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How to Read and View A Worksheet

I. What is the purpose of reading and viewing closely and what does it involve?

Students often ask me: what are the best ways to approach reading, viewing, and note taking at the college level? This is a detailed guide that provides you with some clear and organized ways to read and view carefully, ask substantive questions about the materials you are engaging in your courses, and intelligently take notes on these materials. Above all, we want to approach all of the materials we encounter with a combination of **close observation** (in other words, paying a lot of attention to what we are reading and seeing) and **critical thinking** (meaning, thoughtful engagement with the content at hand).

Close observation (or reading closely) involves slowing down and paying very close attention to what we are reading or viewing. We do this so that we can pull out big ideas or key images *as well as* identify the details of what is in front of us. When we closely observe something, we are dealing with the “WHAT” aspect of a given object: for instance, What am I seeing? What is happening here? What is the context in which this is taking place? When was it written or produced? What is the form in which a story, idea, or image is being conveyed? When we closely observe an object, phenomenon, or event, we are better able to grasp how complex it is, which makes us more capable of practicing critical thinking—this is true whether we are reading a novel or short story, watching a movie, engaging a scholarly text, listening to a political speech, or even scanning the side of a cereal box!

Critical thinking demands that we ask ourselves questions about the ideas, images, stories, and forms we are encountering to better understand the motivations, intentions, and consequences of certain arguments or viewpoints. Critical thinking deals with the “HOW” and the “WHY” of a given object: for example, How is this story or set of ideas being communicated to me? How are these ideas being organized into an argument or claim about the world? Why has the author or creator decided to articulate a set of ideas in one specific way, instead of another? Why am I seeing or reading about some things while others are masked, ignored, or overlooked? What are the consequences of these omissions? In other words, critical thinking demands that we ask what the purpose of a given a text is, and how its presentation of stories, ideas, forms, values, or perspectives have different effects on the world. Ultimately, when we think critically, we refuse to take things at face value. We question everything we see, hear, read, and engage with in a spirit of generosity and curiosity. Critical thinking is a way of caring about the world deeply.

So what's the point of all this brain-work?

The point of exercising close observation and critical thinking together is to develop the ability to make substantial and meaningful claims or arguments about the world around you. We call this **analysis**, or sometimes **critique**. When we analyze or critique something, we are using intelligent and focused observation of a given object to develop arguments about how and why it works the way it does. For example, we might be trying to explain how a movie puts forward a particular set of ideals to its audience through its distinct use of plot and cinematography; how a writer uses specific rhetorical or narrative techniques to make a statement about gender, race, class, or sexuality; or how a scholar organizes a specific argument or invents a concept to explain something about the world that remains under-studied. Answering these kinds of questions requires that we transform our initial close observations into *interpretations* that can be supported by evidence present in the object we are studying. Interpretation is the act of making meaning from the form and content of a story, an idea, a worldview, or an image.

In literary studies, we often call this practice **close reading** (as opposed to reading closely). Close reading is the practice of developing multiple interpretations of a given text, object, or phenomenon, based on evidence collected from close observation and critical thinking. It is important to remember that critique is not the same thing as criticism (or what we think of as negative judgment) though it may involve some amount of that. Rather, critique involves explaining, in your own words, how a certain set of ideas, forms, representations or values function in a given context and to respond to them with your own fully articulated position. **In other words, analysis and critique describe the activity of forming and articulating your own ideas, which allows you the freedom to have an impact on the world, rather than being a bystander to it all.**

A Note on Terms

In this class we will often use the word “**text**” to refer to any object or material we are engaging with and analyzing (including films, comics, scholarship and digital media). This is because everything we look at can be “read” or interpreted like a traditional written text, even if it is a visual or aural document (such as a movie or music). This does not mean we will use the exact same tools for interpreting literature as we will to interpret film or other media. Rather, we will see how some analytical tools can be adapted to close read or analyze different kinds of media texts. It is our job to figure out which analytical tools are adaptable, what their limits are, and how to develop new skills for studying texts or objects that defy our traditional modes of interpretation. We will often use words like “object,” “product” or “source” as synonyms for “text.”

Similarly, when I refer to the term “**reading**” (as in, “to do a *reading* of something”), I mean the act of interpretation or making meaning out of a text. For instance, when I ask you to do a “reading” of a movie, I am encouraging you to use evidence from the film’s content and form to construct an original interpretation of it. This use of the word *reading* makes the practice something active, rather than passive, so that reading involves not only absorbing the content of a text but dynamically engaging it with your own idea

Finally, a **primary source** refers to a text that is a direct product of a historical moment: a movie, a children's book, a newspaper article, a manifesto or speech, a television broadcast, or a photograph (and much, much more) are all primary sources. A **secondary source** is something that comments on, analyzes, or refers to a primary source from the vantage of the present moment: a work of scholarship, your own essays in this class, and our course lectures are all secondary sources. Ultimately, every text in existence will at some point become a primary source (scholarship written fifty years ago, is after all, a product of a historical moment). We mark the distinction between primary and secondary sources purely for clarity, and to be able to apply or use current scholarship to analyze historical products.

II. How should you read?

In this course, you will read or view a combination of primary and secondary source texts, including scholarship from a variety of fields, cultural objects like movies, advertisements, magazine articles, comics, music, and digital media, and political documents like manifestos, speeches, and policy. I use the word **culture** broadly here to describe all creative activities the members of a given society participate in to make meaning out of their everyday lives. Culture then, is not only a set of practices, traditions, or norms, but the meanings people attach to them. There are several ways to approach our course materials in order to gain the most effective grasp of their content, purpose, and significance. Below I list six things you should always do when you read or view any kind of text. Though it may seem like a lot to accomplish, these strategies will quickly become second nature to you:

1. **Distinguish between different kinds of sources, mediums, and modes of address:** before you start reading or viewing something, always identify what kind of source it is, what medium or genre it occupies, and who it might be speaking to. Are you reading scholarship? A manifesto? A work of cultural criticism? A novel, short story, or poetry? Are you watching a movie, a short film, a digital video or a GIF? What year was this text written, produced, or performed and in what context? Who might have read, viewed, or listened to it and where did it circulate? These specifics help you better understand the purpose of a text or cultural object as well as the potential intended audience. They may also help you grasp how different texts impart a range of cultural and political values, or make distinct arguments about the world, using a variety of creative techniques and forms of communication. For instance, a **novel** is a long-form written work of narrative fiction that can occupy numerous genres. There are science-fiction novels, coming of age novels, historical fiction novels, romance novels, mystery novels, westerns, any combination of these and countless more. Alternatively, a **monograph** is a long-form written work of scholarship that focuses on a single topic or set of questions. Academic monographs can appear in almost any scholarly discipline, including political science, literature, history of medicine, sociology, media studies and more. Though both novels and monographs are written texts of

significant length that comment on the world, the former is fictional while the latter is based on scholarly evidence and puts forth clear arguments about something in the real world. This means they use different techniques to impart their ideas and reach different kinds of audiences. Not all things are novels, just like not all things are movies, or television, or music, or scholarship. The distinctions matter.

2. **Identify the argument:** Whether you are reading a work of scholarship or engaging with a cultural text, always identify the central argument or claim the author or text is making. Basically, this is the “big idea” of the piece: what are we meant to take away from reading or viewing this thing? Scholarship is commonly organized around the practice of making a claim or argument about an object or phenomenon. It is explanatory in nature, meaning that it is intended to illuminate or answer questions about something happening in the real world. Because scholarly essays or books are all about making an argument, it is usually (though not always) easy to identify the claims a writer is trying to make. Sometimes a scholar will directly point out what their argument is by stating “In this book, I argue that...” At other times, you will need to think critically about what a writer is trying to say based on the flow of their ideas.

Alternatively, in cultural or political texts like movies, manifestos, speeches, television shows, or music, arguments are often claims made about how we should view the world, what values an audience is assumed to share, or what social, political, or cultural ideals are thought to be most valuable (and which are less valued). These kinds of claims are not usually conveyed or communicated like a traditional scholarly or academic argument; rather they are presented in the form of stories, affective or emotional orientations towards characters, events, or settings, and formal cues like lighting and editing, language structure, or delivery.

The Disney Pixar movie *Finding Nemo*, for instance, is text that argues in favor of the value of alternative or chosen family against the traditional image of the nuclear family. The movie makes this claim by depicting how a traditional father-son pair come to befriend and make family with a huge range of ocean creatures, from sea turtles to starfish to sharks and manatees. The variety of species the two clown fish encounter, as well as the family bond they develop with a forgetful blue fish Dori, could be seen as a metaphor for the utopian promise of developing bonds across real world differences like race, class, sexuality, and ability (in fact, disability is a key difference in the movie, since Nemo has an under-developed fin, which is a focus of the narrative).

Most often, cultural texts will carry multiple, competing, and even contradictory values and ideals; in other words, their arguments are not always fully coherent or fleshed out. It is your job to identify what elements of these texts, both in terms of form and content, convey the values or argument of a given cultural object.

3. **Follow the organization of ideas:** All arguments, claims, or viewpoints are shaped by the *way* they are articulated and delivered. Consequently, in addition to identifying an argument, you need to be able to follow the organization of ideas that leads someone to a particular point of view or claim. This can involve simply plotting out

how a set of ideas or concepts are linked together by a scholar to lead the reader to a larger point. It could also involve following the plot structure of a movie or work of literary fiction, or else listening to how lyrics are organized around rhythms and beats in a song. In each of these cases, you must ask yourself: what is the logic by which this text makes its point? In cultural texts, that logic is often part of the formal structure or movement of a scene or a narrative. It is not enough to understand an argument, you must also know how it came to be made.

4. **Identify how the text uses evidence:** To understand how an argument is made, you must be able to identify the kinds of evidence that a thinker or a text pulls together (or offers the reader/viewer) to convince an audience to buy into or affirm their point of view. In scholarship, evidence includes historical documentation, critical theory (or abstract models and concepts for understanding social and cultural phenomenon), statistical facts, human interaction and testimony, and textual interpretation. Cultural texts will often invent evidence in the form of fictional stories, character types, or plot devices. There are many kinds of evidence, and many ways to use them. Part of critical thinking requires that you discern or tell the difference between different kinds of evidence and make judgments about which convince you and which don't.

5. **Who is the author in a conversation with:** No one writes scholarship or produces culture in a vacuum. We develop ideas with audiences in mind, or in response to the world around us, including what others say and do, what historical events we witness, and what cultural products affect us. Whenever you approach any text, you should look for clues that will let you know what kind of audience the writer, speaker, artist, or producer of a cultural object imagines they are speaking to. Often, the intended audience is not the actual audience that primarily engages a text or a set of ideas (the people who made the film musical *The Wizard of Oz* in 1939, for instance, probably couldn't have fully anticipated just how many generations of US-Americans would be watching the movie decades after it was initially released). But any given text will usually have content that implies or gives clues as to the particular kind of reader or viewer it is intended for. Moreover, in academic writing, scholars will often cite other intellectuals or experts in their field either as evidence to support their own claims or to respond to the ideas another writer has presented or defended. This is what we call **citation** (scholars cite other scholars to be in a dialogue with them, to disagree, affirm, or rethink previous ideas as part of an ongoing conversation). In cultural texts, we call this **making a reference**. In other words, the referencing of one text, story, scene, fantasy, or idea in another text. When you watch movies and television shows, read novels and short stories, listen to music or engage any other form of media, you will often see those texts reference other similar stories that have become canonical or widely known in order to position themselves in a larger history of media forms.

6. **What is at stake?:** Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we gather all the above information in order to name or articulate what is at stake in a given scholarly or cultural argument. This is the "SO WHAT?" of the item. What does this writer or this

cultural object want to say? What position is being taken in relation to bigger ideas or conflicts? Why are the ideas being presented important? Some of the ideas presented in mass media texts have had world changing effects. For example, as scholar Stephanie Ricker Schulte has shown, when the movie *War Games* was released in the late 1980s about an everyday amateur hacker who accidentally taps into the US nuclear codes, Congress passed laws to ban hacking and strengthen government cyber security (keep in mind there was no evidence that US nuclear codes were at threat of being hacked and the movie was a fiction). To make your own judgments and form substantive arguments in response to what you read and view, you must be able to say what is at stake in the very sources you are discussing.

Here are some useful techniques for taking notes that account for these different elements of a scholarly or cultural text. You are welcome to develop your own that fit your needs.

- Identify and define the central terms or ideas of a given text in your own words. This way you have a vocabulary list of clearly explained keywords that are important for understanding the ideas being presented.
- Bullet point central arguments and related secondary arguments in your own words so that you remember what the big ideas are and how they link together. Limit yourself to 4-5 bullet points so that you can condense the ideas in a compact and accessible way.
- Map out the organization of ideas or identify what each of the paragraphs accomplishes. You can do this on a separate sheet of paper or directly on the text itself if it is a written document. You can do this in the margins by using a single word or phrase to identify what each paragraph is about. Also underline or circle key arguments, major terms, important analytical movements or ideas that matter to you so you can remember where they are and return to them in our discussions.
- Explain arguments in your own words and write down questions you have about claims or ideas that confuse or intrigue you. Write down the page numbers of these ideas so you know where they appear in the text. This can help you prepare for class discussion and allow you to identify the elements of an argument that confuse you or require more thought.

III. How should you view movies?

When we are watching a movie, we need to treat the film as a constructed object, rather than a natural or taken-for-granted thing that simply appears to us fully formed. We must remember that a movie, like any work of culture, is a collective undertaking that involves extraordinary expenditures of money, scripting and writing, labor and production, filming and editing, distribution and consumption on the part of audiences. Movies are usually made by thousands of people, even when a single writer, director or actor plays a

key role in bringing it to life. When we go the movie theatre or rent a movie at home, it appears to us as a single complete product, but it is actually the result of an elaborate creative, economic, and cultural process. When we understand that process better we can gain insight into how to interpret or make sense of the movie and its content. In order to do this, we need to watch very carefully, slowing down our viewing experience, taking notes, and separating ourselves emotionally from the content in order to have a more distanced relationship to the cultural product in front of us. We often call this having a “cold” relationship to the text. Of course, we don’t want to gain so much distance that we couldn’t understand why the text entertains, intrigues, surprises, or frustrates us, but we do want to be able to see it clearly. This does not “ruin” the movie or destroy our ability to enjoy it; rather it provides us another way to experience the text from a thoughtful and critical perspective, even though we may also simply love it for what it is.

Here are some basic elements of a movie that you might take notes on when you are watching at home in preparation for our class discussion. There are always more things you could add, but these are the basics:

CONTENT

Plot: What is the movie about? How does the story unfold? What happens and in what sequence? How is the plot presented formally (are there dramatic edits between scenes, montage or dream sequences, split screens, voice overs etc.)?

Characters: Who are the main players of the story (write down their names, their attributes, how they are filmed and where they appear). How do they interact? What purpose do different characters serve? Do their particular identities make a difference to how they act, how people respond to them, or what role they play in the plot? Who plays each character and what is the quality or style of their acting? Who are the supporting or minor characters and why do they matter?

Dialogue: Remember that all movies (especially mass-produced Hollywood films) are originally scripts written down on paper to be performed. That means that all the content you see on screen is meticulously crafted, edited, and revised for mass consumption. Identify what is being said, by whom, in what context, and for what purpose. Are there phrases, ideas, or statements that appear repeatedly, and why? What purpose does the absence of dialogue serve? Who speaks most and with what effect? Aresome voices disembodied? Is the quality and substance of the speaking parts related to the gender, race, sexuality or general identity of different characters and actors?

Mis-en-scene (this is a French term for “arrangement of the scene”): How are different scenes arranged (what is the distribution of people, objects, settings etc.)? What appears in the frame of a scene and what is left out? What objects get highlighted and which are deemphasized? What is the set design like? What scenes seem to be filmed on a sound stage and which are on location? How does the set up of a scene effect how we view it?

Sound: How is sound deployed throughout the movie? Is there a distinct musical soundtrack and what does it consist of? Which sounds are **diegetic** (a film term meaning “within the frame of a scene” or within the narrative) or **extra-diegetic** (meaning outside of the frame). A voice-over for instance, in which someone’s voice is heard speaking over a scene in which they do not appear, is an *extra-diegetic* sound. Do characters sing or dance in the movie?

FORM

Editing: Movies are essentially a series of individual scenes spliced together through editing, which is the process of literally cutting segments of film and linking them in a sequence. Editing represents the choices a director or editor makes to start and stop scenes and to link certain starts and stops together. As viewers we must mentally fill in the gaps between edits, something that we usually do unconsciously. This means that in order to closely observe a movie, we must slow down our viewing and think about how edits are arranged and distributed. How are edits arranged throughout the movie? Is there a pattern of editing or a distinct style that can be seen over the course of the movie? Are there edits that are particularly jarring or dramatic (or that call attention to themselves)? Do these seem like simple mistakes or are they intentional? Are there techniques of editing used to hide or mask movements between scenes? How do we move across time and space between certain edits?

Camera angles: Where is the camera situated and how does it move around in particular scenes? Is there a pattern of shots that repeat in the movie? Does the camera angle in certain scenes suggest or imply a specific way we should view what appears on screen? Whose point of view are we inhabiting in one scene versus another? Does the camera appear to represent a certain kind of viewer, a certain character, or a supposedly omniscient “eye”?

Picture quality and forms of media: How does the camera represent other media like television, music, text, video games and digital culture? What is the quality of the images we see and does the camera switch between modes (home video, digital camera, footage, animation etc.)? What is the look and feel of the image? How is color used in the scene and to what purpose? Does it feel saturated, washed out, crisp, or hazy? What affective responses does the look of the film elicit or encourage?

When we take notes on all these elements of content and form, we are doing so in order to ask the following questions:

1. What purpose do these elements of form and content serve? Do different elements of the text produce different, competing, or even contradictory results?
2. **What is the message of the movie?** Is there one message, or more than one? Is the message of the movie sometimes convoluted, contradictory, or confused?

3. How does the movie use the elements listed above to convey its message?
4. What are the movie's politics? In other words, what kinds of political values, worldviews, or motivations does the movie seem to support or endorse? By political, we mean not only whether the movie takes a specific liberal or conservative view on an issue (though that also matters), but how it interacts with public life, collective debates, or larger social and national concerns.
5. What kind of viewer does the movie appear to speak to? What elements of the movie imply an ideal viewer?

When we ask these questions and use evidence from the form and content of the film to support our answers, we are engaging in the act of close reading or interpreting a movie.

So there you have it, these are the foundational elements of reading and viewing that you can always turn to in order to come to class prepared to have substantive discussion.