



Introduction to Literary Theory

Your most basic talent as an English major is an ability to identify what a text does or says, and to identify how it's done. "What" and "How" are always your focus.

As a reader, focusing on what an author says/does, and how she says it amounts to "understanding" a text.

As a writer, learning how another writer does what he does helps you improve your own craft. You can poach strategies, appropriate techniques, or combine in new ways what has been done before.

New Historicism Made Simple

Reminder: Your job is to "situate" a text within a specific historical context which means a specific place and time. Assume that texts are shaping forces, not merely reflections of values, debates, and preoccupations of their day. Instead, texts take an active role in trying to encourage readers to adopt certain identities, and they valorize or devalorize (celebrate or mock) specific actions, values, and attitudes. Texts are never neutral; they always (knowingly or not) have a point of view that they propagate. Again, we don't ask, "What does the text mean?" We ask instead, "What does a text do?" and "How does that text do it?" The focus on "how" forces you to talk about "rhetorical strategies and discursive conventions" (119). We don't "produce a thematic reading," but we do "consider how the rhetorical strategies" work in the text.

Introduction

1. Introduce and contextualize the text.
2. Identify a problem, question, or puzzle. Given this assignment, you could question a text's role in our culture. Following Bennett, question a text's status as a mirror of society; complicate a text's status as either an "autonomous" artifact separate or a text removed from the historical background that explains it.
3. Use Bennett to introduce a new set of premises or methodology. Cite key passages that deal with the text's relationship to its contemporary discourses. Locate passages that tell us what readers should do, and explain the benefit of doing so. Of course, demonstrate your grasp of this approach by clarifying the passages. Show your reader that you desperately want them to understand.
4. Thesis—Answer: How does the text function in that context?

First Section
(at least one paragraph)

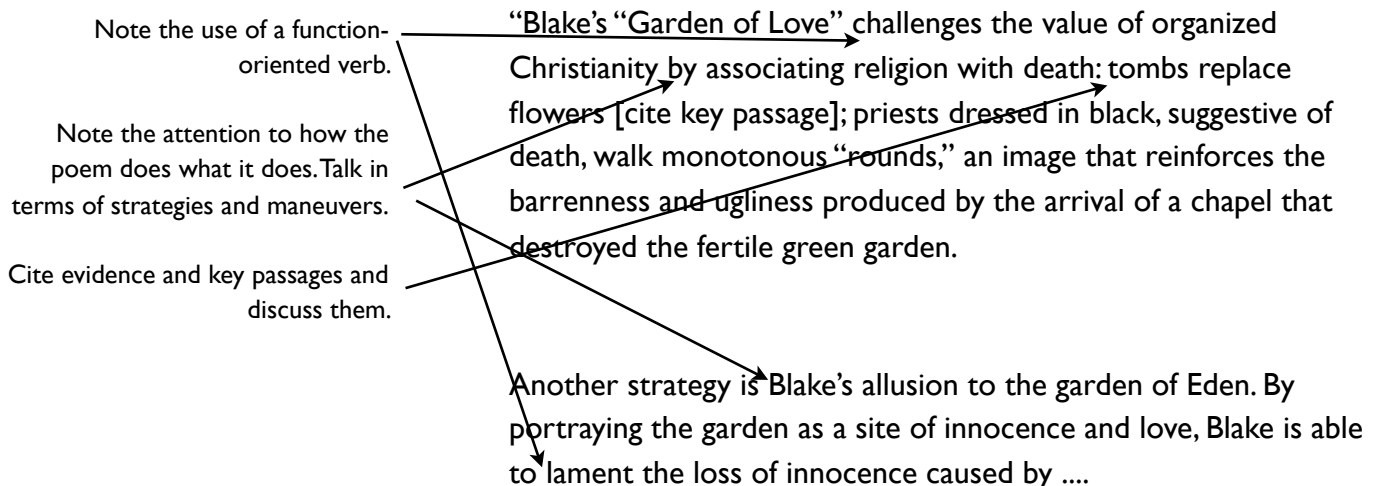
The next step is to use another contemporary text(s) to demonstrate that there is a debate within the culture/society that deals with the same issues that your “main text” is about. For example, if my main text were Blake’s “Garden of Love,” then I’d choose texts like “The Declaration of Independence,” or something by Thomas Paine, or key documents from the French Revolution (and surely there are British texts that would be even more applicable) to show that the debate about individual rights, the role of institutions, and claims of authority are in the air. Use this contemporary text to persuade us that yes, in fact, people are arguing about individuality, authority, and institutions. (Or, you could just as easily focus on the role of religion. Where there any important publications? Laws? Events? that demonstrates that people were torn about the value of religion)

Following Supporting
Paragraphs

First, explain how your “main text” contributes to this conversation. Use verbs that foreground the text’s function, so use verbs like “challenge, reinforce, subvert, appropriate, undermine, celebrate, tame, redefine, etc.” In other words, talk about the function of the text: What does it do?

If I were you, I’d either dedicate a para to each identifiable strategy, or if the text lends itself to this approach, march through the text, noting various strategies along the way.

Second, and you’ll do this simultaneously, explain the rhetorical strategies the text uses to do what you say it does. For example, we might say...



In short, if you do your job right, we’ll see how a text is “bound up with other discourses and rhetorical structures.” You’ll help readers see how a text plays an active role in a cultural debate. The text is a shaping force.