

Strategies for responding critically to a text


Class Session for Applications of Biological Concepts in Public Health

March 14, 2023

Rebecca Wilbanks, PhD

Lecturer, University Writing Program

rwilban2@jhu.edu



Wakanda Doesn't Have Suburbs

KENDRA PIERRE-LOUIS

don't know when I first learned that the story of humanity was one of profound wrongness. But the idea that the world was broken because of our presence was always there, a constant cadence with which to orient my life, as seemingly natural as the four seasons that ordered my years and the cycle of the sun that ordered my days.

I grew up in the Catholic Church, whose theology of original sin means that humans are born with a built-in desire to disobey God ever since Eve, allegedly, took a bite of that damn apple. Since her and Adam's punishment was to be kicked out of the Garden, it's not a stretch to say that I also grew up with a belief that humans have an innate tendency to destroy their environment.

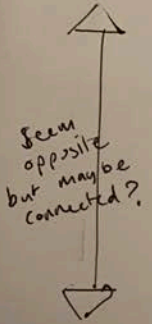
Growing up in New York City, secular classes taught to state standards imparted a similar message of humanity's inherent shortcomings. A critical undercurrent of history and science classes, for example, is the idea of perpetual progress. That progress, we are taught, has always come at the cost of the environment—from smog-filled skies to landscapes devoid of birds, as chronicled in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. And, of course, the idea of progress itself implies that there is something wrong with the present and with our place in it.

I am not the only person who has gotten this message. Robin Wall Kimmerer, an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, scientist, author, and lecturer, writes in her beautiful book *Braiding Sweetgrass* that in her survey of roughly two hundred third-year ecology students, almost all said that they thought that humans and nature were a bad mix. These were, she pointed out, people who had chosen to devote their lives to environmental protection.

"I was stunned," she wrote. "How is it possible that in twenty years of education that they cannot think of any beneficial relationships between people and the environment?"

When I share this quote with a friend, she points out that it is ahistorical to frame people and nature as always in opposition with each other. There are societies that live within their ecological boundaries.

wrongness



Progress

natural > Master narratives

religion

vs. something wrong w/ us

(we messed things up)

something wrong w/ present

original eden

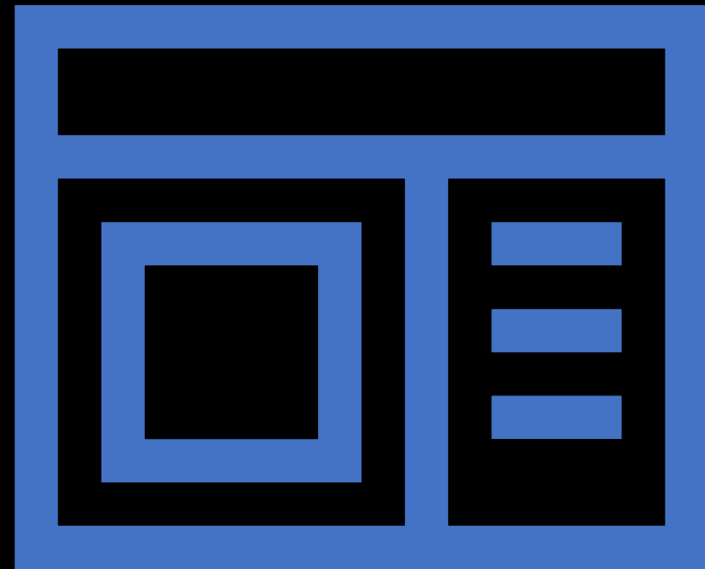
Western narrat
not universal

Good discussion questions start with annotations that record or highlight:

- Gists of passages
- Your reactions; places where you agree, want to challenge the author's assertions, are surprised by something, etc.
- Connections to other texts / ideas / experiences
- Questions, points of ambiguity
- Seeming contradictions
- Key words and sentences, striking language

Thoughts?

- Pierre-Louis discusses the movie *Avatar*. What did you think of the film?



Thoughts?

- The author notes that she “enjoys” and is a “fan” of many of the dystopian stories she discusses (139, 141), even as she finds their implications to be disturbing. Judging by their popularity, many other people enjoy them too. What makes dystopian fiction so pleasurable? Is there something about these narratives that makes them more fun than stories of humans living in balance with their environment?

Great discussion questions/ reading responses:

- Make us think hard about the text
- Have no obvious answer
- May provide complementary perspectives or frameworks that help us see the author's ideas in a new way
- What else??





Analytical moves (Go inward)

- Highlight an assumption of the author's argument
- Make an observation about the structure of the text. How does one part relate to another part, or to the overall argument?
- Ask about something you found ambiguous or hard to understand
- Make us think carefully about the evidence the author uses to support their thesis
- Identify an apparent contradiction in the text
- Highlight a striking or unexpected phrase and talk about its effect

Analogical and
extending
moves
(Go outward)

- Ask a comparative question about a related text or concept
- Offer an example or experience that provides further support for the author's claims, reframes them, or complicates them
- Ask about an implication of the author's argument: if this is true, then...?



Your turn

- Share your discussion questions in groups. Which moves on the handout are your questions making? Work together to strengthen each question and generate a couple new ones using moves that you don't have represented yet.
- Do any of your questions make interesting moves that are not represented on the handout?
- Each group will be asked to share their strongest question with the class!