



## Essay #5 Performatives

If you just can't locate a text, and you don't like the samples I provided in the margin of the website, then come to me and I'll assign you a text.

### Reminder...

As I said before, we sometimes encounter texts that don't seem to respond to the traditional tools we use to make sense of them. We look for "meaning" by trying to make sense of plot, figures, symbols, imagery narrative, genre, meter, rhythm, form, etc. However, some texts are less interested in saying or suggesting something as they are in *doing* something. As we noted repeatedly, "performatives" perform an action, and if they do have something to say, they enact or embody their own argument. Therefore, we need a different way of making sense of these kinds of texts, for they are "incomprehensible" (we cannot inclose them within our intellectual or interpretive frameworks) unless we use a different lens, and that new lens is what we call "performance theory" or "performatives."

### Assignment

First, you need to find a text that not only says something, but also performs/enacts/embodies its own argument. It can be words on a page, paint on a canvas, music, sculpture, film, or any human-made artifact. You'll have more success if you stay within the 20th century, for modern and postmodern texts are often deliberately performative. There are occasional odd pieces from all time periods, but they are harder to find.

Second, your task is to use Sayre's and Bennett's notion of performance/performatives to make sense of the text. You're not really "interpreting" the work as much as explaining how it works or functions. And you are not producing a performance as much as using "performance theory" to make sense of a text. You are, in a sense, classifying or categorizing a text again.

In other words, you need to explain how the text not only says something, but also performs its own argument. All the examples we've studied this week should give you a good sense of what to look for.

### Intro...

Follow introduction strategy #2. You'll introduce and contextualize the work. Then, you will (and this should be easy) identify problems, questions, and puzzles to solve. Surely there will be something about the text—some textual feature—that you can point to that demands explanation. Next, you'll use Bennett and Sayre to introduce the idea of a performative. Help your reader understand the concept. Finally, declare your thesis which should state the main function of the text. What is it doing? In what sense is the text a performative?

### Supporting Paragraphs...

Since you just declared at the end of your intro what the text is doing, explain **HOW** the text does what it does. What strategies does the text use? I suspect that you'll make claims along the lines of "Howe not only suggests that female American writers have broken patriarchal enclosures to express themselves, Howe herself escapes enclosures

As always, make all three steps—  
claim, clarify, demonstrate—in  
every supporting paragraph.

by creating a collage of textual fragments.” Or, “Norman Rockwell not only produces a self-portrait, he comments on portraiture as a genre by drawing attention to the process of producing a portrait.” And another supporting paragraph might be “Rockwell also comments about portraiture by foregrounding the history of portraits.” Or, “John Barth’s story draws attention to the conventions of storytelling, and this self-reflexive technique suggests that ‘Artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work.’” Note that those claims contain the preposition “by” which forces you to focus on technique/strategy.

And once you declare what the text is doing and how it does what it does, then show us. Cite and discuss examples. Demonstrate that the text uses the strategies you claim it uses, and show us that they have the effect or function you claim.

I suspect the text will use multiple strategies, or it might use the same strategies in different ways.

### **Conclusion....**

Please practice one of the strategies described in the website.

### **A Word About Post-Criticism...**

In other semesters I introduced a genre called “post-criticism” which combines criticism and performatives. The idea is that you are making sense of a text, but your own essay enacts the very argument your text is making. The result is that you explain and clarify a text you are reading, but your essay is a performative that requires analysis as well.

We could classify, for example, Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater” or Howe’s “Incloser” as post-criticism because they are both forms of criticism while they are also acts of creative writing. They make an argument, but they also perform that argument.

Historically, students either produced spectacular failures and spectacular successes, and while both of those are kinda interesting, I wasn’t very excited about the middle group, so I’m not asking you to produce “post-criticism.” However, if you are feeling ambitious in another class, then you may want to consider producing a work of post-criticism. For example, I could imagine your writing a play that analyzes a play. I could imagine a series of sonnets that comment on Robert Frost’s sonnets, but also the nature of sonnets in general. If you are writing, say, about modernist fragmentation, then I could imagine a fragmented text that discusses and explores fragmentation. I could also imagine an essay about Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse” that uses the same strategies as Barth uses. One could comment on the act of writing a critical essay about “Lost in the Funhouse” as one simultaneously produces that critical essay. You could create a manifesto about manifestos, a memoir about someone’s memoir (but also embedding your argument about the nature of memoirs in your memoir). Your commentary about Sylvia Plath and confessional poets would be a form of confession. Importantly, it wouldn’t just be a confession. It would have to perform what you say about confessions. And so on...

Again, I don’t want you to produce post-criticism for me for this project, but I hope you take a risk in the future and produce one for someone else or for me...just later.