

ICA: Constructing Layered Questions: How to Court Ideas Before a Paper's Due

English 342: Studies in Literary genres (Afrofuturism)

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YOUR NAME: _____

Today you will work individually to practice producing strong critical thinking questions. Critical thinking is the process of identifying and solving problems, or asking and answering questions, through analytical, reflective and nonjudgmental reasoning (for starters). It often begins with a complex – and therefore *strong*) question. A complex question is essentially a *multi-layered* question. Asking complex and generative questions is a great way to inspire the topic or direction of a research paper (i.e. perfect brainstorming exercise). Here's a breakdown of the different layers:

Text Layer: The layer of the question whose answer is to be found *solely* in the text. This is not an interpretation question that invites multiple responses, but an empirical and straightforward question that you would typically see on a quiz or reading handout:

Examples:

1. *How does Douglass learn to read?*

A response to this question is only available *in the text*. There is very little, if any, room interpretation.

Interpretive Layer: Questions that begin by asking the reader to look at the text, but ultimately end by asking for a more subjective interpretation of that text. Generally, interpretive questions assume the reader has in fact read the text and actually *imply* a text question.

Examples:

*What larger points about literacy do **you** believe Douglass is trying to make in his narration of his first encounters with reading?*

Responses to this question demand knowledge of the text, but the focus is primarily on *your interpretation* of the text, which you would develop by performing a close reading of a passage, for example. The interpretive layer is asking what you, the reader, thinks. Answers can therefore vary with each reader, although the best answers will be grounded in textual analysis and not assumption or speculation.

Context Layer: Questions that focus our attention to the *world outside of the text* by considering its historical, cultural, or political contexts, for example:

What does Douglass's portrayal of literacy suggest about power and agency in the antebellum South?

These questions clearly require knowledge at the text level, and they definitely court interpretation, but they primarily focus on the various historical, political, or cultural contexts of the narrative.

Multilayered Question:

Looking closely at Douglass's portrayal of literacy, what do you believe the text is attempting to say about language and agency? What does this statement suggest about literacy and agency in the antebellum South? Do any of these points resonate in today's post-Slavery U.S. social landscape?