer’s works, life, and milieu. Additional contexts could be added for exemplification and amplification—social, political, economic, literary historical, and the like. The idea would be to ask: *what else might be said about this or that text; how else might readers expand their understanding of it?* One thing, of course, would be to read additional poems by W.C. Williams, to read a bit of his biography, or perhaps one of his short stories—and to bring those readings to bear on the poems included in the chapter. Another would be to read O’Connor’s complete story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find, and then respond to it, personally, analytically, evaluatively—whatever is germane to the course goals and students’ readiness at that point in the course.

A final exercise might be to have the class work in pairs or groups of three to write a poem imitating Langston Hughes’s “Harlem 2” or the villanelle, “The Art of Failing.” Ensure that students honor the poem’s syntactic choices, Hughes’s questions and DiYanni’s statements.

Recommended readings: Donna Gorrel

“Freedom to Write—through Imitation”: <https://wac.colostate.edu/jbw/v6n2/gorrell.pdf>
Scott Newstok, *How to Think Like Shakespeare*: chapter 8, On imitation.

Chapter Two—Reading for the Truth

The second chapter approaches reading literature with a different set of questions, all centered on the notion of “truth.” Readers are invited to consider different ways “truth” may manifest itself in a literary work. Students can be asked to discuss the nature of literary interpretation—whether there is or can be a single, central, prevailing truth that any particular text reveals. This more general, philosophical question can open up for them ideas that transcend textual interpretation, but which are prompted by and grounded in textual analysis—the hermeneutical approach introduced in the book’s opening chapter.

One kind of exercise or assignment is to have students write a personal response to a work, perhaps one included in the book’s first two chapters—or another, perhaps related to one of those works in some way. The goal of the exercise or assignment would be less to analyze and interpret, and more to seize on some aspect of it that prompts the student’s feelings and provokes his or her thinking, the work serving as launchpad for speculation and inquiry.

Other assignments or discussions can revolve around Robert Scholes’s tripartite

explanation of *reading, criticism, and interpretation*. Scholes’s emphasis on cultural codes as essential for textual understanding can serve as a springboard for discussion, inquiry, and analysis of one or more cultural texts outside of literature proper. Topics could include but not be restricted to aspects of American culture—everything from dating before and after the Covid years, Facebook and Instagram culture, game culture, various aspects of sports culture, including big-time college football and basketball; professional sports, including soccer, golf, tennis, and baseball; as well as drag car racing, wrestling, and beyond the US, hockey, sumo, rugby, and more. And beyond sports, cultural behavior and beliefs about family traditions, holidays, music, film, politics, and much more.

In yet another application of the search for textual insight and understanding, students might use my framework of experience, interpretation, and evaluation to explore meaning and value in a written or a visual text—using the consideration of E.B. White’s moonwalk piece in the book as a model.

Finally, students can be invited to consider the ethics of reading—their responsibilities as readers to writers and to texts. They might consider, as well, the extent to which “text” and “work” differ and intersect and overlap.

Chapter Three—Reading Nonfiction: The Pleasures of Conversation

The Essay as Conversation—students engage in conversation an essay with a writer: an imaginary dialogue, perhaps. What might a conversation with John Updike sound like, after students read the following paragraph-length mini essay?

This seems to be an era of gratuitous inventions and negative improvements. (2) Consider the beer can. (3) It was beautiful—as beautiful as the clothespin, as inevitable as the wine bottle, as dignified and reassuring as the fire hydrant. (4) A tranquil cylinder of delightfully resonant metal, it could be opened in an instant, requiring only the application of a handy gadget freely dispensed by every grocer. (5) Who can forget the small, symmetrical thrill of those two triangular punctures, the dainty *ffff*, the little crest of suds that formed eagerly in the exultation of release? (6) Now we are given, instead, a top beetling with an ugly, shmoo-shaped “tab,” which, after fiercely resisting the tugging, bleeding fingers of the thirsty man, threatens his lips with a dangerous and hideous hold.

(7) However, we have discovered a way to thwart Progress, usually so unthwartable. (8) *Turn the beer can upside down and open the bottom.* (9) The bottom is still the way the top used to be. (10) True, this operation gives the beer an unsettling jolt, and the sight of a consistently inverted beer can might make people edgy, not to say queasy. (11) But the latter difficulty could be eliminated if manufacturers would design cans that looked the same whichever end was up, like playing cards. (12) What we need is Progress with an escape hatch.

--John Updike, "Beer Can," *New Yorker*, January 18, 1964

One way to help students begin their conversation with Updike would be to walk them through a critical, deliberative reading of his little piece. Something like this:

The first sentence is general; it proposes an idea—that this age or time makes “improvements,” which to Updike’s way of thinking, are not improvements at all. The words “gratuitous” and “negative” tell us that. The second sentence introduces an example (the beer can) that Updike will turn into evidence to support the claim, or idea, he states in his opening sentence. Updike begins explaining his idea in the third sentence, which splits into two parts--before and after the dash. The first part claims that beer cans used to be beautiful, the past tense verb suggesting that the new version of the beer can is no longer beautiful. The second part of the sentence compares the beer can’s former beauty with three ordinary and useful things that have not changed, have not been “improved” negatively: clothespin, wine bottle, and fire hydrant. If only the beer had been left alone like these three things, Updike implies.

Ask our students to explain the relationship of those first three sentences to one another. We would then follow by asking them to explain the relationship of the next three sentences, 4-6, to the first three. Updike’s first three sentences make a claim about beer cans of his day and ours, and about beer cans of an earlier era, contrasting the later version of the beer can unfavorably with its predecessor. That’s the gist of the three sentences as a unit.

Sentences 4-6 do something different: they provide specific details to support the idea developed over the first three sentences. So, while sentences 1-3 make a claim and elaborate it, sentences 4-6 offer us the evidence to substantiate it. In making this observation about two clusters of sentences, we direct students’ attention to the paragraph’s organization, to its unfolding structure.

Students should see how the second half relates to the first, an extension of their analysis of the relationship between the two parts of the paragraph's first half—sentences 1-3 and 4-6.

Since it's clear that Updike's paragraph splits into two parts, students might be encouraged to visually separate the piece into two parts—to make two paragraphs of its dozen sentences, splitting them at “However,” the beginning of sentence seven. That might make it easier for them to literally “see” how the first half of the piece describes a problem while the second half provides a solution for it. Updike defines the problem in the first half of the paragraph through contrasting older and newer designed beer cans. He presents his solution in the second half (sentences 7-12), with evidence in the form of explanations and reasons, while also making a concession.

The overall purpose of Updike's paragraph, thus, is to make an argument. It's an argument about the double-edged sword of “progress,” which creates as many problems as it solves. Progress, Updike suggests, is also regress.

The paragraph's structure combines problem/solution with comparison/contrast. Updike's essay reveals a conceptual and organizational structure that takes the following form:

Abstract concept
Specific example
Positive aspects
Negative aspects
Particular solution
Abstract concept

Turning this list upside down (as Updike does with the newer beer can), yields something approximating what we started with—an abstract concept. This textual inversion reveals how Updike's organizational strategy imitates his imaginative solution: turning the new beer can upside down and puncturing its bottom (now its top). The paragraph's form, that is, enacts the solution Updike proposes for the problem he identifies.

Repeatedly, throughout the little essay, Updike provides a one-two punch in his description of the beer can—the merits of the older beer can versus the inadequacies of the newer one, the pleasures of the older can versus the pains of the newer can. These contrasts highlight

the paragraph's underlying structure; they also provide concrete, specific details that make Updike's idea clear and understandable.

With that understanding, they are prepared to engage in a productive imaginary conversation with the author.

Argument and Analogy

Other considerations include how effectively the argument may use causal analysis or analogy, how well selected and developed are its examples, along with other strategies employed by the writer or speaker to win over the audience.

Let's consider a few examples, first of analogy and argument. We begin with an excerpt from an essay by Mark Twain, "Corn-Pone Opinions."

I am persuaded that a coldly-thought-out and independent verdict upon a fashion in clothes, or manners, or literature, or politics, or religion, or any other matter that is projected into the field of our interest is a most rare thing—if it has indeed ever existed.

A new thing in costume appears—the flaring hoopskirt, for example—and the passers-by are shocked, and the irreverent laugh. Six months later everybody is reconciled; the fashion has established itself; it is admired now and no one laughs. Public opinion resented it before; public opinion accepts it now and is happy in it. Why? Was the resentment reasoned out? Was the acceptance reasoned out? No. The instinct that moves to conformity did the work.

It is our nature to conform; it is a force which not many can successfully resist. What is its seat? The in-born requirement of self-approval. We all have to bow to that; there are no exceptions. Even the woman who refuses from first to last to wear the hoopskirt comes under that law and is its slave; she would not wear the skirt and have her own approval, and that she *must* have, she cannot help herself.

But as a rule our self-approval has its source in but one place and not elsewhere—the approval of other people. A person of vast consequences can introduce any kind of novelty in dress and the general world will presently adopt it—moved to do it in the first place by the natural instinct to passively yield to that vague something recognized as

natural instinct to passively yield to that vague something recognized as authority, and in the second place by the human instinct to train with the multitude and have its approval.

Exercises

1. How persuasive do you find the argument of “Corn-Pone Opinions?” Why? What additional evidence might you bring to further support it? What evidence might undermine Twain’s argument?
2. How does the following passage from another part of Twain’s essay support the central claim he makes in the first and longer excerpt?

“A man is not independent and cannot afford views which might interfere with his bread and butter. If he would prosper, he must train with the majority; in matters of large moment, like politics and religion, he must think and feel with the bulk of his neighbors or suffer damage in his social standing and in his business prosperities. He must restrict himself to corn-pone opinions—at least on the surface. He must get his opinions from other people, he must reason out none for himself, he must have no first-hand views.”

To what extent does the claim in this excerpt extend or deepen Twain’s previously articulated claim? What kind of supporting evidence for the claim does this second passage provide? To what extent are you persuaded by it?

Argument and Rebuttal—Melville’s “The Advocate”

When we engage in argument, one thing we must often do is to rebut or counter a challenge to an element of our argument. One consideration in analyzing an argument is to see how the writer or speaker anticipates counterviews and responds to them in an attempt to dismiss them as unfounded, irrelevant, or otherwise unwarranted. In the following excerpt from “The Advocate,” a chapter from *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville employs this argumentative strategy in a defense of the whaling industry.

As you read the passage, note how it is structured as a set of challenges and rebuttals of those challenges. Notice the way the speaker responds to each of these challenges, beginning with a repetition of key words and phrases of the various criticisms of whaling.

From “The Advocate”

The whale has to famous author, and whaling no famous chronicler,
you will say.

The whale has no famous author, and whaling no famous chronicler?

Who wrote the first account of our Leviathan? Who but mighty Job! And who composed the first narrative of a whaling voyage? Who, but no less a prince than Alfred the Great, who with his own royal pen, took down the words from Other, the Norwegian whale-hunter of those times! And who pronounced our glowing eulogy in Parliament? Who, but Edmund Burke!

True enough, but then whalemenselves are poor devils; they have no good blood in their veins.

No good blood in their veins? They have something better than royal blood there. The grandmother of Benjamin Franklin was Mary Morrel, afterwards, by marriage, Mary Folger, one of the old settlers of Nantucket, and the ancestress to a long line of Folgers and harpooners—all kith and kin to noble Benjamin—this day darting the barbed iron from one side of the world to the other.

Good again; but then all confess that somehow whaling is not respectable.

Whaling not respectable? Whaling is imperial! By old English statutory law, the whale is declared “a royal fish.”

Oh, that’s only nominal! The whale himself has never figured in any grand imposing way.

The whale never figured in any grand imposing way? In one of the mighty triumphs given to a Roman general upon his entering the world’s capital, the bones of a whale, brought all the way from the Syrian coast, were the most conspicuous object in the cymballed procession.

Grant it, since you cite it; but, say what you will, there is no real dignity in whaling.

No dignity in whaling? The dignity of our calling the very heavens attest. Cetus is a constellation in the South! No more! Drive down your hat in presence of the Czar, and take it off to Queequeg! No more! I know a man that, in his lifetime, has taken three hundred and fifty whales. I account that man more honorable than that great captain of antiquity who boasted of taking as many walled towns.

Exercises

3. How would you characterize the tone of the speaker/writer as he repeats the various italicized criticisms of whaling? How do you hear these criticisms? And how would you characterize the tone of his response to each criticism? Why does Melville italicize certain portions of the text? With what effect? How does Melville's use of punctuation and question-and-answer help you "hear" these varied tones of voice in the passage? To what extent do you think the writer/speaker rebuts or refutes the challenges and criticisms brought against whaling as a profession? Are you persuaded by him? Why or why not?
4. Whaling has come under critical scrutiny in modern times for different reasons than those cited by the anti-advocate of whaling whose views we hear in the excerpted passage. What are these more recent criticisms of whaling, and how might Melville, one of whaling's greatest advocates, have responded to them?

Rogerian Argument

Another type of argument and one that differs significantly from the classical oration was developed by psychologist Carl Rogers. Rogers believed that disputes could not be settled without proponents of each contesting side having a good, full, and fair understanding of the other side's position. A number of mid-twentieth century rhetoricians created from Rogers' concept and approach to argumentation a four-part structure of what has come to be known as "Rogerian argument."

- *Introduction*—The writer describes a problem, issue, or conflict in ways that show an understanding and appreciation for alternative positions on it.
- *Contexts*—The writer describes the contexts in which the alternative positions might be considered legitimate.
- *The Writer's Position*—The writer states his or her own position on the issue, and presents the circumstances in which it would be legitimate.
- *Benefits to Opponent*—The writer explains how his or her opponents would benefit from adopting the position.

The goal of Rogerian argument is reconciliation and mutual understanding. It aims to bridge gaps, soften differences, and seek common understanding. The key to a successful Rogerian argument is to consider and describe opposing positions and perspectives honestly, accurately, and fairly. Rogerian argument offers an alternative to the more combative approach of the classical oration.

Students might select a contentious problem provided by the instructor, or decide on one of their own choosing, and construct a sentence outline following the four-part structure of Rogerian argument. Remind them to include sentences in their outlines that clearly reveal their position. And to include sentences that demonstrate an appreciation and understanding of the opposing position.

Chapter Four—Reading Fiction: Creating a Self

This chapter explores reasons we read fiction. Students can be engaged in open discussion about their experience reading fiction—of all kinds, in and out of school. Engage them in thinking about the role story and stories play in their lives—why they tell stories and why they listen to them, how stories help us understand ourselves. The chapter’s subtitle offers one direction for considering the value of fiction.

Fiction and Reality

Another topic to explore is the relationship between fiction and reality—however that comes to be defined. This discussion extends that of the first chapter about truth—what kinds of truth(s) fictions tell, and how readers discern those truths.

These questions can lead into broader considerations of the way narrative influences opinions and judgments, how it leads to policy decisions and political choices. Students can be invited to consider what it means to “change the narrative” about one or another hot-button contemporary social issue or problem. They can consider how different narratives play out in the seminar room, the courtroom, the boardroom, the streets, and elsewhere.

Recommended books: *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, and *A Question of Freedom* by Dwayne Betts, both about black men and prison. A consideration of fiction and reality can also lead to

discussion of false narratives, disinformation campaigns, alternative versions of reality and truth, and the like.

Exercises based on two additional sections of the chapter: Joyce’s “The Boarding House” and the accompanying analysis via literary elements; Twain’s first chapter of his *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. One exercise for each of those texts could have students annotating the texts for themselves. Another could have them comparing notes with one another—perhaps working in pairs—and then comparing those comparisons with what I propose about each in the book. Two additional exercises: (1) have students read another Dubliners story and identify aspects that connect it with “The Boarding House.” “Araby” and “A Little Cloud” would be good candidates for such a comparison; (2) have students select a classic or contemporary novel with a relatively short opening chapter, and ask them to do a paragraph by paragraph analysis of what each chapter emphasizes. A variant of this exercise would be to have them re-read the opening chapter of a novel they have already read; their paragraph-by-paragraph analysis of that opening chapter would give them a chance to see how an author sets up a work, launches it, and what kinds of thematic hints are provided.

One last concern of the chapter involves *context and intertext*. The key point to emphasize is that literary works, in this case works of fiction, can be—indeed should be—placed in relation to one another, as well as in relation to their writers’ lives and worlds. E.M Forster in *A Passage to India*: “Only connect.” And Henry James: “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere.” Get students thinking about the concept of an intertextual web. Robert Scholes is good on this, especially in *Protocols of Reading*.

Chapter Five—Reading’s Paradoxical Pleasures (a Bit of Theory)

This is the most theoretical of the book’s chapters, with not more theory than necessary—just enough theory, I hope. The chapter’s title and subtitle key in on its essential concerns: paradox and dialectic.

Discussion of *paradox* can be followed by a consideration of *dialectic*, and how each of those terms enrich a reader’s understanding of literature’s power. Students can be provided with some

definitions of paradox and of dialectic, and they can be given examples to discuss. They can be invited to identify paradox and dialectic in things they've read. And they can be encouraged, invited, or required to write up a paragraph, a page, or a short essay that explores one or the other notion.

Engaging in a Theoretical Dialogue

Students might be encouraged to analyze how I engage in dialogue with Wolfgang Iser over a bit of reader-response and reception theory—not so they can join in, but rather so they can see how such a dialogue might take place. They themselves, might choose one or another critical lens through which to read literature—those of interest to the instructor and/or particularly relevant to the course being taught and taken. Students would then write up their own thoughts about that critical lens in relation to its presentation by one or another literary or cultural critic. Their dialogue—perhaps a dialectical one—might be written more or less as mine with Iser as a summary and response to various aspects. Or it might be written as a literal dialogue as it might appear in a play—or in a Platonic dialogue, with which students can be provided a sample.

Dialectical Relationships

One additional exercise in reading, writing, and thinking is to invite students to choose one of the dialectical relationships described near the end of the chapter—submitting to and resisting the text, for example. They could write a paragraph, page, or mini-essay about that dialectical relationship, explaining its importance and illustrating it with one or more examples of a work they have read or are currently reading—for or outside of class.

Some prospective readings on dialectics:

Peter Elbow, *Embracing Contraries*; also: *Oppositions in Chaucer*

Richard Nisbett, *Mindware*, chapter 14 on dialectical reasoning

Chapter Six—Reading for Your Life: Reading Is Intertwined with Living

This chapter gathers up the strands of each of the previous chapters, culminating in an exploration of how our reading lives and our actual lives are intertwined. It is the book's chapter most directly concerned with giving advice about how readers can enrich their lives through reading literature.

How to Live

Books, especially good and great books, literary works in particular, teach us how to live. Students can be asked to explain what this means to them, and to identify one book that has influenced them in this way. Some will choose a scriptural work, the Bible and Quran, likely candidates. If they do, have them narrow their focus to a particular book within one of those works for their discussion.

Students might be asked as well to select one of the books discussed in the chapter—those about living with *War and Peace* or the *Inferno*, for example, and explain why that book and the author being written about, speaks to them, resonates for them, engages them, and perhaps inspires them to want to read both the original author and the book inspired by that author—*Middlemarch*, for example, and Rebecca Mead’s book about Eliot’s novel.

You Must Change Your Life

The chapter concludes with two poems, each charged with epiphany (though only the first is actually described that way, specifically. Wright’s “A Blessing” and Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo” offer insight and admonition, respectively, into how a literary work, even one as brief as a lyric poem, can affect a reader’s life, including our own. Consideration of Wright’s poem can begin with the concept of “epiphany” as outlined in the chapter. It might lead students to discuss moments of epiphany in their own lives, with or without a direct connection to a work of literature. Consideration of Rilke’s sonnet can students to discuss and possibly write about an encounter they had with a work of art that continues to echo in their lives—a concert they attended, a film that deeply moved them, a painting or other work of visual art they love (and why they love it—why it matters to them), to suggest just a few examples.

Two additional suggestions: (1) have students prepare an annotated bibliography of 5 books that have influenced their thinking and living in some way; ask them to explain what those books mean to them, and why; ask them to write a letter to a teacher who has influenced them through strengthening their ability to read with pleasure and understanding, through recommending books to read, or through some other connection with books.

Coda—9 Recommended Reading Practices

Students might select one of the recommended reading practices and explain how they understand it, and why (and how) they might implement it in their reading. Perhaps, have them do this with two recommended reading practices.

Appendix A—Print and Digital Reading

This first appendix explores the benefits and drawbacks of reading in print and digital environments. Students can explain how they see and experience reading in print and reading in digital formats. They can be encouraged to identify the challenges of reading works of literature and other genres in both formats. And they can discuss how they might read more effectively and productively when reading in print and reading in a digital environment.

Another little exercise might be offered students: to respond to the questions I quote posed by Maryanne Wolfe regarding students reading experience. These questions seem to me especially pertinent since the onset of Covid—19.

Appendix B—What to Read and Why

In this second Appendix, I commit an act of hubris—daring to offer readers recommendations for what they might read with profit, and why. I admit up front that any such list is inevitably inadequate—incomplete certainly, while also reflecting my biases along with the limitations of my knowledge and reading experience. One example of such a failure is my omission of Clarice Lispector, the important Brazilian novelist, whose works I have heard about but not yet read. There are many other such omissions, too numerous to count, no less identify.

As an exercise, students might be asked to identify which work and authors they look forward to reading from among those discussed before the lists of fiction writers, dramatists, and poets. They might be asked which of those writers they have read and enjoyed, and which they look forward to reading, and why.

Final Recommendations

What would I add to the book if I had the chance now to include a bit more in it?

These things, at least:

1. **Re-read.** Why? For sheer pleasure. Because the second reading is where and when and how we make a work our own. That's how we come to understand what the author has wrought. The first reading is to see what the book is—what's there. The second reading is to understand how the writer made—how the book works. This is especially important for teachers.
2. **Don't read literature**—or fiction or drama or poetry—or any genre. **Read poems, plays, novels, stories, essays.** Read the particular work. And then another individual work and yet another. Let those works connect and cohere. On the way, we come to read, say, Shakespeare, or Dickinson, or Orwell, or Dickens. But always, foremost, we read this novel by Dickens—*Bleak House* or *Great Expectations*; this play by Shakespeare, *Macbeth* or *King Lear* or *The Tempest*; this essay by Orwell—"Shooting an Elephant" or "A Hanging"; these poems by Dickinson: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant; There's a certain slant of light."
3. **Set a reading quota**—a number of quotas—how much time per day, week, month, year. How many minutes, hours per day, perhaps. In college I set myself a quote of books per week—2—and year 100. I kept it pretty well for 50 years. That's 5,000 books—more like 4,000, allowing for repeat readings. Joseph Luzzi, who teaches at Bard College recommends 45 minutes per day toggling among 4 different books on different topics and in different genres.