

OXFORD IB DIPLOMA PROGRAMME



2ND EDITION

ENGLISH A: LITERATURE

COURSE COMPANION

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OXFORD

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READERS, WRITERS AND TEXTS



This chapter is based on the area of exploration “Readers, writers and texts”. The objectives of this chapter are to:

- **introduce** students to the skills involved in literary study
- **exemplify** the use of these skills in interpreting texts representing a variety of genres
- **investigate** the ways writers write from creative or personal and from critical or scholarly perspectives
- **guide** students toward integrating these skills and perspectives by adopting and practising them in their own writing
- **provide** constructive advice for generating students’ literary aptitude, helping them appreciate literature (and also writing about literature) as a skilled art form.

The “Readers, writers and texts” area of exploration aims to introduce students to the skills and approaches required to examine literary texts closely, as well as to introduce metacognitive awareness of the work of the discipline by considering the following guiding conceptual questions.

1. Why and how do we study literature?
2. How are we affected by texts in various ways?
3. In what ways is meaning constructed, negotiated, expressed and interpreted?



4. How does language use vary among text types and among literary forms?
5. How does the structure or style of a literary text affect meaning?
6. How do literary texts offer insights and challenges?

From the IB Language A Literature subject guide, page 20.

Introduction

The value of literature

A lot has been written about the value of reading, studying and teaching literature. Considered from a very broad perspective, literature is a reflection and an exploration of the human experience in all its magnificent and mystifying range.

Literature may have a representational function but it is also relational. It implicates the writer and the reader in the reconstruction of the imaginary experience and its impact on reality, personal or collective. Imagination is, in part, the stimulus and also the impetus for the creation of literary works that will then engage the reader's imagination. According to Scarry (1995), for example, when an author is describing something, the author is giving us instructions on how to imagine or construct the described object. The mental images that are created under authorial instruction are linked to our perceptual world and constitute a kind of mimetic perception on the reader's part.

In other words, the mental image created by the words of the literary text leads our brain to imitate the perception linked with the image. This is just one of the ways reading literature has been shown to affect us in a powerful way.

Guiding conceptual question

Why and how do we study literature?

Numerous recent scientific studies also offer analyses of the impact of reading on cognitive capacity, working memory, attention span and positive brain rewiring. In fact, the survival and popularity of ancient stories—possibly even before writing systems developed—are seen by evolutionary biologists and evolutionary psychologists as evidence of our need for stories. Some of these stories we still read today, such as *The Odyssey* or *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and scholars specializing in “literary Darwinism” are seeking to identify the elements of these stories. Viewing the question from another perspective, if literature is a reflection of human experience, then it automatically becomes a source of knowledge of other places, periods and people.

Through literary texts, we learn about cultures and worldviews different from our own. Through reading about differences we also come to understand and appreciate what we all have in common, and our shared humanity is revealed through our reading.

Core concept



REPRESENTATION

Core concept



COMMUNICATION

Core concept



TRANSFORMATION

Core concept



CULTURE

TOK

What knowledge can audiences from different times and places gain from reading a text?



Core concept



TRANSFORMATION

Literature allows us to inhabit characters, hear their voices and see the world through their eyes, enhancing our knowledge and understanding of the world and ourselves. Sontag (2001) eloquently states that if literature has engaged her as a project “first as a reader and then as a writer, it is as an extension of [her] sympathies to other selves, other domains, other dreams, other words, other territories of concern”. In this sense, literature comes into contrast with information and fixed opinion as it reveals complexities, nuances and even conflicts of ideas we cherish and values we hold dear.

TOK

Does every literary work have an ideal reader? What are the challenges this presents for us as readers in our interaction with and understanding of the work?

Core concept



CREATIVITY

In this way, literature engages us in reflection and rumination as readers and also citizens of the world. By extension, literature cultivates the knowledge of our self and also our feelings of empathy and compassion for others. Even when we are reading a book we don’t like or we find difficult to understand, we are benefiting from the thought-provoking activity of reading with all the pleasures, challenges and emotions involved.

In addition, what we contribute to this activity is our own imagination, the blueprint of our context as individuals with distinct experiences, wishes, inclinations and habits.

In return, reading rewards us with storytelling skills and the ability to construct our own narrative—that is, to tell our own story.

ATL

Communication and self-management skills

Reflection

Activity

1. Make a list of the literary works you have read in the last year or so, including those you study at school. What does this list reveal about you as a reader, your interests and your relationship with literature?
2. Refer to a list of bestsellers in a newspaper, and find out a local bookstore’s or (if possible) a local publishing company’s bestsellers. What patterns do you notice and how do you interpret them?
3. Looking at your list of local bestsellers, how does your reader profile compare to the profile of the general public buying these books?
4. What value does literature have for you on a personal level?



Uses of Literature

In her book *Uses of Literature*, published in 2008, Rita Felski seeks to build bridges between literary theory and common knowledge by re-examining the reading experience and its significance for readers in general. Her aim is to get “a better handle on how and why we read”.

Felski presents a taxonomy of four of our most enduring and complex reactions to reading. They are:

- recognition: seeing ourselves in our reading
- enchantment: being in a state of fascination and suspended disbelief
- knowledge: getting to understand the world in a new way
- shock: feeling stimulated by unexpected developments.

Have you experienced these four reactions when:

- reading a literary text
- reading a newspaper
- solving a mathematical problem
- conducting a science experiment
- watching a film?

TOK

In what ways is the kind of knowledge we gain from literature different from the kind we gain through the study of other disciplines?

Guiding conceptual question

How are we affected by texts in various ways?

Reading—our starting point to learning



In the English A literature course we will engage with a large number of texts of great diversity in form and genre as well as time and place of origin. We will study the ways language is used to construct meaning in these texts. As we develop our understanding of the function and effect of textual features in different forms and genres we will consider different perspectives, our own included, and respond to texts critically, analytically and also creatively. The starting point of our learning—the fundamental principle of our journey through the course—is reading. We will reflect on what we read, discuss what we read, analyse what we read, interpret what we read, write about what we read and so on. The way we read and how we consciously shape this will be of great importance for understanding and responding to texts as well as completing the tasks required by the course. The continuum of skills we aim to develop in this course will lead us from reading to understanding to interpretation and finally to articulation—that is, our own oral or written work.



Different types of reading

A lot of the reading we do daily is information reading, such as reading road signs, package labels and street names. We also read to find information by skimming and scanning texts for what we need to find out.



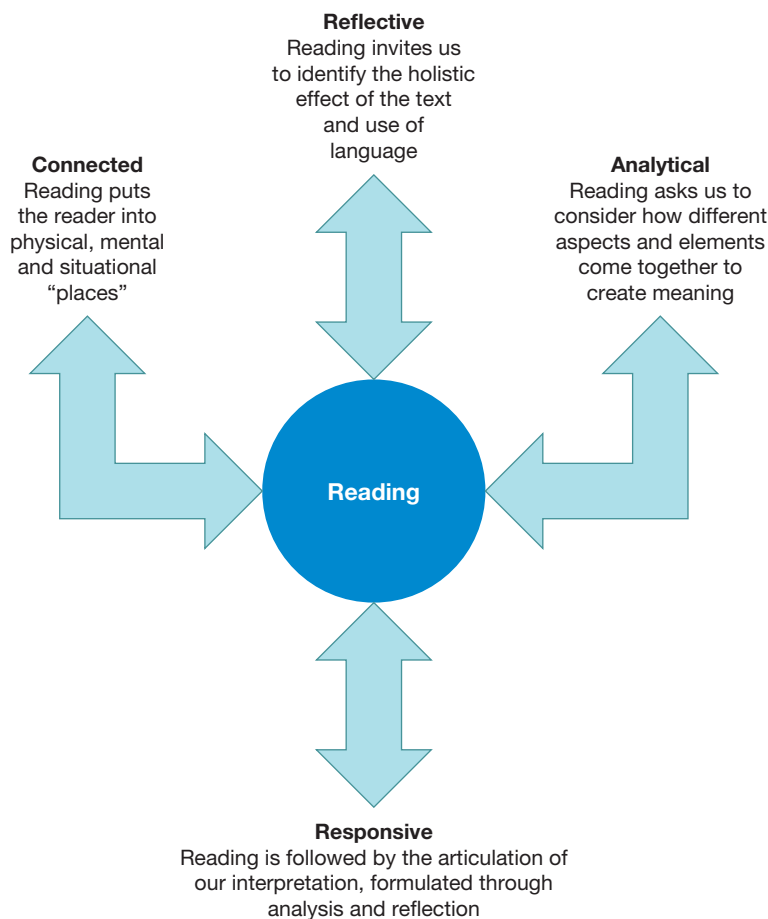
When we read an article about a news item, very often we are scanning—reading fast, focusing on key words such as names and places as we try to collect the information we need about a specific event. Very often, such reading is also guided by titles that alert us to information that may be of interest. Scanning does not require us to “understand” the text but rather to extract from it what we need to learn. Skimming, on the other hand, is a different kind of reading activity that entails going quickly through a text, looking for references to a specific item. Since a part (or most) of our reading of this kind is done online these days, search options very conveniently perform this process for us. Whatever we choose to call these types of reading (inspectional, informational, superficial) they are very different from reading literature. Literary texts take on their reality by being read and because they are read and thereby stimulate our faculties and cognitive skills on many levels.



If we are to describe, in general terms, the kind of reading we will engage in as students of English A literature we can call it **connected**, **reflective**, **analytical** and **responsive**. In the case of studying any text, we view reading as learning, and in the specific case of literary texts we construct an interpretation following analysis and reflection of the text and its features. This process will lead us to one of our purposes of the course, which is to write ably and knowledgeably about literary texts. This means that reading and writing are viewed as reciprocal acts: reading supports our writing, and our writing brings to light our reading.

TOK

Does a reader gain knowledge through literature? If so, what different kinds of knowledge does literature offer?



Performative literacy

In his article “Performative Literacy: The Habits of Mind of Highly Literate Readers” Blau (2003) revisits the issue of the complex contemporary literacies and proposes three new kinds of foundational literacies: textual, intertextual and performative literacy. Textual literacy is the knowledge that allows the reader to create an interpretation of a text and to think about it critically. Intertextual literacy refers to prior conceptual and informational knowledge that allows the reader to make connections with other texts. Performative literacy, however, is more complex because it is “knowledge that enables readers to activate and use all the other forms of knowledge that are required for the exercise of anything like a critical or disciplined literacy [which requires students to be active, responsible and responsive readers]. It also represents a set of literate practices without which readers cannot continue to grow in knowledge and literary competence through their reading experience. This enabling form of knowledge—performative literacy—is essential to functioning as a fully enfranchised reader in 21st century schools”. The traits of performative literacy—Blau’s “seven habits of mind”—are:

1. a capacity for sustained focused attention
2. willingness to suspend closure—to entertain problems rather than avoid them
3. willingness to take risks—to offer interpretive hypotheses, to respond honestly, to challenge texts, to challenge normative readings
4. tolerance for failure—a willingness to reread and reread again
5. tolerance for ambiguity, paradox and uncertainty
6. intellectual generosity and fallibility: willingness to change one’s mind, to appreciate alternative visions and to engage in methodological believing as well as doubting
7. a capacity to monitor and direct one’s own reading process: metacognitive awareness.

Consider the comments (starting opposite) of a teacher reflecting on his or her reading during the early years at university. The comments reflect the teacher’s understanding of how he or she read texts then, and compares this past experience to Blau’s “seven habits of mind”.

From “Performative Literacy: The Habits of Mind of Highly Literate Readers” by Sheridan Blau in *Voices from the Middle* (2003)



Capacity for sustained, focused attention

I did not give careful and sustained attention to text, because I did not think I was capable of understanding the text. "... when simple lack of appropriate effort is treated—as it often is—as a symptom of cultural illiteracy or insufficient mastery of some subskill of reading, students are likely to be offered forms of instructional assistance that support inattention and confirm the students' own mistaken notion that they lack some specialized body of knowledge or reading skills that distinguish them from their teachers." (Page 211)

Willingness to suspend closure

I avoided difficult texts. Therefore, I did not engage in literary analysis in fear of being wrong. It was easier to be lazy and give up by formulating weak explanations. "Expert readers... are more willing to endure and even to embrace the disorientation of not seeing clearly, of being temporarily lost." (Page 211)

Willingness to take risks

I did not value my responses to texts in order to "talk back" to text. I did not know that I was allowed to interact with text or question it. Willingness to take risks is "... to offer interpretive hypotheses, to respond honestly, to challenge texts, to challenge normative readings. This characteristic is closely related to a willingness to entertain problems, and both of them are functions of what we might more globally identify as intellectual courage." (Page 212)

Tolerance for failure

I viewed my failure to comprehend the text the first, second, or even the third time as my own insufficiency, which prevented me from sustaining my efforts until the confusion became lucid. "... one of the principal differences between expert readers and those who appear less skilled is that the more accomplished have a greater capacity for failure... framing their failure but as part of the difficulty that comes with the territory of reading difficult texts." (Page 213)

Tolerance for ambiguity, paradox and uncertainty

As a reader I looked for security, certainty, and the path of least resistance. "The least competent readers tend to confuse intellectual sufficiency with certainty and completed knowledge, and are inclined to equate uncertainty with ignorance, and ambiguity or paradox with confusion."

Guiding conceptual question

How do literary texts offer insights and challenges?

Intellectual generosity and fallibilism

I did not remain open to new and alternative perspectives and meanings—one of the barriers of critical thinking. “The strongest readers will generally argue persuasively for their own readings of texts and be able to demonstrate the deficiencies of arguments for alternative readings... In this process they also show themselves to be fallibilists, persons capable of changing their minds, capable of learning from their encounters with other readings to look in a new way and therefore to adopt a perspective that is more comprehensive than their own former vision.” (Page 214).

Metacognitive awareness

I lacked metacognition—I was not aware of my own thinking, my own comprehension, or how to strategically correct my confusion of text. “... a major difference between strong and weak readers has to do with the way that strong readers monitor the progress of their understanding as they move through a text, self-correcting as necessary and recognizing when they need to reread or refocus their attention or take some other step to assist themselves in understanding what they are reading... they are less likely to feel defeated by difficult text.” (Page 214)





Reflecting on reading

Activity

- How do the reader's comments on the previous pages compare to your experience as a reader of literature?
- How do they reflect your challenges and the setbacks you have encountered or may encounter in the future?
- Include in your learner portfolio a table like the one below. Revisit it as often as possible to document the development of your reading and to reflect on the skills you need to work on.

The table below gives an example of the kind of reflection you may find useful. Treat this reflection table as a living document, not a filling-in exercise. It will increase your awareness of your skills and will guide you in your efforts throughout the course.

Habits of mind	What are my challenges?	What can I do to address the challenges?
1. Capacity for sustained, focused attention	I easily get distracted and I am also worried that I do not fully understand the text.	a. Turn off electronic distractions. b. Set a timer for focused reading and build up gradually. c. Make a note of textual aspects that puzzle me and write questions about them. d. Use these questions in group discussions or respond to them in my learner portfolio.
[Continue the list of the seven habits of mind.]		

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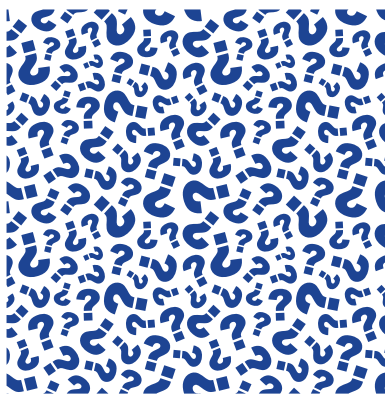
Thinking and self-management skills

Important development skills following reading

Reading actively and reflectively is the foundation of the process of understanding texts and developing the skills needed to articulate a response to the text, written or oral. Recall the continuum of skills we aim to be developing (in the sections “Reading—our starting point to learning” and “Different types of reading”) that will lead us from reading and knowing the text to understanding to interpretation and, finally, to articulation—that is, our own oral or written response.

The assessment tasks for the course are:

- the guided literary analysis of unseen passages (paper 1)
- a comparative analysis of two works with a given focus (paper 2)
- the evaluation of two works in terms of a global issue (individual oral)
- a discussion of work on a broad literary focus (higher level essay).



ATL

Thinking skills

Although each of these tasks involves some skills that are unique to this component and differentiates it from the others, there are some skills of comprehension and textual response that are the same across all tasks. Two of these very important development skills are *asking questions* and *making notes*.

What kinds of questions?

Asking the right kind of questions about a text will further our understanding of it and will reveal aspects for us to focus on in discussion and assessments. Note that we are not talking about the *right* questions but the right *kind* of questions. Consider the following examples.

- * What are the names of the family members of the protagonist?
- ** What happens in the second part of the novel?
- *** What is the significance of the dialogue between the main character and his father in the third chapter and how does this affect the main character?

Note: the three-star notation is adopted from Erica McWilliam's presentation at an IB professional event for teachers: the IBAEM Regional Conference in The Hague in 2011.

The first two types of questions, marked with one star and two stars, seek answers that focus on information and summary respectively. Both of these types of questions can be of use in other contexts. For example:

- when students are revising a text and recall questions are necessary to ensure that they remember the facts of the work
- when a teacher seeks to confirm that the students have all read and understood the facts of the work
- when a teacher would like to recap the facts of the work before proceeding to an activity.

However, it is only third kind of question that really probes into the workings of the text and provokes readers to reflect on their reading and explore aspects that they found interesting, unusual, puzzling or significant. Three-star questions are open-ended and involve a link with the text in terms of effect, consequence and/or language: they question the text, not the reader.

Guiding conceptual question

How do literary texts offer insights and challenges?

Why am I asking the questions?

The kind of questions you are asking are genuine questions that result from your reading. You may know part of the answer or have some indication about how to respond, but the process of questioning is important for your learning for several reasons, a few of which are given in the following list.



- Your questioning originates from your reading and so it guides your understanding of the text and your awareness of your skills as a reader.
- Your questioning helps you and your teachers identify how your understanding of the text is developing, individually or for the group.
- Your questioning gives you confidence, empowers you and makes you responsible for your learning.
- Answering your questions helps you build up “tolerance for ambiguity, uncertainty and paradox” (Blau 2003) to become a more effective reader even beyond the completion of your English A literature course.

What if I ask the wrong questions?

There are no wrong three-star questions as such. Some questions may be less focused than others or relate to an aspect that is not as significant or pertinent as another. As you practise asking questions during your reading, in your learner portfolio and during class discussions, you will notice how your intuition about and appreciation of a very good three-star question will sharpen.

How are questions useful for my assessments?

Beyond its valuable contribution to your understanding and interpretation of texts, formulating questions is a skill that is very relevant to assessment tasks. Paper 2, for example, asks you to respond to a question using two works you have studied. As a question expert you will be able to identify and address all aspects of the examination question and ask also the right kind of questions about the texts you use for your response. For internal assessment, questions about the global issue of your choice will help you access its presentation in the two extracts you have chosen and examine this presentation in depth and in detail. For the higher level essay, questioning will be the first step of the process of reflecting on a concept and identifying an aspect to write about. Further questioning with reference to this aspect will allow you to present a response that is probing and sophisticated.



Making notes and your learner portfolio

For the English A literature course, the learner portfolio is a place where, for example, you reflect, respond, brainstorm and draw diagrams as you read and discuss literary texts. It can contain classwork and marked assignments, ideas for assessments and drafts. Whatever its format and shape, you must think of your portfolio as the chronicle of your English A literature journey—a road map of your academic and personal experience of the course. The processes recorded in the learner portfolio will be instrumental in moving you toward success in the course. The learner portfolio is your personal learning space, a resource for self-assessment, revision, inspiration for tasks and a safe space for your deep thinking. How you manage your portfolio will depend on your own context. To some extent its usefulness will be determined by your awareness of the kind of note-making you use when reading and discussing texts, focusing on discovering the connections between

ATL

Thinking and research skills

them. You may use your learner portfolio or the margins of your book to identify significant aspects of the text or you may want to write down the facts of the work that you need to remember (such as names of characters, dates and events). However, when it comes to responsive and reflective note-making you will realize that there are at least three levels to the processing of your response:

1. Structural note-making	Examples: noting the facts in a work; drawing a diagram of the events in a novel; making a list of the characters in a play; drafting a table that gives the argument in an essay
2. Conceptual and analytical level	Examples: identifying concepts, ideas, thoughts and global issues in texts; appreciating the ways language is used in different texts
3. Dialectical or cross-textual	Examples: looking at the ways concepts, ideas, thoughts and global issues are presented across texts you are studying—making connections and comparisons among these and in the different ways language is used to convey them

Adapted from Adler and Van Doren (2014)

In addition to these kinds of note-making, you may also use underlining, colour-coding and marginal notes in the text you are reading and in tasks linked to it. Just remember that your learner portfolio is there to reflect your entire learning experience during the course and to identify meaningful connections across your evolving work over the two years.

What is the practical purpose of note-making?

Devising a note-making strategy for your work will also be very helpful when reading longer works. It will help you track how your expectations change as your reading progresses while giving you the opportunity to return to previous impressions and readjust your understanding of the work.

A note-making strategy will also help you with your revision before examinations, and it will make it easy for you to explore options for assignments such as the individual oral or the higher level essay. More importantly, in the English A literature course you will be studying different literary forms (four in higher level, three in standard level) and note-making helps develop the study skills that are relevant to the diversity of the texts as well as the aims and the objectives of the course.

What happens when we read a poem?

Unlike prose with its regular lines of print, poetry already creates a riddle for the reader with the way it is laid out on the page. This quality of poetry as a riddle to be solved is very often the reason students talk about “getting” or “not getting” a poem. In what follows, we will outline different approaches to reading poems that will help students abandon this false dichotomy of “getting” or “not getting” it and find ways into poems that will allow students to connect with, analyse, reflect on and respond to these texts. This section features different kinds of poetry, such as visual poetry, haiku and concrete poetry. These are not the type

ATL

Self-management skills



of poems that you will be asked to respond to in examination papers but texts that will help you reflect on the nature and function of poetry and enhance your appreciation of literary forms. Teachers and students can use these readings for activities and discussions as appropriate and relevant.

Guiding conceptual question

How are we affected by texts in various ways?

Poems about poetry

Activity

The two poems below describe attitudes to poetry. The first one elaborates on the students' approach and attitude to poetry; the second one expresses the opinion of the speaker about what genuine poetry is.

1. Choose a phrase from each poem that resonates with you for some reason. You may share the speaker's opinion or you may have had a similar experience to the one described.
2. Which of these two poems is closer to your experience of poetry?
3. How does the language of this poem reflect that experience?
4. If you wrote a poem about poetry, from your own perspective, what would you choose to focus on? What image would you use to represent your experience of poetry?

ATL

Thinking and communication skills

"Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

- 5 I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

- I want them to waterski
10 across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

- 15 They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

From *The Apple That Astonished Paris* by Billy Collins (2006)

"Poetry" by Marianne Moore

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond
all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
discovers in
it after all, a place for the genuine. 5
Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a
high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because
they are 10
useful. When they become so derivative as to become
unintelligible,
the same thing may be said for all of us—that we
do not admire what
we cannot understand. The bat, 15
holding on upside down or in quest of something to
eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless
wolf under
a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse
that feels a flea, the base- 20
ball fan, the statistician—
nor is it valid
to discriminate against "business documents and
school-books"; all these phenomena are important. One must make
a distinction 25
however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the
result is not poetry,
nor till the poets among us can be
"literalists of
the imagination"—above 30
insolence and triviality and can present
for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them,
shall we have
it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand, in defiance of their opinion—
the raw material of poetry in 35
all its rawness, and
that which is on the other hand,
genuine, then you are interested in poetry.

From *Others* by Marianne Moore (1920)



Misguided questions students often ask

It is useful to consider some questions often asked by students when they read poetry. Some of these questions may be based on wrong assumptions and therefore confuse us in the way we hope to explore poetry. Exploring these false assumptions can help focus on how students can construct meaning by reading and examining language use, a process that becomes accessible to students when it is viewed as a supported exploration and discovery of texts.

Guiding conceptual question

In what ways is meaning constructed, negotiated, expressed and interpreted?

Misguided question 1: “How do I know what the poem means?”

“Knowing” the meaning of the poem is very different from knowing a fact—knowing what day of the week it is or that it’s raining. Knowing and understanding a poem is the result of reading that explores different aspects of the text by examination and questioning. The meaning of the poem is not “known” as such but it is constructed by the reader. Sometimes the meaning can be elusive or complex. Again, we need to examine the clues, ask the right kind of questions and put the pieces together. Uncertainty and ambiguity are part of the magic and the enjoyment of reading poetry. It is precisely these subtle qualities of poetry that you will be asked to explore in this course rather than definitively absolute statements about specific interpretations of specific works.



What is the meaning of this?

Activity

1. Read the following poem where the speaker identifies herself as a riddle. Each line also seems to be a kind of image-riddle. Do not attempt to find a meaning yet. Read the first eight lines carefully and make a note of the qualities of each image in each line. Think of the shape, size and look of things the speaker describes in each line. Start with simple questions and observations such as the one given for the first line. You can also draw these images on a separate sheet of paper if you want to.

“Metaphors” by Sylvia Plath

I’m a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf’s big with its yeasty rising.
Money’s new-minted in this fat purse.
I’m a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I’ve eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there’s no getting off.

1. Why “nine” syllables?
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.

From *The Collected Poems* by Sylvia Plath (2015)

ATL

Thinking skills

2. List the qualities of the images in the poem.
3. a. Why does the speaker consider the journey in terms of getting off or not getting off?
 - b. Are there any clues in the text that she wants to get off?
 - b. Are there any clues in the text about her feelings about getting off?
4. a. What do these images have in common?
 - b. How do they fit together and how are they different?
 - c. Do you see a pattern? If so, does this pattern help you solve the riddle?
5. Once you have solved the riddle, look at lines 2–8 in more detail. Does the choice of images reveal something about the experience of the speaker? Make a note of your ideas and impressions.
6. Taking into account what you have discovered about the speaker's feelings for or attitude towards the experience, reread the final line that is the concluding statement of the speaker. Consider the questions below the poem and remember that this is part of the riddle and you are still looking for clues.

Visual poetry

"Visual poetry provides a reading challenge to most readers because the methods of interpreting information vary widely. Some poems read linearly, just as a traditional poem would. Many others utilize individual words outside of any traditional syntax, requiring the reader to find connections that are suggested only spatially. Most contemporary visual poems fragment words into pieces, forcing the reader to delve ever more deeply into the text to sift meaning out of an often hectic

mise-en-page. One important notion to keep in mind while reading visual poetry is that it makes sense via more than just the text itself. Color, shape, and arrangement—including proximity to, and integration with, images—are important elements in the meaning of any visual poem" (Huth 2008).

"Joel Lipman has worked for years with rubber stamps, creating poems on yellowing acidic pages torn out of old books. This technique produces a *frisson* between the apparently unrelated base text and Lipman's overtext. As evidenced by the meter and movement of the words on the page... it is clear that Lipman is writing real poetry, but it is poetry enhanced by the distinctive appearance of the words" (Huth 2008).



Misguided question 2: “How can I find the deeper meaning of the poem?”

Students are often led to believe that every poem should have a deeper meaning. When students read a poem that is, for example, about a fish, they seek a “deeper” meaning for the fish—they want to find what the fish “stands for”. However, sometimes in poetry a fish is a fish. Sometimes a fish is something more than that, not because it has to be, but because other clues in the text make it something more.



Guiding conceptual question

How does the structure or style of a literary text affect meaning?

Is the house a house? Is the soap a soap?

Activity



1. The following two poems mention a house that the speaker visits or seems to inhabit, respectively. In order to discover the meaning of a poem (and in this particular case, the significance of “a house”) students need to question the text themselves rather than the teacher questioning the students. To help you get started with the process of questioning, you are given some keywords to use, as well as some prompts. Read the two poems carefully before you start formulating your questions in response to these prompts. You can use these questions as counterpoints of reflection or analysis in your learner portfolio or in discussions with your peers. During reflection or discussion you will begin to construct the meaning of the poems and start developing your understanding of the poems. Make a note of your thoughts and ideas as you engage in the questioning process, alone or with your peers.

Keywords

colour

house parts

memory

description

verbal tense

feeling

speaker's relationships

thought

soap

house

sound

Your **prompts** are these question openers.

- Why... ?
- How... ?
- What are the reasons for... ?
- What is the purpose of... ?
- What is the role of... ?
- What would change if... ?

"Soap Suds" by Louis MacNeice

This brand of soap has the same smell as once in the big
House he visited when he was eight: the walls of the bathroom open
To reveal a lawn where a great yellow ball rolls back through a hoop
To rest at the head of a mallet held in the hands of a child.

- 5 And these were the joys of that house: a tower with a telescope;
Two great faded globes, one of the earth, one of the stars;
A stuffed black dog in the hall; a walled garden with bees;
A rabbit warren; a rockery; a vine under glass; the sea.

- To which he has now returned. The day of course is fine
10 And a grown-up voice cries Play! The mallet slowly swings,
Then crack, a great gong booms from the dog-dark hall and the ball
Skims forward through the hoop and then through the next and then

- Through hoops where no hoops were and each dissolves in turn
And the grass has grown head-high and an angry voice cries Play!
15 But the ball is lost and the mallet slipped long since from the hands
Under the running tap that are not the hands of a child.

From *Collected Poems* by Louis MacNeice (2007)



“Insomnia” by Dana Gioia

Now you hear what the house has to say.
 Pipes clanking, water running in the dark,
 the mortgaged walls shifting in discomfort,
 and voices mounting in an endless drone
 5 of small complaints like the sounds of a family
 that year by year you’ve learned how to ignore.

But now you must listen to the things you own,
 all that you’ve worked for these past years,
 the murmur of property, of things in disrepair,
 10 the moving parts about to come undone,
 and twisting in the sheets remember all
 the faces you could not bring yourself to love.

How many voices have escaped you until now,
 the venting furnace, the floorboards underfoot,
 15 the steady accusations of the clock
 numbering the minutes no one will mark.
 The terrible clarity this moment brings,
 the useless insight, the unbroken dark.

From *Daily Horoscopes: Poems* by Dana Gioia (1986)

2.
 - a. What did your questioning of the poems reveal about the role of the house in each poem?
 - b. What ideas, thoughts and feelings are associated with the house in each poem?
 - c. How is the idea of the house used differently in each poem?
3. What did this activity show you? Respond to this question in writing and review the process from the beginning of the activity to the end. The process involves four stages and types of engagement that will help you build your skills as a student of literature and your awareness of one aspect of how we construct an interpretation of a literary text. The four stages are:
 1. reading
 2. questioning
 3. reflecting and responding
 4. reflecting on learning.

ATL

Self-management skills



Misguided question 3: “What if I get the meaning wrong?”

This is, by far, the most frequent concern of students of literature, especially poetry. There are two false assumptions behind this concern.

- Assumption 1: there is a meaning to the poem that exists outside a poem, almost like a physical object exists as separate from other objects, for example a car parked outside.
 - Working on this assumption, students ask: “Where do I find the meaning?”
 - The problem with this is that meaning is derived from words, the way they are chosen, put together and laid out on the page. We don’t “find” meaning—we construct it, we form it, we shape it by looking at the ways language is used by the poet.
- Assumption 2: there is one meaning that is “right” and there are many others that are wrong and we have to somehow “match” the poem to the right one.
 - Working on this assumption, students ask: “How can I be sure to find the correct meaning and match the poem to it?”
 - Like assumption 1, this presupposes a meaning that exists outside the poem and also the reader. In addition, this idea contradicts the very nature of literary texts: they are events that become real to us when we engage in the personal activity of reading.

Both of these ways of looking at meaning seem to ignore the common ground for writers and readers that is language itself.

Guiding conceptual question

In what ways is meaning constructed, negotiated, expressed and interpreted?

TOK

Can the meaning of a text ever be ambiguity? Can there ever be one true meaning of text?

The opposite view, that a poem can mean anything the reader wants it to mean, is also based on false assumptions. The most obvious is that this view implies that language can mean anything we want it to mean. This cannot be true, as language is the agreed and shared code of communication. It constitutes the basis of our understanding as readers, and our interpretation of any text begins from this very shared and recognized knowledge of language.

To give an example, when Gioia or MacNeice mention a house in the poems above we all understand that the poet is referring to a house, not a tree or a boat or a cheeseburger. The feelings and thoughts expressed in the poems with reference to these houses can be identified when one considers the choices the poets make with regards to language and, once again, this is our shared code—the one both writers and readers use. When Gioia uses the word “useless” to



describe the insight in the last line, we understand the meaning to be something close to pointless, meaningless or maybe even worthless, and we infer that the process the speaker has engaged in has not offered him something he can use in the future or it has inspired a feeling of futility in the speaker.

In this way, once again, we look to the poem and its language for answers, not outside the poem. How the reading of a text resonates with us is beyond the interpretive domain of our study at this stage. As students of English A literature you must remember that the meaning you are asked to construct is intrinsic to the work; that is, it is found inside the text and its language. Extrinsic aspects of interpretation can be relevant when contextual aspects are considered, which is something we will address in other parts of the course. For example, in terms of very personal context MacNeice's poem may make me think about my grandmother, but this does not mean that that poem is about my grandmother. Gioia's poem may affect middle-aged people differently from younger ones but this does not entail a changed meaning of the poem.

Whether we are looking at the intrinsic meaning of the work (how language is used to create meaning) or the extrinsic meaning of it (how context can impact meaning, how we are affected by the text)—or both—the distinction must be clear in our mind at all times.

Core concept



COMMUNICATION

TOK

Are some interpretations of a text better than others? Can the meaning of a text ever be free from ambiguity? Can there ever be one true meaning of a text?

Choose an interpretation

Reflection and activity

Read the following poem and the three interpretations (a, b, c) offered below it. Choose the interpretation you think most appropriately captures the meaning of the poem.

1. Justify your choice by referring to textual clues.
2. What did the other two interpretations have—or did not have—that could be said to misrepresent the meaning of the poem?

Following this activity, take a minute to reflect on how you reached these conclusions and what textual clues you referred to.

"The Life that I Have" by Leo Marks

The life that I have
Is all that I have
And the life that I have
Is yours

- 5 The love that I have
Of the life that I have
Is yours and yours and yours