

Reading Questions

For every reading assignment, you will write one discussion question before class. You will be assigned to either **context**, **content**, or **form** (we will rotate through these categories). Your question is due by 10 a.m. on the day of class. You'll copy-paste it to a shared Google Doc (on the Google Site, under Reading Assignments, and the essay of the day).

You'll probably want to give some of your thinking behind your question (see examples below). You also might propose a potential answer to your question. But since these questions are meant to spark class discussion, don't try to give the definitive answer either. Keep the entire context/question/response under 250 words.

Productive discussion questions direct the class to certain moments or aspects of the text but do not have an obvious answer. They should be neither too general nor too specific. In the extreme, take the following examples:

Question: "Did you like this text?" Answer: "Well *I* like this argument... well *I* like this sentence... well *I* dislike this image... well *I* dislike with this claim..." (While this might incite a conversation that lasts 45 minutes, that conversation will probably involve many speakers discussing many different and unrelated points. It will be hard to keep the conversation on one specific point, and so it will be hard to grasp a very meaningful understanding of the essay)

Question: "What's the name of the author's dog?" Answer: "Max." (This has not been a very productive conversation)

Ideally you want to ask a question that is not easily answered, that opens a specific discussion or debate, and that leads the class into the text itself. This might mean something along the lines of:

"This particular passage seems to be doing a lot of rhetorical and argumentative work in the essay, I wonder how you read these lines and why she might have phrased them that way?"

"He keeps using this term over and over again, but he never really defines it, how do you think he means it? How does that definition change our understanding of his argument?"

"Here, his argument seems to be resting on a certain assumption—what do you think that assumption might be?"

However, not all questions need to be fully directed at a passage or page number. Sometimes you might want to ask a question that requires the class to find examples of their own. This is okay, as long as you give them enough parameters that they can accomplish this in about 30 seconds or so. For example:

"She seems to be using this image a lot. Can you find a moment where this image particularly complicates her argument?"

"This author develops his argument by addressing several counter-arguments. Which do you think is the strongest counter-argument he suggests, and what do you make of his response to that argument?"

These are the three categories of questions, along with some examples:

Context

Find information about the author or the conversation the author enters in her essay. Consider how that information might help us understand this essay better. Since you'll be bringing in outside information, be sure to cite your source.

Examples:

"I read that this author worked in this profession before writing this essay. How might that experience have informed this essay?"

"Many people discuss this topic in this other way. Do you think this writer is responding to that tradition in any way?"

Content

Pay attention to the actual subject matter of the essay. This means focusing on the argument or topic of the essay. You can do this on the micro or macro level (i.e. an individual argument vs the essay's larger argument). Then consider what makes that content difficult, interesting, surprising, or complicated.

Examples:

"The author makes two seemingly contradictory arguments. How can we reconcile them?"

"I found it strange that the author chose to discuss this idea through this particular topic. Why might she have done so?"

"There seems to be a certain assumption underlying this particular argument. Is that assumption necessarily true, and what does it mean for the larger argument if not?"

Form

Pay attention to the essay's form. This means style, tone, language, images, structure, etc. You can do this on the micro or macro level (i.e. one particular passage vs a recurring motif). Then consider why the author might have selected this particular formal feature for this particular essay.

Examples:

"I found the author's tone rather humorous in several places. Why might humor be useful for this particular topic?"

"I thought it was interesting that the author uses this image more than once. Why might he have selected this particular image?"

"The author starts with this topic and then moves to this one, which is counter-intuitive to me. Why might she have structured it this way?"