# Responding critically to texts

**Learning goal**: Students will be able to generate analytical questions and responses to readings to facilitate in-depth discussions of texts.

**Preparation**: Students are asked to read and annotate an assigned reading. They can also be asked to generate two discussion questions before class. I often share this [resource on annotating texts](https://research.ewu.edu/writers_c_read_study_strategies) when I assign the first reading of the semester.

**Follow up**: Students will practice these strategies on future reading assignments.

**Class agenda**:

* Short presentation/ class discussion on constructing strong discussion questions (~20 min)
* Students work in groups to create discussion questions (or revise the questions they brought in) using strategies presented (~20 min)
* Groups share strongest question with the class; this can lead into discussion of the reading as students respond to questions posed (20+ minutes)

I start by discussing annotation strategies and why we annotate. Annotating (not just underlining but writing “gists” of passages and reactions in the margin) helps us synthesize information. Noting your reactions is a first step towards analysis: initial reactions can guide us to aspects of a text that are worthy of further exploration. For example, a place where you got confused can signal a place where the author’s ideas are ambiguous, and where further conceptual analysis could shed new light on the topic. Consider sharing your own annotation strategies, including a picture of your annotations, with students. (SLIDE 2)

Q: What did you react to when you read this text? What kinds of things did you mark on the page? What are your preferred strategies for annotation?

Next, I share an example of an exaggeratedly superficial discussion question (SLIDE 3) and ask students what they think of it—what makes it strong or weak and why. I then do the same with a stronger question (SLIDE 4). This highlights how weaker questions don’t require much engagement with the author’s actual argument.

Q: In your experience with class discussions, what kind of questions tend to lead to more productive discussions? (I have some ideas on SLIDE 5)

Introduce distinction between analytical questions, which ask us to examine the structure of the text more closely, and analogical/ extending questions, which ask about implications and connections outside the text. (SLIDE 6, 7, and handout)

Q: What type of questions do you tend to write? (Students will usually say analogical. So I like to play up the value of analytical questions and note that the purpose of “critiquing” arguments is not to play “gotcha” but to identify places where we can push the conversation about a topic further; in that sense, going “inward” to explore the inner workings of the argument is also a means of going “outward” to generate new lines of inquiry…)

Next, have students generate discussion questions in small groups, trying out some of the moves on the handout. Or, have them reflect on and revise the questions they brought in. You might require them to have one analytical and one analogical or extending question. I request that each question reference the specific passage that inspired it, so others know where to look to enter the conversation in an informed way.

Circulate between groups and provide feedback on the questions. Ask each group to write their best question on the whiteboard/ big paper when ready. I provide additional feedback as necessary (usually finding ways to redirect a general question to engage more specifically with parts of the text) as each group shares their question with the class.

A follow-up exercise could ask the students to respond in writing to any of the discussion questions they generated.