

## THE READING JOURNAL

### What is a Reading Journal in AP Lit?

**PLEASE UNDERSTAND AND REMEMBER THAT THIS IS A CRITICAL READING JOURNAL, NOT A PERSONAL RESPONSE JOURNAL.** This journal is designed to help you develop critical thinking and reading skills so that you can both develop and articulate legitimate readings of a text. Using the reading journal, I hope, will make your reading and learning personal. And as you attend carefully to how you read and to what you personally make of your reading, I believe you will be charmingly surprised to find that such things can improve your enthusiasm for reading and your participation in the classroom. By watching your own reading move from puzzlements through approximations and misreadings to more and more satisfying readings you will gradually develop a more realistic sense of what valid and legitimate readings of texts are, and in class discussion more readily share your readings and build on each other's perceptions instead of worrying about who is right and who is wrong.

### What type of notebook do I need?

You need a separate notebook just for this journal. Buy whatever you want: a three-ring binder, a spiral notebook, or a stylish notebook that reflects your personal style. You might also rather type your journal. That's fine, too. It is essential that you complete the required reading and the right-hand side of the journal before class. When reading a full-length book, take notes on a very regular basis and indicate page numbers as you take notes. You will also be required to add journal notes in class. Use only the right-hand sides of the pages while you read (right of the spiral). Leave the left-hand blank for later. (You may want to reverse this if you are left-handed.) The basic difference between the right and left hand sides of the journal is that the right-hand sides are for comments on the text while the left-hand sides are for assessments of your reading. Keep the difference clear and make use of it.

### What Do I Put on the Right-Hand Sides of the Journal?

Typically, I will give you a list of questions to guide you here. The questions will always be posted on my website—at the COURSE READINGS area of the AP Lit tab. Beyond that, though, you can—and should—use these general suggestions to guide you, too. Copy this list and paste it into your journal.

1. Note times when your reading changes:
  - You see something you didn't see before.
  - You recognize a pattern--the images start to overlap, gestures or phrases recur, some details seem associated with each other.
  - The story suddenly seems to you to be about something different from what you thought.
  - You discover that you were misreading.
  - You realize that the writer has introduced a new context or new perspective.
2. Note times when you are surprised or puzzled:
  - Something just doesn't fit.
  - Things don't make sense—pose explicitly the question or problem that occurs to you.
3. Note details that seem important and that make you look again. (Remember Nabokov.)
4. Note ways in which the story makes you speculate about real life or a connection to another text or even another academic discipline.

5. Note your first impression of the ending--what "ended"? (How many times, after all, have you read a short story or a novel only to find yourself really confused about the ending?)
6. Note rhetorical devices that you recognize--how do they contribute to your reading of the text?

### **Are there any other specific requirements?**

Yes. When writing in the journal, use full sentences instead of phrases. The demands of the sentence will help you draw out your thoughts fully. You will find that quick reactions to a text—reactions that are recorded with vague, general short comments—are neither thoughtful nor useful. You need to consider your reaction, think about it, and articulate it clearly with both a claim and support. If, for example, you are puzzled by the disappearance of an important character in the text, be explicit about the nature of that puzzlement--what caused it in the text? That might require you to review when the character was first introduced, what that character's role or function is in the text, and what was happening in the plot when that character disappeared. An added benefit to this kind of active reading is improved thinking and writing. Your thinking skills will improve, and when you have clear thoughts, you have clear sentences.

### **Won't this method interrupt the "flow of my reading"?**

You might be frustrated in the beginning, but that is because you will be learning and doing something new, something that will improve your critical reading skills and your level of appreciation for a text. Ultimately, this method will actually heighten your enjoyment of literature. Try to remember that NO piece of literature is designed to be read straight through at uniform speed. The journal will seem less of an intrusion in your reading if—instead of reading simply for plot— you follow the natural rhythms of reading. The questions I will ask you in the Reading Journal assignments point to times when it is time to pause and reflect. Only machines work at uniform speed. Readers need to stop and pause, reflecting and thinking, at different points in a text. The journal is a device to help you make more of those moments of reflection and to preserve them for later reconsideration.

### **How will the Reading Journal function in the day-to-day workings of class?**

You will draw on your journal entries regularly in class discussion, and in turn you will work out—in your journals—new issues that come up in class. More formally, I will ask one student, chosen at random, to begin the day's discussion by a selection from his or her journal on that day's reading. You should make it a practice to ALWAYS come to class with a few points marked in your journals. You will need to be prepared to start the discussion. And from time to time I will ask you to spend the first few minutes of class sharing your journal work in groups of four. Then, the rest of the discussion will grow out of your mutual discovery of problem areas or illuminating sections. In these ways you will see how what you do individually in your journals builds into a communal act in our classroom.

I will regularly check your Journals on the day they are due, as well. You MUST COMPLETE EVERY QUESTION to qualify that work as done. "Almost" finishing your work is not, after all, finishing it. Remember that.

### **What happens during class with the Reading Journal?**

You are required to READ your entries in class. This might feel awkward at first, but you will find that this requirement will train you to take the time with your thoughts, working to ensure

that they are clear and articulate. This is but one way that your writing will improve steadily through the Reading Journal.

You are expected to add to your journals during our class discussions, too. You will find that some of your peers have answers to your questions or have noticed something you didn't. Make your additions on the right-hand sides of the pages. We will discuss the ways to organize your additions in class. **REMEMBER:** The left-hand sides of the pages are for a completely different activity.

### **What happens on the left hand sides of the Journal?**

The main purpose of the left-hand side of the journal is to reflect on what you learned about yourself as a reader. Please keep this in mind as you prepare to complete this step. You **ONLY** work on this section when we have completely finished our class discussion of the text.

When we finish a story or a full-length text, you will go back and use the left-hand sides of the pages to comment on your original observations and to make something of them. Here, you are reflecting on the process of making meaning. What were your strengths here? What are you struggling with at this point? What will you try to build on in the next text? What will you have to be more mindful of in the next text? Why did you misread when you did? What did you focus on? What did you care most about? What did you disregard? Where did you have to strain to follow the story sympathetically? What did you miss? What did you get? What insights did you gain from class discussion? Occasionally, I will vary the specific description of what to include with different works. That way I can adjust the pattern of observation and the skills I am emphasizing with each work.

### **Conferences: Presenting the Journal**

#### **What exactly IS the conference?**

At the end of Quarters 1, 2, and 3 we will have individual conferences for ten to twelve minutes. Your purposes will be many in these conferences, but your fundamental task is to **demonstrate your growth as a reader**. I will **ALWAYS** give you a Journal Conference Guidelines handout two weeks before your conferences begin. You'll want to prepare by addressing every identified requirement first. Then, you should proceed by reviewing your journal in relation to those requirements, selecting especially significant parts to read to me, summarizing and interpreting your work so as to show me what you made of the text for yourself. Basically, you are guiding a conversation with me. As in any conversation, you should be prepared for my asking you questions and making comments. Most successful conferences are the result of thorough work on the right and left sides of the journal, as well as careful preparation and practice with the conference itself.

#### **How much is the conference worth?**

Your work in the journal is 25% of your total grade, and your grade on the journal is determined by how you present it to me in our conferences. Our focus at this critical stage with the journal is not some ideal reading you might have believed was possible, but your own process of making meaning. The conference will allow us to focus quickly on the major successes you've had as well as the problems. What begins in the journal as a kind of personal dialectic through the use of opposing sides of the pages becomes in conference an actual dialogue. You will come to see

the complete continuity between personal work in the journal and public exchange about readings.

We'll take this process step by step. Initially, you'll probably have plenty of questions about "what I want." Gradually, you'll get more comfortable and confident about what you must do.

(Ideas adapted from Cathy D'Agostino, AP Trainer at Northwestern University, Toby Fulwiler, University of Vermont Writing Program Director; Ann Berthoff, Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Gary Lindberg, who was Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire until his death in 1986.)