

DOING THINKING: ON READING AND WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Fall Quarter 2010

The work you do outside class contributes mightily to the inquiry-based, collaborative learning approach that Evergreen values. This handout begins with a brief overview of “close” and purposeful reading, and then provides guidelines for assignments that ask you to do “summary notes” and “journal entries.”

CLOSE, PURPOSEFUL READING

Intellectually-rigorous work depends on a foundational practice referred to as *close reading*. A critical first step for participating in a seminar conversation is the ability to give a fair-minded rendition of someone else’s views. In skilful close reading of a text, you read to understand a writer’s ideas carefully and deeply enough to follow a complex argument. We will use *Analytic Thinking: How to Take Thinking Apart and What to Look for When You Do* as an entry-point for identifying writers’ essential ideas.

If you are new to this kind of reading, close readers typically do the following:

- Write margin notes as they read, identifying key ideas and questions
- Read and re-read complex sections of text where “big ideas” are sited
- Summarize or map the writer’s argument from paragraph to paragraph or section to section
- Note “puzzling passages” (especially useful for seminar and group work)

SUMMARY NOTES

Close reading combined with reading notes are a foundational practice for *the individual work you are expected to do* to prepare for seminar and group work. I recommend that you use a format adapted from the Cornell system of note-taking which uses two columns—the wider, right-hand column is for summarizing key ideas (the focus is on the writer’s argument); the narrower, left-hand column is used for your additions (e.g. comments/questions, classmates’ comments, notes from faculty lectures, passages you find puzzling, references to other writers’ views or other disciplinary perspectives that support or contradict argument presented, etc.). We will review an example of this note-taking practice in the second week of class.

“PUZZLING PASSAGES” AND SEMINAR NOTES

An excerpt from Mortimer Adler and Charles van Doren’s *How to Read a Book* offers unusual coaching for becoming an especially thoughtful contributor to class discussions and group work:

“From your point of view as a reader, the sentences important *for you* are those that require an effort of interpretation because, at first sight, they are not perfectly intelligible. You understand them just well enough to know that there is more to understand.”

“...Perhaps you are beginning to see how essential a part of reading it is *to be perplexed and know it*. Wonder is the beginning of wisdom in learning from books as well as from nature. If you never ask yourself any questions about the meaning of a passage, you cannot expect the book to give you any insight you do not already possess.”

“...Many persons believe that they know how to read because they read at different speeds. But they pause and go slow *over the wrong sentences*. They pause over the sentences that *interest* them rather than the ones that *puzzle* them.”

~Excerpts from: Adler, M. and C. Van Doren. 1972. *How to Read a Book*. New York: MJF Books. First published in 1940 by M. Adler.

Guidelines for seminar notes

- Choose a passage from the text which stretches your mind (as in perplexing, puzzling, especially significant).

- Jot down some notes regarding the “why” of your selection related to *Doing Thinking* guiding questions and related issues (we advise you keep of this preparatory work because you will draw on your work for the integrative project assignment).
- Be prepared to share your insights/puzzles/questions with classmates.

Note: You are mainly identifying *something* you want to discuss with classmates because you are keen to learn from their experience, perspectives, and thinking.

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL WRITING: DESIGN AND EXPECTATIONS

Your reflective journal is a *place to explore your ideas* related to the collective inquiry we are undertaking in *Doing Thinking*. Journal entries are works-in-progress where you think through assumptions, work through puzzles, question “what you know to be true,” try out ideas, and so on. It is NOT a finished statement of your ideas.

If no particular assignment is given for a “journal entry,” you may find it useful to base your writing on one of the following prompts:

- *I used to think..., but now I think... .*
- *Connect/extend/challenge.*
 - How do the ideas and information presented from this class’s assigned reading or in-class work connect to what I already know/appreciate/understand?
 - What new ideas extend or push my thinking in new directions?
 - What do I find challenging or confusing?

Your journal will become a rich source to draw on for your integrative project and for writing your self-evaluation at the end of the term.

Journal structure: Please type your journal entries. As a guideline, journal entries should be 2 pages in length (one page is about 250-300 words) and dated (e.g. week one, class date) so you—and we—can appreciate the development of your ideas over time.

DOING THINKING INTEGRATIVE PROJECT ASSIGNMENT

We will prepare a separate handout for the term’s capstone integrative project after we have worked together for a few weeks. This project assignment will include “working wood” and “crafting ideas” components.

The crafting ideas part of this assignment will be drawn from all forms of your writing (summary notes, notes for seminar discussions, journal entries, and other in-class and outside class assignments), so it behooves you to keep track of your work. Indeed, all your work should be practiced and “saved” with the precision and good work habits artisans bring to their craft.

The working wood part of this assignment will include the making of a wooden box using Japanese hand tools, following established design constraints.