Part I

Frameworks and Approaches
Critical reading, like critical thinking, is a term much bandied about by educators from elementary education through university study. Like critical thinking, critical reading means different things to different people. What critical reading is and why it matters are genuine educational concerns because reading is a foundational skill for successful learning at every level of schooling; to succeed academically students need to become active, engaged, critical readers. The ability to read critically – to analyze a text, understand its logic, evaluate its evidence, interpret it creatively, and ask searching questions of it – is essential for higher-order thinking. Skill in critical reading builds students’ confidence, enriches their understanding of the world, and enables their successful educational progress. Critical reading informs academic writing, particularly analysis and argument, inquiry and exploration – modes of writing required across academic disciplines.

In this essay I explain what critical reading involves, demonstrate applied critical reading in practice, and provide an approach to teaching students how to become critical readers. Framing this work, contextualizing and amplifying it, are discussions of responsible, responsive, and reflective reading.

We begin, though, by considering what critical reading is and is not, identifying some common student misconceptions.
Being Critical

Students sometimes think their goal in reading is to agree or disagree with a text — to argue and take a stand vis-à-vis its author's idea or claim. Their understanding of “critical” is limited to “critique” and “criticism,” to judging a text, to showing what’s wrong with it, identifying its limitations and biases. That more complex work, important as it is, however, comes later, after the initial effort to comprehend what a text says. The first goal of critical reading is to understand. Students achieve understanding through learning to analyze texts carefully and thoroughly. They demonstrate understanding of texts by summarizing and paraphrasing them accurately in writing. These representations of texts need to be done respectfully and responsibly before students engage in any kind of critical challenge to them.

Critical reading focuses not only on what a text says but also on how it says what it does. In teaching our students to read critically, we first teach them to analyze a text’s language and selection of detail, its genre, imagery, and form. We teach them to see how sentences and paragraphs are connected grammatically and conceptually, how writers create meaning through their selection of diction and detail, through their choices with respect to organization and development of idea. This fundamental work, however, though necessary, is not sufficient. We must teach our students something more as well.

The larger goals of critical reading include recognizing a writer’s purpose, understanding his or her idea, identifying tone, evaluating evidence and reasoning, and recognizing a writer’s perspective, position, and bias. Our teaching strategies should focus on helping students see what a writer says through how it is said. And those strategies should also include how well a writer’s evidence supports his or her claims. These considerations are fundamental for reading critically in all disciplines.

To do this analytical work well, however, students need to overcome initial resistance to a text, the impulse to contradict, counter, or otherwise challenge it. To develop into effective and productive critical readers, students need at first to remain open to what a text offers. The performance artist/actor Matthew Goulish provides one approach to this kind of textual receptiveness. In his essay “Criticism” from 39 Microlectures (2000), Goulish suggests that when we encounter any work of art, including imaginative works of all kinds (and by extension any verbal text), we should look for “moments of exhilaration.” These special moments of textual encounter may be provoked by something exciting, engaging, or striking in a text,
something that stirs our feelings, spurs our thinking, sparks our imagination. Here is how Goulish puts it:

We may then look to each work of art not for its faults and shortcomings, but for its moments of exhilaration, in an effort to bring our own imperfections into sympathetic vibration with these moments, and thus effect a creative change in ourselves. These moments will, of course, be somewhat subjective, so that if we don’t find one immediately, we will out of respect look again … In this way we will treat the work of art, in the words of South African composer Kevin Volans, not as an object in this world but as a window into another world. If we can articulate one window’s particular exhilaration, we may open a way to inspire a change in ourselves, so that we may value and work from these recognitions. (p. 45)

This way of engaging with a text requires avoiding the tendency to find something wrong with it, something to criticize. Instead, we seek something that’s right with the work, something exhilarating, anything at all that might prove useful – a vivid detail we admire, a discernible pattern that aids our understanding, an assertion that provokes our thinking, a question we begin answering for ourselves. Through these “moments of exhilaration” we establish a personal relationship with the text in ways that can lead to “a creative change in ourselves.” The kinds of “recognitions” that arise from openness to a text or work are recognitions as much about ourselves as they are about what we read.

The concept of “moments of exhilaration” can stimulate students’ engagement with a text, animating their thinking about it, opening for them metaphorical “windows into other worlds.” Students’ moments of exhilaration can provide ways into a text for them, a start toward finding something of value in it, something to extend their thinking, deepen their feeling, enrich their experience. By inviting students to identify, explain, and explore their exhilarating moments reading texts, we highlight their responsibility and validate their textual engagements.

We can and should demonstrate for our students the experience Goulish describes by sharing with them our own exhilarating moments of reading. What excites us about a text we have assigned? What have we ourselves found exhilarating about it? Why did we choose to read it in the first place? What possibilities for creative change might it offer our students when they read it in the open and attentive way Goulish suggests?
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Responsible Reading, Responsive Reading

Goulish's advocacy of receptiveness to a work's promising possibilities constitutes one aspect of what we might call "responsible reading," an attitude toward texts and works that goes beyond responding to them subjectively, one that moves, instead, toward being accountable to them, toward a standpoint that Robert Scholes, in Protocols of Reading (1990), describes as "an ethic of reading" (p. 90). Part of this reading ethic involves the responsibility to give a text and its author their due. Our students need to hear out authors and texts, letting them have their say, whether they agree with an author's views or not, whether a text's ideas are accessible or difficult, regardless of who wrote a text, when it was written, or why. We need, in short, to encourage students to respect the integrity of texts, to read them responsibly. Henry David Thoreau, perhaps, has said it best: "Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written" (Walden, 1854/1983, p. 403).

This is a foundational principle of critical reading.

In reading responsibly we assume that a text possesses meaning. We give it, from this perspective, the benefit of the doubt. Our goal as ethical readers is to understand what a text means and to accurately represent that meaning in verbal or written form. In reading responsibly we try faithfully to follow an author's line of reasoning and to understand his or her perspective even when – especially when – the author's ideas, concepts, values, and perspectives differ from our own.

Once students have learned to read responsibly by attending carefully to texts, they can begin to assume authority over their reading, exercising power by talking back to the texts they read. They can balance giving texts a fair hearing with offering a judgment and critique earned through thoughtful, reflective analytical reading. In first listening and then responding to texts, students make them their own.

To produce something both respectful of the text and responsive to it that is distinctively the reader's own, George Steiner advocates writing in response to the texts we read. In “The Uncommon Reader” (1996), he suggests that reading responsibly requires that we be "answerable to the text" (p. 6). Our answerability includes both our response to the text and our responsibility for it; it requires an "answerable reciprocity" (p. 6) such that our critical engagement with a text results in a form of commerce with it, a textual dialogue, which can be best established through annotation and marginalia. Steiner suggests that in writing annotations, readers become servants of the text. Through annotation we attempt to elucidate the text for ourselves, to understand it, comprehend it. Marginalia, on the other hand,
allow us to talk back to the text, replying to it rather than simply representing it. When readers annotate they are "servants of the text," and when they write marginalia, they are the text’s “rivals” (p. 6).

In writing marginalia, we augment the author’s text, perhaps disputing aspects of it, perhaps extending its significance through amplification, relating it to other texts we have read and other experiences we have had, finding new applications of the text as we consider its implications. The process is dynamic, collaborative, re-creative, and results in an inter-textual web of meanings – those provided by the authors we read and those we make ourselves in the process of reading them critically.

In having students write increasingly extensive marginal comments about a text, we can show them how to begin constructing texts of their own that both respect and rival those they read. We can demonstrate how marking texts in these ways can serve as points of departure for their own thinking. Teaching them to annotate effectively and to write thoughtful marginalia aids their development as critical readers and thinkers. These aspects of critical reading prove essential for our students’ learning, whatever subject we teach. Moreover, through producing annotations and marginalia students become acculturated into the community of critical readers, such that reading critically becomes for them purposeful, meaningful, and habitual.

In helping students to become both responsive and responsible readers who balance openness to a text with resistance to it, we prepare them for the rewards of academic study. In getting them to listen to texts carefully before talking back to them, we encourage their development of empathy and discernment. And in having them write annotations and marginalia as preparation for more fully developed academic essays and papers, we allow them to experience for themselves the productive relationships among critical reading, writing, and thinking. These relationships are "critical" in a number of ways. Reading critically, asking questions of texts, stimulates reflection; writing about texts prompts careful attention to reading them; thinking about texts via annotations and marginalia prompts deeper reading, thoughtful reflection, and purposeful writing.

These critical reading practices are foundational for critical thinking.

A Framework for Critical Reading

One way to help students become responsible critical readers is to teach them to apply the following critical reading framework:

- *Making observations* about a text.
- *Establishing connections* among observations.
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- Making inferences based on observations and connections.
- Drawing conclusions from the inferences.
- Considering values the text embodies and possibly endorses.

Making Observations

All interpretation begins with observation. We can't say about a text more than we can see in it. This is true whether we are observing a poem or a person, a movie or a monument, an artifact or an architectural structure, a laboratory experiment, a mathematical proof, a musical performance, a museum exhibition, a theatrical production, a social or political event, anything at all to which we may devote our attention. We learn to look at, and we learn to look for specific details, aspects, elements – of novels and of buildings, for example, of films and fashion photographs, of advertisements and popular songs, of all manner of "texts." In observing a painting, for example, we learn to notice how the artist creates line, uses volume, blends and balances color, creates perspective, employs smooth or thick brushstrokes, arranges the overall composition, to cite a few elements. In reading poems, we observe how the poem is structured, what kinds of sound patterns it uses, how sentences spill over or are contained within lines and stanzas, what its various voices convey in terms of tone and mood and implied meaning. Through learning to notice and attend – to look and listen with care – our students develop discernment; they come to understand how texts mean, not just what they mean.

There can be no discussion, no commentary, no productive interpretation of any work of any art without this bedrock noticing. The seeing and saying are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing. Careful, attentive, respectful noticing is fundamental to successful critical reading and writing. Our approach to critical reading is grounded in observation, with the active give and take between noticing and recording what we notice – writing it down. Regardless of the discipline we teach and our students' level of preparation, giving them repeated practice in making careful observations, both verbally and in writing, is an essential first step to critical understanding. They can't say more than they can see. Seeing more, they have more to think about, and ultimately more to say and write about what they think.

The scientist Samuel Scudder testifies to the power and importance of observation in recounting his study of fossils as a graduate student of Louis Agassiz, the Harvard professor of paleontology. Agassiz required him to look at plant and animal specimens for long periods of time without telling him what to look for. After staring at a single fossil specimen for a few hours, Scudder thought he was finished, only to be told by Professor Agassiz, “You
have not looked very carefully ... look again, look again!” (1874, pp. 369–370).

Only after spending days and then weeks examining that single specimen was Scudder allowed to compare it with others that Agassiz brought him. Along the way, Scudder learned how to look with scrupulous attention to detail, and how to prepare himself to see things he didn’t expect to see. There are lessons here, for sure, not the least of which is that learning to look requires persistence and perseverance. Patient, deliberate noticing gives students a chance to see more, think about what they see, and thus have something more to say about it.

Establishing Connections

Observing textual details and features, whatever the nature of our “text,” however, is not enough. To read critically, students must also make connections among the details they notice. We should encourage them to look for two kinds of connections: (1) connections among textual details; (2) connections between the writer’s text and their own lives and world. (And, of course, for non-verbal texts, connections among their basic elements, whether visual or aural, experiential or conceptual.)

For example, in reading the following couplet, which concludes Shakespeare’s Sonnet 29, we would invite students to look for connections between and among the details of its two lines:

For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

And so, they connect the “I” of the second line with the “thy” of the first. They relate the speaker’s self to his beloved, whose “sweet love” he remembers. They relate the past tense of “remembered” to the present of “scorn to change.” They contrast the literal wealth of kings with the metaphorical wealth of the speaker’s love. From these related details, which also include rhyme and iambic pentameter, students can begin to think about meaning. We might ask them to explain the relationship between the couplet’s two lines as a guide to its meaning, and to consider the couplet’s meaning in relation to the meaning of the sonnet overall.

The connections we establish among observations move us toward meaning; those connections provide the basis for preliminary thinking about implications – about what those observed details might suggest or signify. Establishing and understanding relationships between and among details, and then between and among parts of a text, is crucial for critical reading.
Considering connections between text and world authenticates the work of critical reading, making it personally meaningful and valuable. And so with Shakespeare’s couplet, students might think about how their experience of being unhappy or even depressed can change dramatically with the remembrance of someone they love, with the evocation of the beloved’s image, such that nothing can compare with the value and power of that love.

**Making Inferences**

Establishing connections among textual details prepares us to make inferences about texts. One of the most important things we can do for our students is to help them make reliable inferences. We need to encourage them to make the inferential leap from the details they notice and connect. And we need to remind them that their inferences should be grounded in and supported by the details they observe and the connections they establish – textual evidence in short. When they make inferences, students should reasonably conclude that something is the case based on evidence – on what they have observed, and on connections between and among their observations. They need to learn that their inferences, however, may be correct or incorrect, or partly correct, and that inferences are hypotheses that need to be tested.

All disciplinary study requires making sound inferences. Scientists are expert inference makers. The scientific theories they develop out of the laws they devise are based upon their observations, which they test and confirm or disconfirm. They are inference-based extrapolations into the unknown from the observed data. In *The Meaning of It All* (1998), Richard Feynman calls them good guesses that have held up as true so far. Those good-guess inferences that determine the theory could be proven inadequate; they might be shown later to be slightly or even completely wrong. But they are the best inferences that can be made at the time – and thus they constitute current scientific knowledge. The guessing and estimating, the extrapolations from observation – the inference-making leading to laws and theories – all are essential for doing science.

Historical investigation follows an analogous process, mostly using primary and secondary source documents, rather than experiments, as evidence upon which to develop conclusions through reasoning inductively about particular instances and arriving at general principles. The particular details of history – historical facts, data, and other forms of information – provide the evidence for the development of inferences and theories of historical explanation.
Both scientific experimentation and historical analysis, however, may begin, and often actually do begin, with a theory or an idea — that is, with a generalization the investigator sets out to test by finding evidence that either supports or falsifies it. In this case, the process of thought moves from a general idea or concept to specific supporting evidence. Thus, thinking, including scientific and historical thinking, typically involves interplay between inductive and deductive reasoning, moving back and forth between them repeatedly in a looping, recursive process.

Our students need to understand this reciprocal process of investigative thinking. They need to know that they themselves do this in their everyday lives, and that this thinking process is formalized and deepened through academic study. We might suggest to them, in fact, that gaining confidence and competence in making inferences is essential for critical reading and critical thinking. Inference-making is a turning point in the critical reading/thinking process, one that pivots from the basic skills of observing and connecting to the deeper skills of concluding and evaluating.

**Drawing Conclusions and Considering Values**

Thinking about the inferences we make in analyzing a text leads us toward developing a conclusion about it, an interpretation. We should help students understand, first, that an interpretation must be grounded in textual evidence — in the observations and connections they make about it and in the inferences they draw from what they have noticed and related. We also need to help them understand that the interpretive conclusions they make are tentative and provisional. Their interpretations can change. Like the theories scientists develop and the theoretical models historians employ, a textual interpretation is subject to revision. It can change based on the re-reading of a piece, on a reader’s having thought more about it, on having discussed it with others, on relating it to other texts and life experiences. Textual interpretations are always subject to modification.

So, too, are evaluations of texts. Students are inclined to evaluate. They like to offer opinions, to judge. We can capitalize on those tendencies by helping them understand what evaluation can mean for critical reading.

Evaluation consists of two different kinds of assessment: (1) a judgment about a work’s achievement, including the power and persuasiveness of its ideas; (2) a consideration of the values the work reflects and/or embodies. In the first sense of evaluation, in evaluating an idea, for example, we consider its accuracy as a description, its validity as an argument, its
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persuasiveness and interest as a proposal, its credibility as an imaginative construction. Evaluation depends on interpretation, on understanding. Our understanding of a work’s idea influences our evaluative judgment of it. That’s why understanding a text is so important and why we need to work our students hard to determine what a text means, signifies, suggests for them.

In another type of “evaluation,” we assess the social, cultural, political, religious, and other values reflected in a work; in the process, we bring our own values into play. Considering those kinds of values in a work brings students to a better understanding of their own. We need to help students understand that their social values reflect their beliefs and customs, that their cultural values are shaped by their racial, ethnic, and family heritage, and that these values are also affected by gender and language. These aspects of evaluation can help students move beyond thinking of evaluation as making a judgment about a text’s quality, whether it is “good” or “interesting” – or not – to think more deeply about how texts endorse or reflect a wide range of cultural and other values.

An additional point about values is that as our values change, the ways we evaluate particular texts, objects, processes, artworks, and the like can change as well. We may have found Hawthorne’s or Melville’s fiction, or the paintings of Picasso, unappealing when we were high school or college students only to discover their allure later in life. The history of taste represents one large-scale example of evaluative shifts. The music of Johann Sebastian Bach was not appreciated nearly as fully in his lifetime as it is today. The work of many women writers, painters, and religious and philosophical thinkers was long neglected. We need to help students understand that evaluation is dynamic rather than static, provisional rather than final.

Demonstration – E. B. White on the Moonwalk

We can demonstrate the process of responsible, reflective critical reading with a close look at E. B. White’s paragraph about the first moonwalk, written for The New Yorker in 1969. White read his sixth and final draft over the phone to the magazine’s editor. All six drafts can be found in the appendix to a biography of White by Scott Elledge (1986). We will use the critical reading framework to demonstrate how students might engage with a text, and what we could help them notice about White’s achievement in his nine-sentence paragraph. The sentences have been numbered for ease of reference.
Notes and Comment

E. B. White

[1] The moon, it turns out, is a great place for men. [2] One-sixth gravity must be a lot of fun, and when Armstrong and Aldrin went into their bouncy little dance, like two happy children, it was a moment not only of triumph but of gaiety. [3] The moon, on the other hand, is a poor place for flags. [4] Ours looked stiff and awkward, trying to float on the breeze that does not blow. [5] (There must be a lesson here somewhere.) [6] It is traditional, of course, for explorers to plant the flag, but it struck us, as we watched with awe and admiration and pride, that our two fellows were universal men, not national men, and should have been equipped accordingly. [7] Like every great river and every great sea, the moon belongs to none and belongs to all. [8] It still holds the key to madness, still controls the tides that lap on shores everywhere, still guards the lovers who kiss in every land under no banner but the sky. [9] What a pity that in our moment of triumph we did not forswear the familiar Iwo Jima scene and plant instead a device acceptable to all: a limp white handkerchief, perhaps, symbol of the common cold, which, like the moon, affects us all, unites us all.

White – Observations

We can begin by asking students what they see on the page: a single paragraph that begins with a brief sentence and ends with a much longer one. We might invite them to notice the length of White's sentences throughout the paragraph. They will find that his sentences vary quite a bit in length, that White intersperses his three very short sentences between longer ones. The varied sentence lengths avoid monotony, while aiding the paragraph's fluency. The longer sentences make room for complexity of thought.

We can ask about the function of White's opening sentences. “What do those initial sentences do?” we should ask them. The first sentence does two things: it makes an assertion; it creates surprise. Who would have thought (the surprise) that the moon (of all places) is “a great place for men”? Reading this sentence attentively, we wonder why White says what he does. We ask ourselves: “How” is the moon great for men? White's second sentence answers that question by positing two explanations: first, it is a place of “triumph”; second, it is a place of “gaiety,” with White describing the two astronauts, Armstrong and Aldrin, as “happy children” doing a “bouncy little dance.”
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These first two sentences, our students should notice, are closely linked. The second provides specification for the first; it answers the question raised by the first, and it begins to suggest how, in White's view, the moon is "a great place for men." We might additionally help students notice that White compares the bouncy way men move on the moon (due to its significantly lower gravity than earth) to a "dance," illustrating their "gaiety."

White's opening differs in emphasis from what most other commentators of the time highlighted, focusing on the astronauts' walk on the moon as "one small step for [a] man" and "one giant leap for mankind" (Armstrong’s own famous formulation). Triumphant it certainly was, though White chooses to emphasize something other than that triumph, and something more than gaiety, something, paradoxically, both humbler and more ambitious, which he develops later as the paragraph progresses.

White – Connections

Toward what connections might we direct our students' attention in analyzing White's paragraph? One thing we might lead them to see (and hear) is a shift – a change of tone as the paragraph proceeds. In sentences 3, 4, and 5, White shifts from the men's apparently happy movement – their "bouncy little dance" – to the American flag they planted on the moon's surface. The flag's stiffness, White suggests, is an indication of its awkwardness, its being out of place. The moon's atmosphere lacks the breezy force to make the flag wave in celebration of the Americans’ triumphant walk on its surface. The fifth sentence’s parenthesis injects a note of humor into its fundamental seriousness. White will develop the "lesson" he alludes to here in successive sentences.

We might direct our students' attention in these sentences to a shift from the celebratory tone of the paragraph's first two sentences to something graver that follows. We could point them to White's contrast between the active men and the static flag to detect this shift in tone. And we would hope they might take up White's invitation to consider the lesson implied by the paragraph's first five sentences – particularly as it is implied in sentences 3 and 4.

We might invite our students to look through the paragraph, noting words and details that are related and/or repeated. White repeats the word "flag," for example, in the plural "flags" and echoes it again in the word "banner." He uses the word "plant" (or a variant) twice – in planting an American flag and in planting a handkerchief on the moon.

Other connections they might notice include the references to nature – to river, sea, and sky, as well as to the moon. Considering the implications
of these connections and repetitions leads students to begin thinking about meaning, initially through the inferences they begin making about those repeated terms and the references to the natural world.

But there is yet another element to making connections, one involved with analyzing the component parts of a text. In reading critically, students attempt to understand how a text – whatever its length or its genre – breaks down into parts. Students need to identify the parts. They need to understand what each part contributes to the whole; they need to identify each part’s function or purpose. In short, they need to understand relationships – the relationship of part to part and of part to whole. The process of re-reading a text, focusing on its overall structure, solidifies and deepens students’ understanding. Without understanding a text’s structure, students can achieve no real understanding of its governing idea. Connecting the parts is essential for this understanding. On the basis of those connections, students can begin to think about implications. They are now ready to make well-grounded inferences.

White – Inferences

How might we help our students make inferences as they analyze White’s paragraph? What inferences might be made from their observations and connections? What initial thoughts might they infer from them?

Making inferences leads us back to the text – for yet another look at (and listen to) its language and structure. Making inferences forces readers into scrupulous textual observation; it prompts them to make yet another pass at the text to reconsider it, ideally, perhaps, reading it aloud to hear what it suggests, to ascertain what its rhythms contribute to its meaning.

We might encourage our students to look carefully at (and listen carefully to) White’s language as he builds out sentence 6, which is longer and more complex than the five sentences that precede it. We would ask students what work this sentence does, and why White might have made it as long as he did. We would help them see the contrast White develops there between admiration and national pride for the astronauts’ achievement, on one hand, and a more expansive sense of awe for their accomplishment, something beyond patriotic fervor, on the other. We could encourage them to see the moon landing as more than an American triumph. The moon, as White notes, “belongs to all,” while, paradoxically, belonging to no one.

Our critical reading goal is to help students develop the inferential habit, a habit of speculating about implications and possibilities, less to determine fully, finally, and definitively what they think than to provoke their thinking. Making inferences leads them to ideas.
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White – Conclusions and Values

What conclusions might our students make about White’s paragraph? Foremost, we would want them to understand (from sentence 7) that it’s not just the moon that provokes this paradoxical idea, but nature more generally: “every great river and every great sea.” This universalizing concept is further developed and illustrated in sentence 8, which relies on familiar associations of the moon with madness and love, while recognizing as well the moon’s physical influence on the watery tides “everywhere.” We should help students see how White brings back the image of the flag in an implied comparison with the sky, the “banner” under which lovers kiss “in every land.” We are given, thus, another kind of banner, a universal banner of blue, to contrast with the national banner of the stars and stripes.

White’s final sentence is a tour de force in its range of reference, its re-collection of images and ideas that come before, and in its stunning control of phrase and rhythm. Those images and that rhythm collect and connect earlier descriptive details, enforcing and solidifying White’s notion that in emphasizing the moon landing as a human triumph, we miss a chance to see its larger human implications, that it remains an exciting yet imperfect achievement for humankind. In emphasizing its national American accomplishment, we miss an opportunity to see its universal human significance.

White’s paragraph about the moon landing acknowledges the amazing accomplishment it was. White sees the moon landing as a tribute to human ingenuity as well as to American triumphalism. And yet for all the feat’s triumphant success, White adduces other considerations beyond the values associated with either a national or a broader human achievement. He invites his readers, instead, to consider another way of thinking about the meaning of the moon landing.

He conveys these larger ideas with two related details at the end of his paragraph: his reference to the “familiar Iwo Jima scene” and his suggestion to replace the American flag with a white handkerchief, symbol of “the common cold.” White refers to the iconic picture of American soldiers hoisting the flag after defeating the Japanese in World War II on the strategic Pacific island of Iwo Jima. He connects the moon landing to the important American victory only to suggest that there are other values at stake in the moon landing, and that there are other ways to think about the significance of what was achieved that day in 1969, different symbols by which that achievement might be represented, remembered, and revered.

An additional aspect of critical reading is thinking about the author’s idea and evidence – whether or not we accept what is said and why, whether we agree or disagree, and why. In reading a text critically, we consider whether
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to accept, reject, or qualify what the writer says – and what form that qualification might take. The following exercise invites students to engage in this process of critical evaluation: to consider the extent to which they find White’s argument persuasive and the extent to which it stimulates them to think about the larger issues he raises about nationalism and universalism.

Exercise: Further Considerations of White’s Moonwalk Paragraph

1. Consider the historical context of the paragraph, first in relation to White’s reference to Iwo Jima, and then in relation to the time in which it was written. How was White’s little piece received at the time? How did it compare with the many other pieces written about the moon landing, in newspapers and magazines and books? What larger cultural and political implications does White’s moon landing paragraph have for thinking about nationalism and internationalism? How have the issues of nationalism and internationalism played out historically since 1969?

2. Why do you think White included the sentence in parentheses: “(There must be a lesson here somewhere.)”? How would you characterize the tone of this sentence? How effective is this sentence? What “lesson(s)” do you draw from White’s paragraph? To what extent do you agree with the lesson(s) the paragraph presents? Why?

3. In her book *Leaving Orbit*, Margaret Lazarus Dean notes that when they landed on the moon, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin not only planted an American flag, but also left a plaque with these words: “Here men from the planet Earth first set foot upon the moon July 1969, A.D. We came in peace for all mankind.” How does this information affect your interpretation of and response to White’s moon landing paragraph?

4. What title might you provide for White’s piece? Explain why you gave it that title.

Application – Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address

We can apply our critical reading approach and framework – observation, connection, inference, conclusion, and values – to Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. The paragraphs are numbered for ease of reference.

The Gettysburg Address

[1] Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.
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[2] Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives, that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

[3] But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate – we can not hallow – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

[4] It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have, thus far, so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

A Bit of Context

A few basic facts. First, Lincoln's speech was delivered in approximately two minutes. Second, there are five versions of the speech extant in various US libraries, including the Library of Congress, which owns two of these versions. The variant copies include minor differences in wording and punctuation. Some versions use dashes in places that others use commas. Some add a word here and there – for example in the last sentence where the version reprinted here has “that government of the people,” one of the other variant versions adds the word “this”: “that this government of the people.” And third, a number of books have been written about this speech – its writing, delivery, rhetoric, and reception.

A Suite of Exercises

The following set of exercises employs the framework we applied to E. B. White's moonwalk paragraph. The exercises that highlight observations and connections invite a close look at Lincoln's language, especially his diction and syntax. The exercises on inferences and conclusions raise questions
about his religious and historical allusions and also about his omissions.
The exercises on conclusions and values include further variants on these
topics, while inviting consideration of the rhetorical appeals of Lincoln's
speech and the moral and cultural values it espouses. Using the framework
of observations, connections, inferences, conclusions, and values, students
can work productively through the Gettysburg Address. We can begin by
asking students what they notice in Lincoln's language, especially his syntax
and diction.

**Exercise – Observations**

1. What effect results from the varied lengths of Lincoln's sentences? Why
   might it be important for him to keep some sentences short – given the
   occasion of his speech and the fact that it is a speech?
2. Read the speech aloud, one paragraph at a time, slowly. What is notice-
   able about Lincoln's diction, or choice of words? At what level of formal-
   ity does he pitch his language? Why?
3. What pronouns are emphasized? Who are the “we” and “us” that Lincoln
   refers to?
4. What historical references does Lincoln include and why do you think
   he includes them?
5. What does Lincoln avoid mentioning in his speech? What does he leave
   out, and why, given the historical context of the speech, the place where
   Lincoln delivered it, and what happened there? Consider the larger his-
   torical context and implications of what could have been included but
   wasn't.

**Exercise – Connections**

1. What patterns of repetition (and variation) does Lincoln employ? What
   effects do those repetitions of word, phrase, and clause create? More
   specifically, which particular words are repeated – and with what effects?
   Which single word (in various forms) occurs most frequently in the
   speech? Why is that word so important to Lincoln?
2. What negative words are included in the speech? What is their function,
   their purpose? What point does Lincoln make by means of negation?
3. Consider the importance of the words “conceived,” “consecrate,” and
   “devotion.” What was conceived? What is being consecrated? What kind
   of devotion is Lincoln advocating? With what concepts – what ideas –
   does Lincoln link these three terms?
4. How do the connections made between these words and the concepts
   Lincoln evokes convey the spirit and the values Lincoln celebrates in the
   speech?
5 What other kinds of connections can you see and make among the details and/or the language of the speech?

Exercise – Inferences
1 What inferences might be made from the observations and connections we have made?
2 Why might Lincoln have kept the speech exceedingly brief?
3 Why might he have invoked the founding fathers and Declaration of Independence?
4 Why might he have chosen to avoid mentioning contentious political issues?

Exercise – Conclusions and Values
1 How does reading the speech aloud help you notice things not readily apparent when it is read silently? How does what you notice through listening to yourself or someone else read it aloud nudge your thinking about its purpose and its meaning?
2 What ideas begin to form as you make inferences about the speech?
3 What is the value of contrast and analogy for Lincoln in the speech? Why do you think Lincoln valued an ability to use language effectively?
4 What political, cultural, and religious values does the speech reflect? Why might the “dedicate” with religious language such as “consecrate” and “hallow” emphasizes reconciliation and a high moral purpose. It’s important, as well, for them to discover the references to the Declaration of Independence that serve Lincoln’s rhetorical and historical purpose to preserve the union and its form of government.
5 What kinds of appeals does Lincoln make to his audience? What ultimate value drives Lincoln’s rhetorical purpose?

These guided questions use the critical reading framework to direct students’ attention to the formal diction and balanced syntax of Lincoln’s speech and to repetitions of phrase and clause, which, taken together, create its majestic tone. Students can work in pairs or small groups, perhaps after doing some preliminary independent work on the exercises. They can share their observations and their questions, their inferences and provisional conclusions about the purpose, concepts, and effects of Lincoln’s speech.

It’s important for them to notice that Lincoln omits references to northerners and southerners, to victories and defeats, to slavery and states’ rights. It’s also important for them to see how often the word “dedicate” is used, and why. They need to see how the association of “dedicate” with religious language such as “consecrate” and “hallow” emphasizes reconciliation and a high moral purpose. It’s important, as well, for them to discover the references to the Declaration of Independence that serve Lincoln’s rhetorical and historical purpose to preserve the union and its form of government.

Our role is to guide students’ critical reading – their understanding and interpretation, as well as their reflection about the significance and the
implications of the speech – without directly telling them what we think it means, says, suggests, or implies rhetorically and historically. Our goal is to help students develop the requisite skills to do their own critical reading, to arrive at their own interpretive conclusions, and to consider the values enlisted, embodied, and enshrined in the text in relation to their own personal values.

We need to help students become independent readers, getting beyond their need for us. We serve as conduits for them, as guides, as ladders to be pushed away once students have developed the critical reading skills and associated habits of mind we demonstrate and embody for them with our own reading and in our teaching.

Reflective Reading – Reading and Living

In his essay “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson writes: “There is then creative reading as well as creative writing” (as cited in Richardson, 2009, p. 7). For Emerson, reading is active and purposeful; it bears fruit in original thinking and writing. “First we read,” he notes, “then we write” (p. 7). The sequence is natural, even inevitable. Out of our reading we generate ideas and develop our thinking. We reflect and make meaning.

In reading reflectively and imaginatively, readers do their own thinking, which they develop in writing. In doing that work faithfully and deliberately, readers demonstrate an ethic of reading that requires being both responsive and responsible to the text. Good critical readers balance how they respect texts and how they rival them, how they listen carefully to what texts say and how they challenge those texts. As George Steiner notes, “[T]he relation of the true reader to the book is creative. The book has need of him as he has need of it,” as the reader brings the text to life in “dynamic reciprocity,” with every act of genuine reading “collaborative with the text” (1996, p. 17).

In “History,” Emerson urges the student to “read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary” (Richardson, 2009, p. 7). Reflecting on our reading leads us to connect it with our everyday lives. Emerson’s ideas strengthen the reader’s authority and weaken the authority of the text. Alberto Manguel, in A Reader on Reading (2010), describes this process in terms of “a commitment that is both political and private,” one that can result in making us “better and wiser,” because reading involves a quest for truth (p. 10). Manguel sees the ideal reader as “an inventor, who subverts the text,” and as one “who does not take the writer’s word for granted” (p. 152). The ideal reader exercises power over what he or she reads.
As Peter Mendelsund (2014) suggests, the act of reading “feels like, and is like, consciousness itself: imperfect; partial; hazy; co-creative” (p. 403). It’s the “co-creative” aspect that links reading with the act of perception, which is always subjective, selective, and interpretive. Our unique response reflects our particular form of textual engagement, a response from which we make something new and personal, each book we read becoming part of our intellectual life.

Reading critically and creatively in these ways, we acknowledge how books influence our lives. The reciprocity between reading and thinking, along with the dynamic interchange between responsible and responsive reading, suggests the relationship between reading and living. We need to help our students experience how critical reading enriches and guides their lives, and, conversely, how reflecting on their lives enables and enhances their reading. We need to help them experience the impact critical reading can have on their thinking in relation to their living. They need to feel as well as understand the exhilaration of critical reading for their lives overall.

Reading and living animate and invigorate one another in reciprocal interplay. The books we read speak to one another and affect each other, combining in various ways in our minds and hearts. They form an intertextual web that includes not only their relationships among themselves, but also their relationships with us, who engage in life-long conversations with them. We need to help students see how reading is related to their lives outside books, how their reading lives are entangled with their other lives. Thoreau suggests as much when he writes, “What I began by reading, I must finish by acting” (Journal, February 19, 1841).

Critical reading, like critical thinking with which it is inextricably intertwined, leads to additional questions, to further investigation, deeper exploration. Every text, as Kafka noted and demonstrated, remains unfinished. A poem, said Valéry, is never finished, only abandoned. If writers abandon texts, leaving them unfinished, then readers have room to enter them. Readers continue reading the texts that writers relinquish. And yet the reader’s work, too, is never finished. We leave off reading rather than definitively conclude it. The texts we read critically become part of our consciousness, part of who we are. We become what we critically read, and as we continue to evolve as individuals, so too do the books that have become part of us. We never finish with them, nor they with us. This is one of the wondrous pleasures and the unending challenges of critical reading.

These notions highlight both the need for and the demands of critical reading. They suggest that to do it well requires, in Thoreau’s words, “noble exercise … that will tax the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes
underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object” (*Walden*, 1854/1983, p. 403). Laying the foundation for that kind of critical reading for our students begins with us. When we are successful in helping them grow as critical readers, our students develop the skills and habits of mind that enable them to become responsible, reflective readers, critical thinkers, and life-long learners. What more can we teachers do for our students than this?

**References**


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