

# Critical Essay & Question Presentation

engl 374-001 / autumn 2013-14 / drew university / chang



Our class covers a survey of American literature from *The Great Gatsby* to *Howl* to *Fun Home*. One of the best ways to explore and understand a text is through close reading. Another way to explore and understand a text—using what you have gained through reading—is through lively discussion and questioning both the text and your experience of it. And, finally, a third way to explore and understand a text is to engage what someone else—a scholar, an expert, an academic—has said or written about it.

You will be required to sign up for an oral presentation during the course of the semester in which you “teach” the class a critical essay you found on the literary text at hand. You may present individually or in pairs. Your presentation will require forethought, planning, and some research. Once you have signed for a particular week and a particular class session:

- 1) Read ahead of time the text (or texts) assigned in that week; if there are multiple texts, select one.
- 2) Research a recent scholarly essay from an academic source that is relevant to the text and the goals of the course; get a copy of the essay either in hardcopy or in PDF form.
- 3) In the week prior to your presentation date, distribute the essay to the class; give the class at least three days to read the essay.
- 4) Present a short précis or summary of the essay, a brief rationale for why you selected the essay, and generate a critical question that connects the essay and the week’s text.
- 5) Presentations should be 8-10 minutes, but you will be expected to help lead the class discussion for your assigned day.

Your presentation will be graded on timeliness, completeness, organization, engagement with the texts, and the overall quality of the researched essay, critical question, explanation, and discussion. If you work in pairs, each person must equitably share in the preparation and in the speaking roles for the presentation. Each presenter will be graded individually and will be required to submit a brief assessment of their presentation partners.

## Guidelines and Due Dates

**Format:** 8 to 10 minute oral presentation  
research a critical essay on the week’s text is required, provide bibliographic information  
refer to specific passages and the texts for the week

**Due:** on your sign-up date, at least once during the semester  
if working in pairs, make sure to send your evaluation email  
please post your critical question and presentation information to the class blog

## What is a Critical Question?

Generating critical questions is a necessary and useful academic skill; critical questions are often the beginning of intellectual or theoretical or artistic exploration, require active and attentive reading and thinking, and can generate the beginnings of analysis, multiple perspectives on an issue, topics for research, ways to critique and understand a text, and further curiosity for the material at hand.

Your critical question for your readings presentation should develop from a close reading of one of the week’s texts and your critical thinking about the text. **What questions or concerns do you want to ask of the text? What questions or concerns does the text ask of you?** Your critical question should be developed, dimensional, and complex that pushes beyond simple questions of theme, symbolism, personal opinion, or personal reaction. Consider the following when generating your critical question; your critical question:

—May think about the larger critical questions of our class, beyond just the course goals. What does the text reveal about our “culture” or “literature” or “reading”? How and why and what does the text respond to, reassert, or critique keywords like literacy, race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and citizenship.

—Asks more than, “What does \_\_\_\_\_ mean?” Critiques more than just theme, symbol, character, plot, setting. Think about the following: What is important about \_\_\_\_\_? Does \_\_\_\_\_ raise questions about representation (or how the text makes meaning), how we understand our lives and our world? Does \_\_\_\_\_ challenge or perpetuate cultural definitions, norms, traditions, ideologies?

—Begins with “How might...” or “Why...” and requires answers beyond yes or no, right or wrong, black or white. How and why and what would your answer to such a question be? In fact, critical questions often invite many different ways to answer a question and different kinds of evidence and reasoning as well.

—May focus on one section or one main idea of the text. How does the section fit the overall text? How does the main idea run through the whole text? What makes the section or idea important? What connections does it make to other texts, to the course goals?

—May be explicitly about the form, structure, language, and rhetorical or literary features of the text. What is its genre? How and why and what does it play with form? What rhetorical or literary features does it possess? How and why and what does it play with these features? How is the text answering the question, “What is important about this text?”

—Contextualizes the text in history, geography, politics, academia, and its conditions and modes of production. In other words, how and why and what is important about when the text was made, who the text was made for, where it was made, how it was made, and why it was made? What does its context tell us about our own context as we read it now?

### Insufficient Critical Questions

What does the green light at the end of the dock in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* signify?

In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, why does Harry choose to save both Ron and Fleur’s sister? What does this say about his personality?

Because the author was nearly drowned as a child, the novel uses the metaphor of drowning as a main theme. If the author had not had this unfortunate accident, would the novel be different? Would the ending change?

Is Hamlet really crazy or just pretending to be crazy?

Do you like this novel?

### Sample Complex Critical Questions

Much has been made of the green light at the end of the dock in *The Great Gatsby*, calling it a symbol of unrequited love, the American Dream, or envy and money. Clearly *TGG* is preoccupied by the definition of and critique of class and wealth. If the green light is something unattainable, how might we think about how the novel argues about who gets to achieve the American Dream, who doesn’t, and more importantly, how these logics of inclusion and exclusion fall along gendered and raced lines. Moreover, how might the American Dream be deployed to police these lines, particularly for characters like Myrtle or Meyer Wolfsheim?

Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” troubles the definition of “mad” or “madness” through a narrator that is simultaneously, ambivalently “very, very dreadfully nervous” and “healthy” and “calm.” Given that traditional and stereotypical definitions of madness center on irrationality, wild emotions, delusions, and misperceptions, how might the story’s narrator resist these definitions with his rationality, calm, and keen perceptions? He says, “Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work!” Even the ending of the story, with the narrator overcome by his too keen perceptions, does not seem wholly uncontrolled. The narrator’s confession seems more out of frustration over perceived derision than from guilt. How might reading the narrator as not mad challenge the ways madness gets defined, often mapped on to people and bodies that are deemed not “normal” or “acceptable,” and how might the story itself challenge the privileging of rationality as inherently “normal” and “good”?