

Teaching Textual Irreverence

Marion Wrenn

Use choreographed writing to help students crack a source's meaning and use another writer's ideas to motivate their own inquiry.

Writing Focus: *analysis*
Project Stage: *drafting*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Student Preparation: *medium*
Estimated Time: *55 minutes*

EXERCISE

Prep Work: Choose a professionally written text with which the student will work—either something the whole class has read together or something they have read and selected on their own. Ideally the text should be complex and should reward re-reading. (I have used everything from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" to excerpts from Matthew Goulish's *39 Microlectures: In Proximity of Performance*). Before class, students will need to have carefully read and annotated the source they want to use for the exercise. Ask students to identify a key paragraph-length passage in the source. I ask my students to find moments that haunt or delight: "This could be a piece of the text you don't understand but feel is critical, a passage that gets you riled up, an image that stays with you long after you finish reading. Pick a paragraph-sized moment."

Step One: (10 minutes) Give students time to re-read their notes and the passage itself. Ideally they will have marked it up—identifying key terms, noting style and craft, and thinking about why they identified this passage. Is it important to the text's ideas? Does it charm the reader? Or baffle the mind? (The good news is that answering yes to any of these questions will do just fine.)

Step Two: (45 minutes total; anticipate 5-7 minutes for each of the seven instructions below)

Ask students to pull out a notebook and open up to a blank page.

1) *Introduce* and *restate* that passage in your own words, in four or five sentences. Do not try to interpret the passage at this point. Your goal is simply to make the author's words into your own. As you do this, ask yourself: what are the paragraph's important ideas and key concepts? What is the author saying in this paragraph? What key words would readers need to chew on so that they might better understand the passage?

- 2) Restate your four or five sentences in one sentence that begins with “In other words . . .” Your goal here is to pay closer attention to the important parts of the author's text. This sentence should both *compress* and logically *emerge* from your initial paraphrase.
- 3) Challenge yourself to press your restatement further. Begin your next sentence with “Not only that, but . . .” As above, this sentence should logically emerge from what has come before.
- 4) Begin your next sentence with “This leads me to consider that, for [this author’s ideas, or in this essay . . .].” Again, the sentence will logically emerge from what has come before it.
- 5) Push yourself further. Add a sentence that starts with “However . . .” and see if you can locate a contradiction or complication within the selected text.
- 6) “Perhaps . . .”: Now would be a great time to riff a tentative claim. Articulate an insight based on the contradiction you just noted. Don’t try to fix, resolve, or shut down this puzzle. Aim to open it up, articulate what makes it worth thinking about, and reflect on the stakes of your inquiry.
- 7) Finally, strive to clarify the sense you’ve made. Start the final sentence with “What I’m really trying to say is . . .” and see how you might compress or restate what you are coming to understand.

Your students should come away from this work with a sizeable and complex paragraph (or two!). You might ask them to repeat this choreographed close reading again at home using another part of the essay.

REFLECTIONS

I’ll confess that when I ask students to summarize sources I’m afraid I’ll wind up with a stack of obedient paragraphs that get stuck on theme or plot rather than explore claim, argument, or idea. These looming, potentially lifeless paragraphs are full of declarative sentences like “This essay is about {x}” (where {x} is always only a single word) or “I agree with the author.”

Overgeneralizations like these are safe and they create a sense of authority for the student writer. But it is sentences like these that stand in for a more nuanced representation of the source material and keep students from finding an analytical edge. It took me a while to realize it was my job to help students learn to do something different.

This workshop stages an embodied experience of close reading in order for students to decipher the textual complexity of a single source and then do something with those findings. That “something” can be anything from coming up with a good analytical question, to arriving at a deeper understanding of a primary source’s ideas, to taking a stance on those ideas after carefully rendering and representing them. (Look back at the fourth prompt and you’ll see that you can tailor the bracketed part of the sentence to serve the work you want your students to do for the particular writing assignment in your class).

I've found this workshop works really well in the rough draft phase of the writing process, especially for analytical essays drawing upon complex source material. When I tried it recently, Layan, a first-year student from Egypt writing an essay about a Woody Allen film, was able to draw upon and re-see what Adorno and Horkheimer meant by their claim that “the culture industry cheats the consumer of what it perpetually promises.” She had come to class with a draft in which she'd attempted to integrate “The Culture Industry” in the service of her analysis of the film. By looking back at the passages she'd tried to draw from, and (re)writing her reading of them in class, she went home with targeted work to do based on what she'd discovered. She had a practical starting place to re-work her source integration, and the insights that emerged helped her develop and refine her thesis.

The results were impressive: Layan used the authors' claims to critique and refine an underlying idea about the social construction of taste she found lurking in Allen's *Midnight in Paris*. By dwelling upon the complexities of one text she was inspired to re-assess another. She was also, crucially, able to name this work in the cover letter she wrote for her final essay. Layan noted that this in-class writing helped her figure out an analytical question that ultimately led to a thesis, signaling that she could now see—and perform—the relationship between careful source use and her own ability to make powerful, insightful claims.

Ultimately, the workshop can be adjusted to suit your students' needs. I have used it early in the drafting process, as an idea-generating tool. I have also used it slightly later, for a second-draft workshop, to highlight that good source use demands careful thinking and a robust expression of that thought process. It is also worth noting that this series of prompts acts like an accordion: it can take 40 minutes, or it can be stretched across multiple classes, repeated and varied as needed.

Birkenstein and Graff's *They Say/I Say*—as well as the Writing Lexicon—serve as the pedagogical and conceptual background for this assignment. What your students will begin to notice is that they can establish their credibility as thinkers and writers by performing engaged, sustained attention to the text at hand *on the page*. The prompts set them up to write for an imagined reader who can follow the steps of their observations and reflections, the flow of insights based on the close reading of text(s).

But more importantly, this assignment sparks and activates students' analytical minds by asking them to slow down and pay attention to a small piece of potential evidence. Doing so—slowing down—creates the illusion of infinite time. If your students are feeling pressed with deadlines or stressed by exams or overwhelmed by the range of sources they have gathered for their research papers, they might not know where to start. So they are apt to skim the surface rather than risk drowning in material. The exercise creates space and time for them to mull, dwell, to dive in and deal directly with source material—to see what the source says before they say something about it.