

Sample Course Assignments

1) Observation and Analysis

[I use this assignment across my courses to help students develop skills in close reading.]

Observation and Analysis (OA) assignments are closely related to your short argumentative papers. You can think of these as complimentary assignments. Several times during the semester you will be required to submit a short observation and analysis about a text we are reading during that week. These OA assignments are meant to be low-stakes exercises in learning the difference between noticing a feature of the text (observation) and explaining its meaning (analysis). The things you notice or observe may include punctuation, changes in tense or perspective, recurrent themes or symbols, a piece of dialogue, etc.

For OA assignments, you should pick a short segment from the text – a passage or a few paragraphs – to focus on. It will be easier to do a thorough analysis on a short segment than several pages. In your passage, identify something that you find interesting, striking, or puzzling about the text. This is your observation. You then want to make an analytic point about it. This can entail things like discussing the meaning it produces in the text, how it illuminates themes in the text, or how it affects your understanding of the text or what you know about the text. Summarizing the text does not count as observation or analysis.

You will want to discuss the significance of your observation in the passage itself, but can also connect it to the work more broadly. If a piece of dialogue in your passage is a crucial moment of character development, for example, you should talk about how it is working in the passage (both what and how it is said) and can also talk about how it affects or reflects your understanding of the larger work. By analyzing your observation, you will be learning how to make a claim about the significance of something in the text. In your longer papers you will have the chance to move from analyzing one part of the text to making a larger claim about the text as a whole. They are related processes; a claim is often made through the accumulation of different analytical points.

2) Local toxicity presentations

[This assignment was used to help students think about how environmental issues affect their everyday lives. It was part of the unit on “slow violence” in my “Genres of Living on a Damaged Planet” course.]

In order to think about our own embeddedness in the circulation of toxins and pollutants, as well as the protections, blockades, or exposures we experience in our particular places, research how some sort of common chemical – a pesticide, detergent, household cleaner, batteries, etc – is treated where you live or in a place you have lived previously. What are your options for disposing of the chemical? Are there clear directions on the product? If not, how would you find out how to dispose of them? Are there services for disposal or sites near you where you can dispose of them safely? Are there barriers to accessing any of these? What are the physical consequences of inappropriate exposure to the chemical you picked?

If possible, find out what happens to the chemical after it leaves your immediate attention. You do not need to do exhaustive research; you may choose to visit a site, make online inquiries, call, or read information on a product website. Part of the purpose of this task is to find out what information is easily available and accessible to the public – and what is not. How does what you learned (or were not able to learn) affect your concepts of where you live and how toxicity impacts you.

Depending on the size of the class, you will either give a short (5-10 minute) presentation of your findings or discuss your findings in small groups before reporting back to the class.

3) In-class role-play: Aziz on Trial

[This exercise helped students practice using textual evidence and inhabiting an argumentative position they may not have agreed with personally. It was used in “Problems in the Study of Sexuality: Love and Borders.”]

Draw upon your knowledge of the discourses of colonial domination and anti-colonial resistance we have encountered in class to defend or prosecute Aziz from E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*. You might draw upon the Orientalist discourse Said critiqued, the burdens of genealogical society that Poveinelli discussed, or Forster’s own critical depictions of both Britons and Indians. You have 10 minutes to prepare and each side will have 5 minutes to argue.

This exercise is meant to help you mobilize and occupy logics you may not agree with, and to think about the structural nature of raced and gendered bias. After the debate we will discuss how and why you chose the kinds of evidence you did. In particular we will discuss how either defense or accusation within Forster’s colonial context become problematic precisely because they rely on stereotypes of raced and gendered subjectivity that they novel is elsewhere helping us disrupt.

4) In-class debate: Are the ghosts in Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* real?

[I regularly use this exercise in my Introduction to Fiction classes to give students an opportunity to practice using textual evidence to support an argument. Students also have the chance to offer counter arguments and consider what evidence was most effective from their opponent’s argument.]

The class will be divided into two groups. Using evidence from the text, you will either argue that the ghosts are real or not real. Remember that texts support multiple interpretations and your goal is to make the most persuasive case possible for your side of the argument. After our debate we will discuss the merits of each argument and how or why they were persuasive.

5) Reading Criticism Together: Theories of Genre

[This kind of exercise helps students analyze a critical text. I ask students to approach the text in manageable portions with a partner and as a class the students assemble an understanding of the article’s argument.]

This article provides a survey of many different theories of genre. Rather than tackle the whole article in isolation, we will read it together and teach each other about the many ways thinkers have understood genre. In pairs, you will work together to understand the main ideas of a particular thinker discussed in the article, and then your group will report back to the class about that theory of genre. In this way we will break down the article into manageable portions and explore wide ranging theories of genre that we will draw on over the course of the semester.

6) Word of the Day

[I use this exercise across my courses to lower barriers to student participation in discussion.]

Pick a word from the fictional work of each week to serve as a “conversation starter.” It might be a word that recurs throughout the work and serves as a fulcrum for multiple meanings; it might be a word that was confusing for you, a word that only showed up once but seemed important, a word used in a new way, etc. At the beginning of each class we will gather these words on the board where they will serve as an archive for our discussion. Be prepared to explain the significance of your word if called upon.