

Grading: Sample Reading Questions

You might be asking yourself why I require you to generate these questions, and though I told you when I introduced the directions, it bears repeating. If you're not interested, skip ahead to the examples.

The first and most obvious reason for generating the questions is that it requires students to read for more than plot. When I didn't have some sort of required activity for the readings, students seemed to be doing little more than reading the words and usually at the very last minute, feeling no responsibility to uncover (much less reconcile) the ambiguities in the text. In other words, students weren't really reading at all in any meaningful sense, since it was disconnected from any thinking on their part. This is problematic because "reading" of this sort is inefficient, since the time doing it is essentially wasted, as a real reading still has to occur in order to do anything interesting with the text. It is also a disaster when it comes time for students to test, for unless one trains oneself to pay attention while reading for the first time, it simply won't happen (good luck with that on the AP exam).

To fix this problem, I could require annotations, but these are difficult to grade, provide no guarantee of doing anything more than text summarization in the margins, and are notoriously easy to fake. I also don't want to standardize an annotation format, since 1) it becomes an annoying busy-work requirement for more sophisticated readers; 2) annotations work best when they are private notes to oneself, pointing out the things one is afraid one will forget; and 3) on the AP test doing anything other than the most basic annotations is not a helpful strategy (given the time constraints). If extensive annotations are how you organize your ideas, by all means go for it (I've formatted everything you read with a wide right-hand margin to facilitate this), but understand it's primarily for your personal benefit in understanding or to save time on the back end (when it becomes easier to put things together for assignments when you've already left yourself notes).

I could also require students to answer teacher-generated questions. However, the sorts of questions I would generate would almost certainly duplicate (to at least some extent) the work students would eventually have to do in the assignments, making it seem like I'm assigning the same thing twice. For much the same reason, it (like standardized annotations) ends up punishing the most sophisticated readers to service the needs of the weakest readers. Finally, and most fatally from my point of view, teacher-generated questions limits the conversation to a teacher-driven agenda, which is a lousy strategy to foster the kind of independent thought that will be required to do well on the AP test.

By contrast, student-generated questions (at least partially) solves the problem of reading without thinking; is not such a tedious burden that (reasonable) students will resent it; allows sophisticated readers a chance to show off their cleverness (and I would hope everyone becomes a sophisticated reader by the time they leave this class); and alerts me to both comprehension gaps and areas of student interest so that I can adjust accordingly.

I obviously grade them to incentivize students to take them seriously, but I would hope you will come to see their benefit. Good readers are constantly asking themselves these three questions as they read: *Why is this happening? Why is this being presented in this way? How are these things communicating some kind of larger message?* When you get further in your college career (that is, when the classes are smaller or there are mandatory discussion sections), this will also be the sort of preparation you will be expected to do for class as a matter of course. No, it probably won't be a graded assignment like this, but the students with the clever questions and interpretations in discussion are almost always the ones making the highest grade at the end of term (if for no other reason than they are impressing the ones grading their assignments). Save the *I don't get it* questions for my tutorials or your professor's office hours.

A word about the formatting: I've silently corrected spelling, obvious grammatical errors, and improper MLA formatting. I've also added words (in brackets) if the original needed some kind of transition to improve the flow of ideas. Minor awkwardness or wordiness was not corrected.

Example One:

The woman in the short story repeatedly revisits the idea of abandonment inflicted by "the man." Not only has he abandoned her, but also, a number of his belongings which are now in the woman's possession. As she contemplates the best course of action, she, perhaps unknowingly, places his belongings and herself on the same plane of worth when finding an excuse to keep everything he left, [thinking] "surely he felt no attachment to the things he left behind." This overarching answer to whether "the man" would want to retrieve his property, let alone even hear from her, is the woman believing he has taken all which has value, [with] her not being in that category. This is further emphasized in the following paragraph, [when Kōno writes], "Besides, she couldn't give these things which the man had abandoned, along with herself, to someone else" (3). She then creates a tie between her, the man, and his possessions, refusing to move on. What other factors are involved in the woman's fall into madness, in which reality has been obscured; are they related; and from where or whom do they stem?

I start with this one to note that it is a bit of overkill. Yes, it earns an A in the grade book, but my expectation is not a mini-essay. If you feel inspired to do something of this sort, I certainly won't discourage you, and your efforts will almost certainly be rewarded (unless you're just writing nonsense), but this is not what is required to get a good grade.

More pertinently, it earns the good grade because it is 1) engaging in something thematic (non-trivial); 2) has very specific references to the text (quotation helps a lot here); 3) and is developed (though, in this case, slightly more than it really needs to be). It's not just *A for effort*.

Example Two:

In the story, the woman is in love with eating the scraps the man left behind, the bones and the shells (12-13). It is to the point where food lacks flavor if it wasn't the morsels

the man left behind (14). [Given this] what can be inferred about the type of relationship they had and the mental state of the woman?

This is a solid question that engages in something important and thematic and is pretty specific (snippet quotes would have helped, though). The big potential improvement here would be a stronger connection between the set-up and the actual question (which is a bit too open-ended). I gave it a B+, mainly because it is zeroing in on the most important issue in the text.

Example Three:

In the story “Bone Meat” by Taeko Kōno, the main character shows several submissive qualities during the relationship, including accepting “the least morsel” of food (13), and even after the relationship [has ended] placing the clothing box of the man over her own suitcase (4). What reasoning could the woman have to make her so subservient? Through this is Kōno sending a message about women’s role in a relationship, [and if so], what is that role?

This is a better version of the previous question. It is slightly more specific, engages the same big idea in the text, but is more interpretive and less open-ended in what it is asking. By venturing an implied opinion about what the story is about (*Kōno is saying something about gender roles*), it is taking more of a compositional risk, and this will generally be rewarded in the graded (even if it is not quite correct). It earns an A-.

Example Four:

It is clear that the flash back that the woman had was because winter was ending, but why are oysters mentioned again in the end of the story? What is so significant about them?

This is an inferior version of the previous two questions. It correctly identifies the scraps and bones as something that is important, but the references to the text are completely generalized, and there is no evidence that the writer has any kind of theory about why the textual puzzle exists. A lack of parenthetical references and overall development also is problematic for the grade (though I’m not going to be too particular about this for the first few times you do this). Right now this earns a C+/B-. Once we get a little further in the year, this earns a C.

Example Five:

Throughout the passage, the woman has associated taste with many things she interacts with. In one instance, she seemed disappointed that something was missing that is associated with taste (11). What might the scene during or after be that she craves so much during these moments?

This identifies something important, has textual evidence (without being terribly specific), but seems to be struggling with what to actually ask given the pattern or puzzle that the writer has uncovered. Right now this is a B-, but would be a C+/B- even a few weeks into the year.

Example Six:

Although it appears that the narrator is angry and holding grudges, there are points in the story when it seems otherwise (1), thus making it difficult for the reader to understand the character. Assuming that the character is sensitive (3), what best explains the narrator's uneasy feelings and emotions throughout the story.

Here we have over-generalized textual evidence in support of something important in the story. I understand what the writer is getting at here, but the question is really too vague for me to be absolutely sure. Like the last one, right now this is a B-, but would be a C+/B- later in the year.

Going Forward:

As you continue to generate these, here are some tips that might help:

- Think like a teacher. If Mr. Davidson were writing a quiz, what ideas would he want to test? What would he hope that I notice?
- Generate the simplified version of the question first, *then* fill it out with the set-up in paragraph form. This helps to avoid the rambling paragraphs that don't lead anywhere.
- Look for patterns. If something happens once, it's interesting. If it happens more than once, it's a pattern and is almost certainly relevant to the big picture.
- Think thematically. What is the text trying to communicate, and how do the details help to establish this big-picture understanding?
- Start early. Try to get at least one of the questions done a few days before it is due so you're not frantically trying to come up with something at the last minute.