**Some Notes On How To Ask A Good Question About Literature That Will Provoke Conversation And Further Discussion From Your Colleagues**

**Based on a text by Kyla Wazana Tompkins**

* Reread the text
* Take notes in the margins: mess with the text. Underline, star, jot down questions
* Take breaks
* Linger over passages that are unclear or that strike you as particularly significant or that jar you. Why do those passages trigger this response?
* Relate those passages to the whole text: how is this piece of the text part of a larger context? What is it connected to and why?
* Make your questions open-ended, i.e. not answerable based on general knowledge of the text or by reference to a single moment in the text.
* On the other hand, make sure your question is basically answerable, i.e., is not vague and does not rely on facts or assumptions not addressable within the confines of our class conversation.
* Make sure your question doesn’t rely on information the rest of the class doesn’t have, OR give the class enough information and background to be able to engage the question.
* It is often smart and productive to write a preamble to a question. That preamble might be a short history of your question; it might contextualize the question by referring to several points in the same text. Don’t make this preamble so long that no-one can excavate the original question, however.
* Make reference to the text with quotes or page numbers: direct the class to look at a relevant passage, read it together out loud, and drill down into the writing and sentence structure itself to get at the problem you are interested in.
* Questions about a reader’s experience, response, or feelings tend not to be helpful questions. Try to step back from personal responses and instead focus on the way that things are presented in the text
* Often we are tempted to ask the “what about” question: e.g., What about the people whose perspectives are excluded from this story? Although not an unreasonable question, asked in this manner this is not really a sophisticated question because it doesn’t open up conversation. The only answer to “what about” is: they aren’t there. More productive is to ask: how do the exclusions at the heart of this work generate a certain picture of the world, certain problems, and certain contradictions? What would this text look like if re-written from a different point of view?
* It’s a god idea to have some thoughts about how to answer your questions before sharing them with your colleagues. However, sometimes you are just really stumped and need to work through a question with your classmates. That’s okay too.
* Sometimes the question you write is simply the jumping-off point for more developed questions on the part of the class. That is fine! The point is to catalyze inquiry, not perform mastery: good pedagogy means letting go of your ego-investments in your own ideas.
* Sometimes you are stuck with an instinct, a hunch, a nagging feeling and a half-formed question and you simply can’t move forward without thinking about it out loud. Bring those seemingly half-formed thoughts to the class: we will figure the direction or shape of your question together.
* Finally: when you don’t get it, you don’t get it. Ask for help from the professor or your classmates, and feel free and supported in bringing your “I Don’t Get It” questions to class. We will all profit from these acts of intellectual humility and generosity.
* Proofread your questions so that you catch grammar and spelling mistakes.