THINKING ABOUT SHAKESPEARE

Before factions in the late 1980s vilified the term "liberal," it was widely understood that the "liberal arts" were valuable in the process of "liberating" us from the shackles of ignorance and illiteracy, from leading lives of mere Pavlovian gratification. The "humanities" function identically, seeking to cultivate what is best in us as humans, as opposed to the animalistic consumers that corporations want us to be or the mechanized automatons that our employers, the corporations, want us to be. One of the reasons Shakespeare is respected still is that his works seem ideal in the cultivation of a humanizing sensitivity and sensibility.

Towards this kind and quality of education, Washington State University is currently taking an impressive lead in finding and fine-tuning ways to improve critical thinking skills. The WSU Critical Thinking Rubric, a variation of which you may have already encountered in other classes, provides a framework and vocabulary for identifying many of the elusive features that teachers seek in their students' work and classroom contributions but sometimes find difficult to convey to students clearly as expectations. Here is an adaptation of the rubric to our Shakespeare class.

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1) Identifying and summarizing the problem/question at issue (and/or the source's position).

This sounds basic but it's not a cinch, and I for one certainly had my share of college English classes that never encouraged us even getting to this rung of critical thinking. A "report" on the Globe theater, for example, does not reach even this first step. Neither does a "compare/contrast" discussion of individual characters from two different plays. You want to tackle an authentic issue, not just carry out an arbitrary exercise of blab. So instead of simply following a theme through or describing a complex character or relationship, realize that Shakespeare's works are riddled with ambiguities and quirks in need of interpretation and explanation. Recognize that there are ongoing critical debates about living issues embedded in the texts. The Christopher Sly frame in The Taming of the Shrew lends itself better to being cast as a problem or question to be wrangled with. The depiction of Henry V as a hero or a war criminal could work too, or the issue of "comedy" in The Merchant of Venice, or why Timon of Athens does or doesn't work as effective drama.

Good critical thinking of this type "identifies the main problem and subsidiary, embedded, or implicit aspects of the problem, and identifies them clearly, addressing their relationships to each other. [It] identifies not only the basics of the issue, but recognizes nuances of the issue."

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2) Identifying and presenting the student's own **perspective and position** as it is important to the analysis of the issue.

Students facing their first formal written assignment for a class often ask me, "How much of this should be my opinion?" I'm afraid there's only a long answer to this question. You certainly do not want to write a "report" -- a regurgitation of well-researched but dry and pointless factoids. On the other hand, neither should a writing serve as an editorial spewing of "opinion." Somewhere between these extremes, and yet transcending them both, comes what teachers really seek -- your "perspective" -- that is, a well-articulated indication that you have brought some sophisticated worldview of your own to the subject, or that the subject has contributed somehow to the development of that worldview.

Therefore, this item in the rubric needs considerable tweaking for our context. Indeed, even within the wording of this component of the rubric, one might take issue with the blurring of the terms "perspective" and "position." Someone with a ferocious "position" on an issue may desperately need some "perspective"! Most teachers have read, for example, many term papers that are impressively researched, superbly organized, excellently written, and utterly pointless. They fall dead because the conclusion merely concludes and readers are left asking "so what?"

So "perspective" is a significant and usually sophisticated accomplishment, and teachers in many disciplines who have adapted the entire WSU rubric, as a sequence, to their courses have relocated this step to a place much later in the schematic. I recommend thinking of this component as relocated before or after what is listed as #6: context.

3) Identifies and considers OTHER salient **perspectives and positions** that are important to the analysis of the issue.

If you cannot see that multiple angles or possibilities are inherent in the subject, then it's likely that you aren't conceptualizing the subject as a problem or question to begin with. Return to step #1.

Weak critical thinking here offers "only ... a single perspective and fails to discuss other possible perspectives, especially those salient to the issue." Much better to address "perspectives noted previously, and additional diverse perspectives drawn from outside information."

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4) Identifies and assesses the key assumptions.

This means that you are perceiving the subject somewhat three-dimensionally, or at least reading between the lines. Questioning the widely-held assumption that, in accordance with Elizabethan bigotry, Shylock is a bloodthirsty villain is a good sign of the critical thinking process.

Weak critical thinking "does not surface the assumptions and ethical issues that underlie the issue, or does so superficially," whereas better critical thinking "identifies and questions the validity of the assumptions and addresses the ethical dimensions that underlie the issue."

5) Identifies and assesses the quality of supporting data/evidence and provides additional data/evidence related to the issue.

The distinction here is between merely regurgitating others' work or reporting from research and truly incorporating the valuable findings. Besides marshalling other critics' assertions, show your readers primary source material -- lines from the play -- in a new light.

Poor critical thinking "merely repeats information provided, taking it as truth, or denies evidence without adequate justification. [It] confuses associations and correlations with cause and effect [and] does not distinguish between fact, opinion, and value judgments."

Much better critical thinking "examines the evidence and source of evidence; questions its accuracy, precision, relevance, completeness."

6) Identifies and considers the influence of the context on the issue.

An appendix to the Critical Thinking Rubric lists possible contexts (cultural, political, ethical, educational, etc.) for consideration. This is not a matter of praising the mighty Shakespeare in general in a conclusion, nor dismissing your entire analysis because "everyone has his or her own interpretation." Nor is it excusing Shakespeare finally because in Renaissance England supposedly everyone was a racist sexist jingoistic bastard. Instead, considering Elizabethan stage practices might serve as a context for the issue of Rosalind's epilogue in As You Like It.

Good critical thinking here "analyzes the issue with a clear sense of scope and context, including [perhaps] an assessment of the audience of the analysis."

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7) Identifies and assesses conclusions, implications, and consequences.

Move beyond concluding with simply a reassertion of the thesis, or a limp summary of the preceding discussion. Here too readers are asking, "So what?" and the best signs of critical thinking are those indications that you have activated the subject by showing its importance. After showing your readers what a fink Henry V is, speculate on the implications that the play can come across to its audience in two polar opposite ways.

Good critical thinking of this type reflects objectively on the significance of the prior material.

Not every assignment demands your success in demonstrating all the above skills with anything like equal emphasis. Rather, the Critical Thinking Rubric is designed to lend us some framework and/or some language with which to help pinpoint some ways to evaluate not writing strictly, but thinking. Texts and materials in the humanities exist not to be "appreciated" reverentially, but rather to encourage critical thinking themselves. I think Shakespeare would agree.