

# Baruch COLLEGE | WRITING CENTER

## ANALYZING TEXTS WORKSHOP

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### MATERIALS NEEDED

Whiteboard markers

### LEARNING GOALS

At the close of the workshop, students will be able to:

- Describe criteria by which effective close readers identify analytically fruitful passages from a text.
- Appropriately select analytically fruitful passages from a text.
- Raise analytical questions in response to observed patterns within a text.

### OVERVIEW

In this workshop, four primary activities take place:

- Students observe an excerpt of an essay by bell hooks in order to extract principles by which fruitful textual passages may be identified.
- Students cluster textual evidence into suggested model patterns.
- Practicing independently, students make selections and articulate patterns in their own texts.
- Students return to the bell hooks text to collaboratively generate analytical questions from the previously discussed patterns.

## LESSON PLAN

### Introduction

Begin by framing for students the foundational role played by close reading, emphasizing that it is a flexible and recursive method to understand a text, to initiate writing about a text, to expand and enrich writing about a text, to develop arguments about a text, etc. **Foreground the three steps of close reading:**

- 1) selecting textual features to *observe*
- 2) identifying *patterns* in those features
- 3) *posing analytical questions* in response

Explain that at each stage, a period of group practice will precede work on the student's individual text.

### Part One: Extracting Principles for Analytical Observation

1. **Common text: Distribute Handout 1, "Selecting What to Observe."**
  - Frame this handout an excerpt of an essay by bell hooks on political liberation.
  - Explain that the group will read the text aloud, then work backward to determine the reader's reasons for calling out these words and phrases from the whole.
2. **Common text: After reading, provide a few moments for additional annotation.**
  - Disclose that for simplicity's sake, the workshop focuses on highlighting, but that the best readers also:
    - define new terms
    - take notes
    - record questions
    - use symbols to code their responses to texts (such as ! to indicate surprise or ? to signal confusion).
  - Direct students to spend a minute or two adding these kinds of notes.
3. **Common text: Facilitate discussion on how this reader made her observations.**
  - Prompt students with questions such as:
    - *What do you notice about what the reader has highlighted?*
    - *What did they determine important or potentially useful?*
    - *What criteria does it seem they used to make these determinations?*
    - *Can we figure out how they knew what to pay attention to?*

## ANALYZING TEXTS WORKSHOP

- Elicit the responses below, recording in a T-chart both the principles/criteria, and the specific textual passages that reflect them:

The reader marked passages that...	Examples
...are repetitive	“Love,” “ethic” “domination”
...refer to key terms they might need to look up to understand	“System of exchange,” Tina Turner
...have parallel syntax, distinct rhythm, echoed words, or other evidence of the author’s emphasis	“Merely sentimental” / “naive” We/us/our
...are intriguing, surprising, or curious	“needs of the spirit”
...highlight contrasts	Materialism vs. spirituality

### Part Two: Identifying Patterns

- 1. Common text: Segue to the commonalities or patterns in the highlighted passages.**
  - Explain that identifying patterns helps shape the isolated pieces into a trend we can actually write about.
  - Elicit or model a pattern evident in the pieces the group has discussed.
  - **Distribute Handout 2, “Identifying Patterns.”**
    - Again frame the handout as the model reader’s work. Here, they are clustering their passages into patterns.
  - Direct students to categorize the highlighted phrases from Handout 1 into the provided headings on Handout 2.
  - Allay anxiety about correct answers by noting that some snippets easily bridge categories, and that these headings are not exhaustive.
- 2. Common text: Facilitate a full-group discussion of students’ findings and choices, and what these might suggest about the text.**
  - Elicit their thoughts on how the categories were determined and how they put them to use:
    - *What elements of each phrase do you think led to these categories?*
    - *How did our model reader decide what labels to use?*
    - *Which groups might be the most useful and why?*
    - *How did you decide where to put each phrase?*
  - Invite students to generate other potential categories for the passage.
- 3. Individual texts: Invite students to take out a text they are reading for class (or, if it’s an in-class workshop, to choose whatever they are currently reading as a group). Make time for two discrete units of reading and note-taking while they analyze their chosen reading.**
  - Ensure that students have brought a reading, and ask them to select a passage of one to three paragraphs on which to focus.

- If any students do not have reading with them, offer the sample text, **Handout 3, “Excerpt from Mrs. Sen’s.”**

They should:

- first underline and annotate their passages as they read, and then
- seek and articulate patterns—repetitions, contradictions, parallels, similarities—of their own.
- Circulate as they do so, ensuring their progress.
- Conclude by sharing out.

## **Part Three: Posing Analytical Questions**

- 1. Common text: Return to the bell hooks passage and the patterns the group has mapped.**
  - Explain that with this kind of fruitful, robust material, they can now ask analytical questions—the very questions whose answers will become thesis statements and claims.
  - Ask students to pose questions as you record. Offer examples or otherwise guide them toward privileging questions that explore original motivations, function, significance, or complication/paradox. Some examples:
    - **Origin:** *What accounts for bell hooks’s repetition of the word “love”? Why does she need to emphasize the term so often?*
    - **Function:** *How does hooks contrast radical change with “reform”?*
    - **What’s the significance of her references to other sources? Why are MLK JR and Tina Turner both cited as authorities in this text?**
    - **Paradox:** *Why does hooks describe “longing for change” as “self-centered,” while still arguing for revolution?*
- 2. Individual texts: Ask students to draft one analytical question about a pattern identified in their own text; encourage them to begin with one of the stubs bolded above.**
- 3. Wrap-up.** As students share out their questions, help them reflect on next steps. Questions that are especially strong may be ready to serve as the beginnings of a thesis statement. Others may need refinement, or might motivate them to read the text again, looking for answers.

## SELECTING WHAT TO OBSERVE

*Discussion questions:*

- What do you notice about what the reader has highlighted?
- What did they think was important? Why is this language useful to highlight?
- What criteria do you think they used to make their decisions?
- How did they know what to pay attention to?

In this society, there is no powerful discourse on love emerging either from politically progressive radicals or from the Left. The absence of a sustained focus on love in progressive circles arises from a collective failure to acknowledge the needs of the spirit and an overdetermined emphasis on material concerns. Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination.

Without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism. It has always puzzled me that women and men who spend a lifetime working to resist and oppose one form of domination can be systematically supporting another. [...] Critically examining these blind spots, I conclude that many of us are motivated to move against domination solely when we feel our self-interest directly threatened. Often, then, the longing is not for a collective transformation of society, an end to politics of dominations, but rather simply for an end to what we feel is hurting us. This is why we desperately need an ethic of love to intervene in our self-centered longing for change. Fundamentally, if we are only committed to an improvement in that politic of domination that we feel leads directly to our individual exploitation or oppression, we not only remain attached to the status quo but act in complicity with it, nurturing and maintaining those very systems of domination. Until we are all able to accept the interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle.

The ability to acknowledge blind spots can emerge only as we expand our concern about politics of domination and our capacity to care about the oppression and

exploitation of others. A **love ethic** makes this expansion possible. The civil rights movement transformed society in the United States because it was fundamentally rooted in a **love ethic**. No leader has emphasized this ethic more than Martin Luther King, jr. He had the **prophetic** insight to recognize that a **revolution** built on any other foundation would fail. Again and again, King testified that he had "decided to **love**" because he believed deeply that if we are "seeking the highest good" we "find it through **love**" because this is "the **key that unlocks the door** to the meaning of ultimate reality." And the point of being in touch with a transcendent reality is that we struggle for justice, all the while realizing that we are always more than our race, class, or sex. When I look back at the civil rights movement which was in many ways limited because it was **a reformist effort**, I see that it had the power to move masses of people to act in the interest of racial justice—and because it was profoundly rooted in a **love ethic**. [...]

Many people feel unable to **love** either themselves or others because they do not know what **love** is. Contemporary songs like **Tina Turner's** "What's Love Got To Do With It" advocate **a system of exchange around desire**, **mirroring** the economics of capitalism: the idea that **love** is important is mocked. In his essay "Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message?" Thomas Merton argues that we are taught within the **framework of competitive consumer capitalism** to see **love** as a **business deal**: "This concept of **love** assumes that the machinery of buying and selling of needs is what makes everything run. It regards life as a **market** and **love** as a variation on free enterprise." Though many folks recognize and critique the **commercialization** of **love**, they see no alternative. [...]

It is **truly amazing** that King had the courage to speak as much as he did about the transformative power of **love** in a culture where such talk is often seen as **merely sentimental**. In **progressive political** circles, to speak of **love** is to guarantee that one will be dismissed or **considered naive**. But outside those circles there are many people who openly acknowledge that they are consumed by feelings of **self-hatred**, who feel **worthless**, who want a way out. Often they are too **trapped by paralyzing despair** to be able to engage effectively in any movement for **social change**. However, if the leaders of such movements refuse to address the **anguish and pain** of their lives, they will never be motivated to consider personal and political recovery. Any political movement that can effectively address these **needs of the spirit** in the context of liberation struggle will succeed.

*Excerpted from bell hooks' 1994 "Love as the Practice of Freedom."*

## IDENTIFYING PATTERNS

Distinctions between collective vs. individual action

Contrast between materialism/spirituality

Calls for radical change

References to systems or structures

Repetition of “love”

Feelings of doom/despair

References to the Civil Rights Movement

Use of the 1st person plural (we/us/our)

## EXCERPT FROM “MRS. SEN’S”

1 Eliot had been going to Mrs. Sen’s for nearly a month, ever since school started in  
September. The year before he was looked after by a university student named Abby, a slim,  
freckled girl who read books without pictures on their covers, and refused to prepare any  
food for Eliot containing meat. Before that an older woman, Mrs. Linden, greeted him when  
5 he came home each afternoon, sipping coffee from a thermos and working on crossword  
puzzles while Eliot played on his own. Abby received her degree and moved off to another  
university, while Mrs. Linden was, in the end, fired when Eliot’s mother discovered that Mrs.  
Linden’s thermos contained more whiskey than coffee. Mrs. Sen came to them in tidy  
ballpoint script, posted on an index card outside the supermarket: “Professor’s wife,  
10 responsible and kind, I will care for your child in my home.” On the telephone Eliot’s  
mother told Mrs. Sen that the previous baby-sitters had come to their house. “Eliot is eleven.  
He can feed and entertain himself; I just want an adult in the house, in case of an  
emergency.” But Mrs. Sen did not know how to drive.

“As you can see, our home is quite clean, quite safe for a child,” Mrs. Sen had said at their  
15 first meeting. It was a university apartment located on the fringes of the campus. The lobby  
was tiled in unattractive squares of tan, with a row of mailboxes marked with masking tape  
or white labels. Inside, intersecting shadows left by a vacuum cleaner were frozen on the  
surface of a plush pear-colored carpet. Mismatched remnants of other carpets were  
20 positioned in front of the sofa and chairs, like individual welcome mats anticipating where a  
person’s feet would contact the floor. White drum-shaped lampshades flanking the sofa were  
still wrapped in the manufacturer’s plastic. The TV and the telephone were covered by pieces  
of yellow fabric with scalloped edges. There was tea in a tall gray pot, along with mugs, and  
butter biscuits on a tray. Mr. Sen, a short, stocky man with slightly protuberant eyes and  
25 glasses with black rectangular frames, had been there, too. He crossed his legs with some  
effort, and held his mug with both hands very close to his mouth, even when he wasn’t  
drinking. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Sen wore shoes; Eliot noticed several pairs lined on the  
shelves of a small bookcase by the front door. They wore flip-flops. “Mr. Sen teaches  
mathematics at the university,” Mrs. Sen had said by way of introduction, as if they were only  
distantly acquainted.

*from “Mrs. Sen’s” by Jhumpa Lahiri (1999)*