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Interrogating Texts: From Deferent to Efferent and Aesthetic Reading Practices

Cheryl Hogue Smith

ABSTRACT: This article offers a revised version of transactional reading theory to explain how students classified as basic writers tend to employ counterproductive reading and thinking processes that inhibit them from full participation in academic life. Louise Rosenblatt proposes that readers have two main positions or purposes in reading—the efferent stance, where readers focus on the information in a text, and the aesthetic stance, where readers focus on the experience they have with a text. This article describes a third, deferent stance of reading that many basic writers adopt when they defer their interpretations of texts to other readers or defer to the counter-productive emotions they experience during the process of reading difficult texts. Building on this theoretical frame, the article describes an instructional strategy employing a series of prompts that invite students to examine their own thinking as they read difficult texts and to focus more on what they don't understand than on what they do. The article concludes with reconstructions of classroom scenarios and a body of textual evidence showing how a carefully sequenced and controlled procedure for having basic writing students interrogate texts and themselves as readers can lead those students to become more engaged, authentic, and productive readers, writers, and participants in the academic community of a college classroom.

KEYWORDS: basic writing; reading/writing connection; transactional theory of reading; pedagogy

A 1999 study by Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris describes an experiment where participants watching a video of six people passing a basketball were told to focus on one aspect of the video, for instance how many times the ball was passed among the three players wearing white shirts or the three players wearing black shirts. After watching the video, participants were asked if they saw anything unusual in the video, and only about 50% said they saw the person dressed in a gorilla suit who actually passed through the scene in the middle of the game. Simons and Chabris attribute the phenomenon of missing something that should be obvious to what they call “inattention blindness” (1060). This phenomenon refers to cases

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when we are so focused on a task at hand—in the experiment, counting the number of passes—that we miss something like a gorilla on the basketball court. As they explain, “observers are unlikely to notice” when something unusual is placed before them if their “attention is otherwise engaged” (1071).

This study makes me think of the way my students regularly read: Believing that most (if not all) reading tasks require “correct” responses, they are so intent on mining texts for “right” answers that they often miss the gorillas that might flash before them. This is not to say that reading for right or correct answers is always a barrier to learning or that seeing “gorillas” is always a path towards illumination. But just as the five-paragraph essay has its place in composition classes, where students can learn the structure of a deductively-reasoned paper before they learn to move beyond the limitations of that structure, so too must students move beyond reading-for-answers when they encounter complex and nuanced texts in composition classes. We want students to make intertextual connections, find subtleties in texts, listen and react to metacognitive whispers, engage emotionally with a text, read with multiple purposes, understand multiple interpretations, find gaps, and so on. In other words, we want students to read with a confidence that allows them to expand, rather than limit, their attention so they can be more sophisticated thinkers about texts.

I teach basic writing at a community college in Brooklyn, New York, where the students are as diverse a population as can be imagined in any urban setting. But one thing that seems to be common to most of my students is their struggle with interpreting texts that are typically assigned in college classes. For years, scholars have argued that many of the academic problems basic writers face are in large part due to the difficulty they have in reading and interpreting texts. As early as 1976, Marilyn Sternglass was urging composition instructors to more actively become reading instructors in order to help their students succeed in college writing (382). In 2003, Sugie Goen and Helen Gillotte-Tropp concluded that the poor performance of a substantial number of students on the reading section of a placement test “accounts for their placement in basic *writing* classes, suggesting that students’ difficulty constructing meaning *from* texts may be a significant source of their difficulty constructing meaning *in* texts” (91, author’s emphasis). Patrick Sullivan sums up the case in his insistence that if students are ever to be successful in college-level writing, they must first become successful in college-level reading (233). Behind all these arguments is the recognition that college students’ ability to write is limited by their ability to read.

To that conception of the reading problem of basic writers, I would add the logically necessary corollary that the reading problem struggling students experience isn’t confined merely to their analysis of assigned academic texts, but also to the texts of their own making. That is to say, the performance of writers necessarily depends heavily on their capacity to read their own emerging texts with sufficient interpretive insight to see where meaning remains undiscovered or inadequately articulated. Hence, as I have asserted elsewhere, “students can never outwrite their reading ability” (670). If we are ever going to create college-level writers, we must begin by creating college-level readers—both of others’ texts and of their own. And to do that, we must help our basic writing students read as negotiators engaged in the construction of textual meaning, not miners of existing meanings, which is to say that we must help them overcome the “inattentional blindness” that consumes their thoughts when they read. We must teach them, in other words, to see the gorillas represented by their own responses, fleeting thoughts, emerging ideas, questions, and intuitions, and that means liberating their unproductively preoccupied attention.

Basic Writers as Basic Readers

Before I elaborate on what I am calling the “inattentional blindness” of basic writers, let me describe what typically defines their reading habits. In “Becoming a Strategic Reader,” Scott Paris, Marjorie Lipson, and Karen Wixson argue that few basic writers know how to effectively “skim, scan, reread, integrate information, plan ahead, take notes, make inferences, and so forth” (795). Of these skills, Sheridan Blau emphasizes the particular importance of rereading: “One of the most powerful strategies available to us for reading difficult texts is the obvious strategy of rereading, which, it happens, is neither obvious nor frequently employed by many readers and is especially underemployed by those who think of themselves as (and generally appear to be) not very strong, or minimally competent, or unmotivated, or reluctant readers” (44). While all the strategies that Paris, Lipson, and Wixson catalog are important when readers interpret and analyze texts, the strategy of rereading is, as Blau describes, key for students to successfully interpret the texts we often assign. Many students come to our classes not understanding the writing process and the necessity for revision, and most do not realize that reading also requires revision through an act of slow and deliberate rereading. Moreover, for most basic writers the strategy of rereading carries with it a stigma that connotes deficiency or incompetence because

many associate “rereading” only with the struggles of those who can’t read. My own students often see rereading much like they do a visit to any writing center: If they go to a tutor, *clearly* there is something “wrong” with them or their writing. Ironically, for basic writers, the very things that can help all students succeed are typically seen as forms of punishment and evidence of failure. Thus, the need for rereading seems to trigger in basic writers all the feelings of inferiority and imminent failure that scholars like Shaughnessy and Rose brought to our attention so many years ago.

To counter basic writing students’ reluctance to reread, we might first begin by helping them understand that even the most competent readers of college-level texts need to negotiate and construct meaning, which entails a significant amount of rereading. Linda Flower, in *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning*, speaks of how reading and writing are meaning-making processes, where readers are certain to find in texts “alternative goals, constraints, and possibilities” with which they must negotiate (2). Similarly, in her transactional theory of reading, Louise Rosenblatt argues, “Every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context. Instead of two fixed entities acting on one another, the reader and the text are two aspects of a total dynamic situation” (“Transactional” 1063). Or as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, a “text is not a thing” in itself; rather, it is always under construction (107). All these accounts of how readers negotiate meaning imply an engaged, active, meaning-making reader who reads slowly and recursively.

One could argue, however, that basic writers are, in fact, active readers, with their activity focused on mining texts for “right” answers. Stephen Norris and Linda Phillips pointed out long ago that struggling students often search for the predetermined and fixed meanings that they believe we, as teachers, are looking for (408-409)—a search that Carol Dixon and Denise Nessel describe “as a meaning-finding process” (5). While this meaning-finding process does subvert the rhetorical and interpretive skills students need to engage thoughtfully with texts, it also shows that students have the capacity to read with a focused attention—a skill that, if honed in more productive ways, can transfer students’ focus from a scavenger hunt within a text to their transaction with that text. And in so doing, they will develop reading habits that will help them engage with texts more meaningfully.

A similar but related counterproductive reading habit that students sometimes exhibit is jumping on the bandwagon in support of the interpretation they think is the most valued by the class leaders and/or instructor.

Students who defer to other’s interpretations often write papers that parrot class discussions rather than reflect their own understanding of a text. As Blau describes this phenomenon, students “behave like consumers of literary interpretations rather than the producers of them” (20). So if we can show students that actively reading (and rereading) texts can help them to better negotiate meaning, we can lead students to see that they needn’t buy someone else’s interpretation of texts because they themselves already have the capacity to be “producers of them.” But until these students understand the power they hold with texts, they are in danger of holding on to the belief that texts have a predetermined meaning that they are obliged to extract, one that successful students know how to find. Hence, our students read with the purpose of discovering what they think of as the correct information and/or deferring to those who seem to have found it.

Reading with Purpose

As one of the seminal theorists about the importance of purpose in reading, Rosenblatt classifies the full range of possible reading purposes into two stances that she designates the “efferent” and the “aesthetic.” She asserts that readers always adopt a stance while they are reading, which influences their transactions with texts during the reading process. She explains that efferent and aesthetic stances “reflect the two main ways of looking at the world” in that the efferent stance deals more with “the cognitive, the referential, the factual, the analytic, the logical, the quantitative aspects of meaning,” while the aesthetic stance deals more with “the sensuous, the affective, the emotive, the qualitative” (“Transactional” 1068). Rosenblatt is clear that texts themselves are neither efferent nor aesthetic; instead, our purpose for reading texts determines which stance we assume. She explains that the efferent stance entails “a process of more stringent narrowing of the focus of attention,” while the aesthetic stance demands more of “an opening of the shutter, so to speak, to admit a broader field of awareness” (“On the Aesthetic” 23). According to Rosenblatt, when we read texts in order to extract information—like facts in a biology text or directions in a product’s user manual—or to pay attention to the structural form or the logic of an argument, we are purposefully narrowing our focus to find specific information. On the other hand, when we are reading aesthetically, we allow our minds to open and experience our transaction with the text both cognitively and affectively. She adds that we choose a stance based upon how we think the texts need to be read.

Rosenblatt's discussion about stances presupposes a fairly sophisticated level of metacognitive awareness on the part of readers, an awareness of their own purposes. And this kind of awareness, Richard Vacca argues, typifies the practice of successful readers who are strategic in their reading process, actively monitoring their thinking as they read (8). Rosenblatt explains that as we read, we move back and forth between the two stances, depending on the signals our metacognitive monitors emit. For example, as readers of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays, we can be fully engaged in the emotional drama of the play while acquiring historical information about the reign of Henry V. In the end, Rosenblatt believes that readings can fall anywhere on the continuum between the two polar stances and argues that most readings probably fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum ("Transactional" 1068).

In addition to Rosenblatt's two stances, I want to argue that there is, in fact, a kind of *tertium quid*—a pseudo-literate third stance that I'll call the "deferent stance." The deferent stance is like the efferent stance in that it is more of a "stringent narrowing of the focus of attention" (Rosenblatt "On the Aesthetic" 23) wherein students concentrate merely on finding "correct" answers, including answers that sometimes aren't there for them to find. In so doing, they create for themselves an "inattentive blindness" (Simons and Chabris) that prevents them from encountering a text with anything resembling free attention that would otherwise allow them to fully engage with that text. So instead of discovering how intertextual relationships, subtleties, and multiple interpretations affect the possible meaning and therefore interpretation of a text, they limit their engagement through their narrowly defined purpose. Also, for many struggling readers, the deferent stance includes the "affective" or "emotive" aesthetic—or more accurately anesthetic—aspect of reading in that reading becomes an emotionally-numbing prospect for readers who anticipate a negative outcome and often quit at the first sign of difficulty (Vacca and Padak).

Some basic writers who are deferent readers often give up on demanding texts because they believe the texts are too hard for them; they assume that when they have difficulty understanding challenging texts, their struggle to understand must be attributable to a deficiency in their reading ability, not in the fact that some texts are just difficult and require patience, sustained focus, and persistence to understand (Blau). Blau makes the case that only challenging texts are worth reading because they teach us difficult concepts that we don't already know, but we have to be willing to face the confusion and insecurity of not knowing (24). Successful readers know how

to metacognitively face the confusion and insecurity of reading complex texts without internalizing the sometimes destructive feelings that accompany the process of working through the confusion. Basic writers, however, often struggle with confusing texts because they do internalize and defer to the negative feelings, turning an intellectual endeavor into an emotionally defeating one. To this end, I would argue that instead of embracing confusion (Blau), basic writers embrace their emotions, essentially severing their link to the metacognitive monitors that could otherwise help them identify problems within the text and then figure out how to address those problems.

If students are ever to write successfully in the academy, they must metacognitively read difficult and complex texts that will initially and inevitably require them to experience and endure confusion, at least for a while. In many ways, metacognitive reading is an exercise that allows for gorilla sightings, as long as readers are willing to listen to the cues. But as long as struggling readers think confusion represents some insufficiency in them rather than difficulties located in the text (Blau), they will either retreat entirely from the challenges posed by difficult texts or continue to read as supplicants or lost travelers hoping to stumble upon the "correct" answer that they would never be able to find otherwise.

Interrogating Texts

One way that I have had success in helping students shed their deferent approach to reading is by teaching them how to interrogate a text, which is to say, how to understand a text by focusing on questions instead of answers. While I am grateful to Robert Probst, whose "Dialogue with a Text" gave me the basic format for the exercise I am about to describe, I am deeply indebted to the workshop practices of Sheridan Blau, who profoundly affected the way I now teach reading in my basic writing classes, even though his discussions—like Rosenblatt's—revolve around the teaching of difficult literary texts, which we may not immediately associate with basic writing classrooms. The "Interrogating Texts" exercise I use in my classes (see Appendix A) combines the tactics of both Probst and Blau by using open-ended template questions that students can apply to any text as they reread and reflect upon the more difficult aspects of that text. The key here is that students are instructed to investigate not what they *do* understand, but to focus on what they *don't*, which is a fundamental shift in the thinking of students who think that their only job as readers is to know right answers.

For the exercise, students are placed into small groups where they individually write their responses to open-ended questions about their experience of the text they are reading. In order for “Interrogating Texts” to work, students must follow the directions, which are listed on the exercise handout and which I also give orally, and I monitor their groups to make sure they are following them. These are the oral instructions I provide:

- (1) Read the first direction/question.
- (2) Answer the question or respond to the direction; you must write your responses. Remember that any questions you have of the text constitutes an acceptable and valuable response.
- (3) Wait patiently for your group members to write their responses. Do not move ahead to other questions; your discussions with your group members may influence subsequent responses.
- (4) Read aloud your responses; you cannot say what you intended to write, but must read what you actually wrote.
- (5) Discuss your responses only after everyone has read their writing; do not discuss any of the responses in between each group member’s reading.
- (6) After everyone has read, discuss all you want.
- (7) After your discussions for each question, write down anything you just learned from your group that you hadn’t thought of before you discussed it.
- (8) Move to the next question/direction.

These directions force students to first write, then read, and finally discuss their responses. In other words, they cannot hide what they actually *think* about a text because they are not allowed to discuss the reading until the entire group has *read* their responses. Inevitably, students have different responses, and students learn very early on to respect the various answers and recognize the validity of the varying perspectives. By not being able to defer to or parrot someone else’s response, they learn to trust their own ideas; for some, this is the first time they have realized that their thinking has merit.

I first use “Interrogating Texts” with a reading that isn’t too difficult; this way, I don’t make the exercise any more anxiety inducing than it already is, given that students must read their writing aloud. But I also use a less-demanding text to help students become accustomed to the way the “Interrogating Texts” process works. Before I introduce this assignment to my class, I spend a couple of weeks on what it means to read closely (with

a dictionary in hand), so my students have learned to deal with difficult vocabulary when reading texts. The students are required to read the texts that I assign *prior* to class, giving them as much time as they need to read. Therefore, when they begin “Interrogating Texts” in my class, their “first” read is actually their second (or, dare I hope, their third or fourth).

The first instruction requires students to summarize and paraphrase, which is fundamental for all students to master since they will usually need to summarize and paraphrase any text they write about. These are often difficult skills for basic writers to master and when they first do “Interrogating Texts,” their summaries for the first question are sometimes quite short. Still, I’ve never encountered a student who was unable to write at least a sentence about what he has read, which is all students need to participate. Students in groups almost always choose to highlight different aspects of the texts they are summarizing and paraphrasing, so when students discuss these differences in their groups (after they’ve all *read* their responses), they begin to discover that multiple interpretations are not only possible, but also likely and probably advantageous. And it’s this discovery that is the first step towards shedding their belief that they need to find the one, fixed interpretation that their instructor is looking for. Early last semester, the participants of one group all simultaneously jerked their heads up toward me with a look that suggested they had done or said something wrong; I went over to their group to see what happened. One student hesitantly asked, “What if we all said this reading is about something different?” I replied, “Great! Talk about what you found!” They looked perplexed but proceeded to talk and ultimately saw the validity of multiple interpretations as a path to increased understanding of a text that, initially, is confusing.

This scenario happens often: Students discover that through their discussions, they—together as a group—come to a better understanding of a text’s difficulties, which have suddenly become interesting. Incidentally, they also learn that it’s impossible to fully summarize or paraphrase a text they don’t yet understand and that *it’s okay and even productive to be confused about the text* as they discuss their paraphrases and identify their confusions. When they see that their group members are also confused or that they have different responses, students begin to realize that reading isn’t about finding the “right” answer and that they need not defer to others’ interpretations.

The second “Interrogating Texts” direction asks students to reread the text and then to underline the one sentence they felt was “most important to the meaning of the entire piece.” To do this, students must be able to reflect upon their own individual experience of the text well enough to explain *why*

they chose that one sentence. The discussion that already took place after the first summary directive sets them up to answer this question, because they have already debated their different constructions of what the text is about. So the discussion after the first question, combined with yet another reading of the text, are ample preparation to help students make the leap from summary to analysis. After all, underlining the one sentence that they feel is the most important to the meaning of the entire piece and then explaining *why* they chose that one sentence is an act of analysis. Sometimes students underline different sentences, and sometimes they underline the same ones; it really doesn't make a difference for this exercise because the analysis of *why* they chose the sentence reveals their individual interpretive and reflective thinking, and it's in that discussion of *why* that students continue to learn from each other while simultaneously beginning to believe in their ability to transact and negotiate with texts.

The third and fourth questions are designed to show students the value of rereading (again) and, as Blau often says in workshops, to “embrace confusion” by focusing on the questions they still have about the text. The discussions students have about what they still don't understand tend to be some of the most productive because those discussions so dramatically demonstrate to students how interpretation isn't about finding already known answers and how their own questions about meaning are almost always the most useful and reliable avenue to a deeper reading of texts.

Thus, “Interrogating Texts” works for several reasons. First, students are constantly rereading and in that process revising their interpretations every time they read the text, thereby learning the power of rereading as a strategy for dealing with difficult texts and as a productive alternative to the temptation to give up when faced with especially challenging reading tasks (Blau 44). Second, by reading their responses before any discussion begins, students discover the value of their own interpretations to the thinking of other readers as well as the value of alternative interpretations to their own thinking. These discussions help students learn that having ideas and putting them out for the world to see isn't as scary as they think and can even be productive, especially when people may disagree with their responses. Third, by shifting the focus to what confuses them, instead of focusing on a single answer that they think they're supposed to find, students place their attention on their own experience of the text rather than on a right answer. Last, they learn that they are capable readers and that they can support their interpretations of texts with evidence from those texts (as the exercise asks them to do), especially in negotiations with readers who disagree with them.

Interrogating Texts in Practice

The most memorable experience I've had using “Interrogating Texts” was in a basic writing class when students were reading Jo Goodwin Parker's “What is Poverty?”—an essay by a woman who lives in squalor with her children and who vividly describes her life of poverty. When students first read this essay, they didn't know that I was going to pair it with a chapter in Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, which details the author's social experiment of working in minimum wage jobs. As students would eventually learn, the writing assignment would ask students to *become* Goodwin Parker in order to evaluate Ehrenreich's view of living in poverty:

Pretend that you are Jo Goodwin Parker and that you have just read Ehrenreich's “Serving in Florida.” Then, in a well-developed essay, explain your reaction to Ehrenreich's chapter, describing whether or not you think she effectively explained in “Serving in Florida” what it is like to work a minimum-wage job and live the life of a relatively poor person. In other words, you are going to compare your life as Goodwin Parker to the life Ehrenreich describes in her narrative to show whether Ehrenreich understood what it was like to live an impoverished life.

To prepare students for this paper, I assigned Goodwin Parker before Ehrenreich, and I gave them “Interrogating Texts” to use with Goodwin Parker's text. As I always do when students are working on this exercise, I moved through the class and eavesdropped on their discussions. At first the students' responses were not unusual. From the very first question, the students started to realize that Goodwin Parker's text could be interpreted in multiple ways. In one group of three young women, the first focused on Goodwin Parker's sad circumstances, another criticized the government, and the third was critical of Goodwin Parker's choices. The three dissimilar summaries elicited intriguing and lengthy discussions. The students also started listing the questions they had: “Where is she?” “How young is she?” “Why did she not give her kids up for adoption?” and “How can I help?”—all of which are important questions to ask about the text.

For the second “Interrogating Texts” step, this same group chose three different sentences to discuss: “Poverty is an acid that drips on pride until all pride is worn away” (33), “I knew my husband was leaving the day he left, but there were no good-bys between us” (32), and “The poor are always silent”

(34). Each student was able to discuss *why* she thought this sentence was the most important in relation to the entire text, and again the conversations were enlightening to the members of the group because each student placed the “blame” for Goodwin Parker’s circumstances on different people or forces in her life.

It was during the third question that something unusual happened in class. Chip,¹ from a different group, stood up and started lifting his desk a few inches off the floor and loudly banging it on the ground. He was so excited about the debate between Andrew and Tia that he couldn’t contain his emotions. Even though Chip’s group was only on the second question, the group I was watching stopped their discussions about the third question and became participants in what turned into an animated class debate. Chip, Andrew, and Tia became discussion leaders, of sorts, as they (mostly) respectfully challenged each other’s thinking. Andrew believed that the impoverished mother in the text had a responsibility to give her kids away, while Tia accused the husband of desertion and said the mother should keep her kids as long as she could. It became a debate about male-female responsibility in society as a whole. I watched as the two sides used evidence from Goodwin Parker’s text, other texts, and their own lives to address this problem that Goodwin Parker only minimally touches upon. Here they were, making intertextual connections, finding subtleties, reading (and discussing) metacognitively, understanding multiple perspectives, and finding gaps in the text; in essence, they were seeing some gorillas. I sat back and watched as the entire class became immersed in a discussion I could not have orchestrated if I had tried.

It occurs to me now that what I witnessed was an act of basic writers *emotionally engaging with* and *experiencing* a text. I had often seen how “Interrogating Texts” helped move students away from the deferent stance of reading in that they stopped looking for predetermined meanings in texts (the skewed efferent stance), but I could never really gauge how it helped move students away from the negative emotions they often associate with learning (the anesthetic stance), other than seeing that they were in no distress as they discussed the texts. But in that class session on “What is Poverty?”—with Chip banging his desk and emotions flying through the room—I could see that the discussions surrounding this essay helped these students experience what engaged, active learning *feels* like. They were combining this text with their lived experiences, which connected them to the text in such a way that they could not hide their enthusiasm or their

enjoyment of the academic debate. These students showed no signs of deference; in fact, they showed an emotional and intellectual engagement with the text. Before my eyes, these students were *experiencing* Rosenblatt’s efferent and aesthetic stances, moving to and fro on the continuum as they shared their thoughts and feelings about the text.

After about fifteen minutes of heated debate, the arguments died down and the groups went back to their discussions. The group I was watching moved on to question four. Below are samples of Monica’s, Yvette’s, and Melinda’s answers to the fourth set of prompts: “What questions does this essay leave you with? What do you wish you had more information about? What do you still not quite understand in the text?”²

- Monica: I think the first question the text leaves me with is how old is the girl? She always says she is very young compared to how old she looks.
- Yvette: What’s up with our country? How can someone get valuable help and live a healthy life? How old are you? I’m curious to know how old she was when she married. How come she doesn’t take her children somewhere or even adoption?
- Melinda: Why didn’t she avoid the problem. She should of gone to school and done something instead of getting married. I would wish to know why she went through that when she could have avoided it.

The answers to the above “Interrogating Texts” questions cannot begin to capture the intellectual or emotional depth of the conversations that happened during these group discussions. What we can see are the various kinds of questions students were asking, from concrete (“How old is the girl?”) to interpretive and analytical (“Why didn’t she avoid the problem?” and “What’s up with our country?”). There’s even evidence in Yvette’s response that the larger class discussion influenced her thinking about the subject (“How come she doesn’t take her children somewhere or even adoption?”). In this group, the students were asking questions within and beyond the text, and two of the three were trying to solve the larger social problems (child services and education) that their experience with the text evoked. In short, these students were *thinking* about the text and the problems of this text that they would ultimately write about.

Because I wanted to hear what these students thought of this exercise, I also asked an additional question: “In what ways did the discussions of these questions with your partners help you view the texts differently?”

Monica: They brought up different points of views I didn’t consider when I wrote my answer. Different emotions writing techniques were used to persuade us all in different ways of talking about the text.

Yvette: I like to hear other people’s thoughts. I see how sometimes we all have the same idea except one or two people will come up with something totally different than what I was thinking. Which is pretty cool.

Melinda: In the beginning I was like oh my gosh but then I’m thinking she could have avoided it by not doing the things she did. In case other people who go through poverty because something happens you know!

Monica’s and Yvette’s answers to the last question are the most revealing, for both students saw alternate viewpoints that made them think in new ways about the text. This is not to say their opinions changed (or didn’t), but that they recognized others had dissimilar yet valuable thoughts, and by implication, their own differing thoughts were also valuable. Melinda’s answer, I think, represents how she did change her opinion about the essay. She didn’t quite answer the question I asked, but she seemed to be saying that at first she was taken in by Goodwin Parker’s descriptive plight before her group members helped her to see that Goodwin Parker might have some culpability in her own destiny. This isn’t to say she began parroting her group members; instead, she learned from her group members through a process of negotiation that advanced her own interpretation. In addition, Monica touches upon the affective, aesthetic aspect of this exercise: “Different emotions writing techniques were used to persuade us all in different ways of talking about the text.” What Monica is referring to here is the pathos that Goodwin Parker uses to manipulate her reader’s emotions—with the descriptions of poverty that are almost too vivid to stomach—and Monica’s response demonstrates her awareness of the emotional engagement she and her group members had with this text. It is virtually impossible not to viscerally experience Goodwin Parker’s text, but rarely do students understand or

so clearly explain that the pathos of Goodwin Parker’s argument affects the different ways readers will interpret her text.

As I listened to the conversations in the room (but mainly of this one group), I noticed that once students started talking about what they didn’t understand in the essay, they began to look at their confusion as a product of the *text*, not as evidence of a deficiency in *themselves* as readers. And they started listening to the varied and warranted interpretations that their group members (and in one case, the whole class) had about the essay. They started to believe and understand that they were capable readers, they were producers of plausible interpretations, and they could emotionally engage with a text in positive ways—all of which helped them begin to reject the deferent stance they might otherwise be inclined to take. Of course, one participation in this exercise does not automatically transform students’ stances from deferent to efferent or aesthetic (or both), but it does help them begin to see that there is more to reading than getting the correct answer—that the process of discovery is valuable in and of itself and that questions and even confusion are pathways to richer and more illuminating ideas about a text. As both Monica and Yvette attest, students also learn the value of multiple interpretations.

Incidentally, every student in this class who participated in the “Interrogating Texts” exercise was able to effectively adopt the persona of Goodwin Parker in order to critique Ehrenreich’s experiment. In the one and a half hours that students had to write this essay (as an in-class essay), many explained the significance of the differences and similarities between Goodwin Parker and Ehrenreich, which was *not* a requirement of the prompt, and I can’t help but think that their thorough understanding of the Goodwin Parker text contributed to the added layer of analysis that many students included.

I’ve used “Interrogating Texts” in numerous classes, most recently in a freshman composition class that was reading Edward Dolnick’s *The Forger’s Spell*, a book that details how a mediocre Dutch painter made millions during World War II selling forged Vermeer paintings to national museums and high-ranking Nazis. Jody, a student in this class, asked, “Are we going to be doing one of these for every part of the book?” The book is divided into five parts, and for each part I chose short but crucial chapters to use in an “Interrogating Texts” exercise in order to help students understand the nuances of Dolnick’s text and to get them ready to answer the question for their final paper: “Why did Hitler and Goering covet Vermeer’s paintings?” We were only on Part II of the book when she asked her question, so I hesitantly answered, “Yes,” expecting that Jody would complain about the

monotony of doing the same exercise day after day. She surprised me with her response: “Good! Because doing this really helps me understand what is going on in the book.”

Through the Mist

While I stand behind this exercise as one that I think breaks basic writers of counter-productive reading habits, I in no way mean to suggest it is the only way to teach reading; it is just my way of teaching difficult, complex, and problematic texts to a group of students who have continually faltered in reading and writing tasks because they adopt a deferent stance when reading. “Interrogating Texts” helps basic writers ignore that deferent stance by liberating their attention from predetermined and fixed meanings in texts and shedding the counterproductive emotional responses they might otherwise have towards reading and rereading. It helps students identify themselves as readers as they learn the value of pushing through confusion caused by difficult texts.

We have to acknowledge, however, that some interpretations of texts can be, in fact, off the mark, which should not be confused with “right” versus “wrong” answers. Glynda Hull and Mike Rose discuss the notion of “misreading” in their description of a Trinidadian/Jamaican student’s “misreading” of a poem: Robert, who doesn’t understand the middle-class use of the word “shack” in a poem because a “shack” from his parents’ homelands isn’t a hovel, interprets the poem in such a way that Rose classifies it as a clear misreading of the text. Hull and Rose conclude that misreadings often come from logical places, but that doesn’t help those students who struggle with their academic confidence as they read. We have all misread texts because, like Robert, we lack some piece of relevant cultural information, but we are usually happy to discover our mistake and correct our reading, constructing a more comprehensive and internally consistent interpretation of the text. For basic writers like Robert, however, such discoveries are hardly welcome because although they can logically support their mistaken interpretation with evidence from the text (which with their limited cultural knowledge is valid evidence), the final verdict of their misreading is added proof of their “incompetence” as readers unable to find the “correct” answers that others were able to find. Situations like this exacerbate basic writers’ tendency to read deferently; even though we continually preach that there are no “right” and “wrong” answers, they are confronted with proof that they are, in fact, wrong in their interpretations and should therefore defer to others in the

class. Exercises like “Interrogating Texts” can help students learn to discover as a group the normative readings of texts and can show them, particularly through the discussions, how a “misreading” can be both logical and literate, yet mistaken at the same time. And through those nuanced discussions, students can develop the confidence to understand that sometimes misreadings happen, and revising interpretations based upon missing information is not a matter of deference, but a necessary part of any reading process.

As Wolfgang Iser suggests, there are infinite numbers of readings for texts, which means there are infinite numbers of interpretations. Our students need to learn that their interpretations will fluctuate depending on how often they read and discuss texts, and they need to have a safe place to feel passionately about and discuss *all* of their interpretations, even those that might be off the mark. The point is for students to become comfortable with their own interpretations, whether they are a little or completely different from their classmates. With faith in their ability as readers and interpreters of texts, they need to welcome any challenge to those interpretations and believe in their capacity to revise their interpretations when necessary. Yet they also need to defend—without fear—their conviction when they think their atypical interpretation is warranted.

In the end, regardless of how we each accomplish it, we must help our students shed the deferent stance that is created by their inattentive blindness and/or their willingness to take on other’s interpretations. By shifting their focus from their insecurities to the transaction they experience with difficult texts, they will learn to see through the mist in order to catch glimpses of the gorillas that appear before them—even if they see those gorillas as chimpanzees or orangutans or even if they, at first, mistake them for lions.

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Notes

1. All student names in this article are pseudonyms, and student work is used with permission.
2. Student answers have not been edited from the original.

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Appendix
INTERROGATING TEXTS

Please read the essay assigned for today, and take a few minutes to reflect on it. Then begin answering the questions. Take as much time as you need for each question. Reread the text as necessary. The goal is not to finish, so if your group gets hung up on one question for a long time, don't worry. Just keep the discussion going. (You may need extra paper for enough space to answer.)

1. Summarize/paraphrase the text you just read. Do not look at the text as you do this. After you paraphrase the text, write down any questions that this text leaves you with.

**Wait for your group members to finish writing their answers, and then discuss all of your answers before moving on.

Write down anything you just learned from your group that you hadn't thought of before you discussed it.

2. **Reread the text, and underline the one sentence that you think is most important to the meaning of the entire piece.** Explain why you think this one sentence is the most important sentence in the piece. If you found some of this text difficult, mark what you think were the most confusing parts, and discuss these with your group.

**Wait for your group members to finish writing their answers, and then discuss all of your answers before moving on.

Write down anything you just learned from your group that you hadn't thought of before you discussed it.

3. **Reread the text once again, and make note of anything interesting or important that you may not have noticed before, including any new questions you may have.** What did you discover during this reading that you didn't notice before? How do these new discoveries make you now view the text?

**Wait for your group members to finish writing their answers, and then discuss all of your answers before moving on.

Write down anything you just learned from your group that you hadn't thought of before you discussed it.

4. What questions does this essay leave you with? What do you wish you had more information about? What do you still not quite understand in the text?

**Wait for your group members to finish writing their answers, and then discuss all of your answers before moving on.

Write down anything you just learned from your group that you hadn't thought of before you discussed it.