

This activity helps students learn the basic skills necessary for eventual analytical and argumentative writing assignments. First, the activity hones their critical reading skills by requiring them to gather pivotal evidence from the assigned texts. Next, students begin the writing process by transfiguring this evidence as summary, paraphrase, or quotation; finally, students must justify their choice of evidence with preliminary interpretation. I devise this activity as a series of precise, even punctilious, instructions that “micro-manage” the students’ reading habits. At first glance, these enumerated instructions may have some semblance of old-fashioned reading comprehension questions; however, reading comprehension questions often lead students to thematic summarizing and generalizations that may or may not be anchored to actual elements of the text. With this assignment, I shift the focus to rigorous critical reading and the pinpointing of specific evidence. My students demonstrate greater engagement with this assignment than with generalized reading comprehension questions because the concrete and incremental nature of the tasks allows for a more verifiable sense of mastery and progress.

This assignment segues into classroom activities that accomplish a dual end: they rehearse the *formal* reading and writing skills while advancing the discussion of course *content*. Using collaborative learning methods, I place students into small groups and ask them to compare their results on one of the assigned tasks. (I select a task whose focus will provide a fruitful aperture for our general thematic discussion of the text). The group “debates” tend to be lively because the focus of each task is limited and students seem to feel confident defending the merits of a concrete choice (e.g., this quotation is more important than that quotation to the overall meaning of the paragraph). After ten or fifteen minutes, I stop the small group discussion and ask for volunteers to share their findings, which may be in the form of identifying a pivotal quotation, reading a paraphrase or summary, or describing the group’s argumentative process. Then, using PowerPoint, I project a copy of the paragraph under discussion and demonstrate my own process of culling evidence, whether key quotations, key word-sets for paraphrase, or key ideas for summary. While pursuing this demonstration, I defend my choices, incorporate and validate the students’ alternate approaches to the material, and broaden our general discussion of the thematic content. This exercise allows me to juggle dexterously the complementary skills of critical reading, interpretation, and writing for academic purposes.

Because the instructions for this assignment are lengthy, I post them on the class website as an alternative to photocopying. The students submit their responses to me on the class website as well, but they are required to bring a printed copy of the work to class in order to participate in the small group discussions.

Journal Entry 2

For week two, you will analyze the following three stories:

“Prison Studies,” by Malcolm X; “One Writer’s Beginnings,” by Eudora Welty

“Volar,” by Judith Ortiz Cofer

Your essay topic on these stories will be: **“Can reading transform our lives?”** (You will write the essay in class on Thursday, January 16.)

Journal Entry 4 (“Prison Studies”)

1) Identify the three paragraphs in the essay that provide the best evidence to support the essay topic. (Just write down the numbers of the paragraphs; don’t copy the entire paragraph.)

2) Rank the three paragraphs in order: most important, second most important, third most important. Then explain why you selected each paragraph. Please be precise in your explanation. Format your responses like this:

Paragraph number 00 is the most important paragraph because...

Paragraph number 00 is the second most important paragraph because...

Paragraph number 00 is the third most important paragraph because...

3) For each paragraph, select the two most powerful quotations that demonstrate how reading transformed the author’s life. (Obviously, you will not all choose the same quotations). Please think very, very carefully when selecting your quotations.

Journal Entry 5 (“One Writer’s Beginnings”)

Complete the same activities as Journal Entry 4. Then, **add the following**:

Of the six quotations that you selected from the story, decide which **3** should be left as quotations. Carefully **paraphrase** the other three.

Journal Entry 6 (“Volar”)

1) Write a summary of this story that responds to the essay topic. In other words, summarize what this story says about how reading can transform a person’s life.

2) Select the **4** most powerful quotations that you can use as evidence in your essay.

3) Select which **2** of the quotations should be left as quotations. Write a careful **paraphrase** of the other two.