

quoted and adapted
from "Reading to
Write," Nancy Koppelman & Sandy
Yanonne

Concepts

Reading to write is a complex and even paradoxical activity, since it requires the student to welcome discomfort, and its challenges are worthy of time and devotion."

Sometimes reading is hard.

That a text is difficult is not necessarily the author's fault. Texts are difficult most often to suit an audience with specialized knowledge. Consider such books an invitation, a puzzle that will draw you deeper into a discourse, a discipline. Some difficult texts are difficult because of they were written in a different time, and/or by a member of a different culture. Here, a difficult book is an opportunity to unravel that alien psyche.

When faced with a difficult text, it is one of the functions of a seminar to seek an understanding. Even in a room full of academic equals, a difficult text can be elucidated through conversation, questions, and a shared interest in coming to the best interpretation of the text.

Words—or vocabulary, to be precise—are usually the problem. All our lives we struggle to learn our language. Every new situation, new trend, new social group, new discipline, new author, new invention, new art form, new idea demands a reshaping of the language. When reading the most difficult texts, the dictionary is little help to us. The words and their definitions remain beyond us, or the context is unclear or confusing.

Books refer, defer, allude. They are the product of study, and in order to contain only what they must, authors must make some assumptions about what the reader already knows or could be expected to look up on their own.

Similarly, authors expect a certain degree of cultural literacy.



WORKSHOP

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4

TEXTS CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR A NUMBER OF REASONS. THE MOST COMMON ARE THESE:

—THE WRITING STYLE DIFFERS DUE TO THE TIME OF WRITING, PLACE, OR INTENDED AUDIENCE (VARIANCES NOT OF DISCIPLINE BUT OF CULTURE, PREFERENCE, AND SO ON). DIFFERENCES ARE ENOUGH SO AS TO MAKE SENTENCE STRUCTURE, VOCABULARY, OR REFERENCES CONFUSING;

—THE DISCIPLINE HAS DEVELOPED A SPECIALIZED LANGUAGE, PERHAPS RELIES HEAVILY ON REFERENCES TO PREVIOUS WORKS;

—THE WRITER INTENTIONALLY CREATES OBSCURITIES OR ENJOYS THE CHALLENGE OF READING, PERHAPS THINKING THAT IT CONVEYS HER SUBJECT THE BEST, DESPITE THE DIFFICULTY;

—THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE WORK IS UNCLEAR, SUBTLE, OR ABSENT.

In this workshop, we will encounter a particularly frustrating text. Without assuming that the text deserves our concentration, we will nonetheless avoid blaming the author for our difficulties. That is, we will give him the benefit of the doubt. Doing so may seem antithetical to our usual assumptions about the job of the prose writer: Isn't his goal to be understood? Isn't he supposed to be striving for clarity? Doesn't he want to reach an audience? All of these things may be true, yet still the essay seems difficult for all of the reasons above. In our reading, we will apply ourselves not to diagnosing his style or use of language, but to genuinely pursuing a common interpretation of what we feel he has tried to communicate in writing. We will assume that he has composed everything with good, purposeful intentions.

1. The encounter...

The Offending Ranter: Hakim "get-out-yer-dictionary" Bey has composed for us an introduction to his theory of "immediatism" by describing "*Ontological Anarchy in a Nutshell*."

- Read the text to yourself. As you read, mark the paper, underline, throw in question marks, anything that will help you to sort things out on the first go-through.
- Now, take stock of your assumptions, your gut reactions. Be they good or bad, get over them. Do not try to make the essay be what you think it is after one reading. In order to give the author the benefit of our best reading, we have to work from a somewhat blank slate. List some of your assumptions and put them aside.
- In a small group, then, tackle some immediate problems, questions, and so on. The goal here is to see how many trouble spots in the text you can clear up simply by talking about the text with others, sharing your experiences. Look up any words that you don't know.

2. Decoding...

In this section, we'll work through each of the "reasons for difficulty" and see what works to unravel Bey's writing. Deal with each of the following as you see fit and by responding to the questions under each heading (use worksheet to record your group's answers).

- Style*: Because Bey's work is relatively contemporary, we can't consider time much of a barrier. Instead, describe the predilections, subculture, or interests of an audience who would be drawn to this essay.
- Specialized Discipline*: To what disciplines does Bey appeal? How might he himself have been educated? Mark the terms, references, or ideas that seem to point to particularities of a discipline. Make a list of the different fields of interest that Bey seems to have.
- Intentional difficulty*: What does Bey seem to do intentionally to make his work difficult? Does any part of the work suggest that he enjoys such difficulties? Does the work change if you read it as a more poetic endeavor and not as a strictly informative or explanatory essay? How would you characterize Bey's style & voice?
- Organization*: Begin by dividing the essay into Beginning, Middle, and End. Next, identify "Key Sentences." These could be like thesis statements; they could also be the topic sentences of paragraphs, or they could simply be the sentences that mean the most to you.

3. Discuss...

Merge with another small group to discuss your determinations. Work towards interpreting the meaning of the essay as a whole by piecing together your understanding of the parts.

4. Translate...

a) By yourself, write, in your own words, the central point or meaning of the essay; try to include as much of Bey's scope as you can in a short paragraph. **b)** As a group, assemble or choose the best translation.