

Reading Critically

Why should you read critically?

To better understand what you are reading by examining how and why it works (or doesn't work!) as a text
In order to understand how to write critically

The following questions are designed to help you both **analyze the works you are assigned** and **begin discussing or writing critically about what you have read**.

NOTE: The examples provided focus on the novel *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros.

What is the context of the work?

The answer to this question could include (but is not limited to) when and where the work was written/published, whether or not it was translated (if so, by whom), whether or not the work is connected to any major political or social movements, and whether the work is representative of the literary *canon* or an outlier.

Who is the author?

What is their connection to the work and how might they be influenced in writing this work?

Example

Sandra Cisneros grew up in a poor Latino community outside of Chicago (similar to that of the fictional Mango Street). The novel could be read as semi-autobiographical, meaning that some of the characters and scenarios might be drawn from Cisneros's experience in her own childhood. With this context, the feelings of Esperanza wanting to leave but being told that she will always retain a piece of Mango Street could be reminiscent of Cisneros's own feelings about leaving Chicago and making a life for herself away from her old neighborhood.

Do you think the writing is effective?

The term "effective" refers to whether the author is successful in their presentation of their ideas and execution of their argument or narrative. When writing about fiction, this can also refer to the believability of the work, as well as how well the style of writing complements (or contradicts) the story being told.

It's important to remember that when you argue the effectiveness of a particular written work, especially a work of fiction, you want to avoid commenting on what the *author* does and does not do, and instead focus on what the *text* does or does not do. (Note: When you are ready to write a formal essay about your reading, you will want to support your claims with examples from the text or texts being analyzed.)

Example

The poetic yet sparse language of *The House on Mango Street* mirrors the stark and deep emotions of teenaged Esperanza. As she matures and decides to leave Mango Street, the lyrical structure of the novel also matures in diction and syntax.

What does the author argue?

Distill that idea into one or two sentences, maximum.

Example

In *The House on Mango Street*, author Sandra Cisneros argues that, no matter how we try to forget our past, we can never completely escape the influence of where we grew up.

How does the author support their arguments?

Cite specific examples that support what you believe the author is ultimately trying to say with their work. Be sure to follow your examples with a sentence or two connecting the quote to your overall reading of the text. (If you need help with this, please refer to the “Quote Sandwich” handout!)

Example

In the final chapter of *The House on Mango Street*, the main character is told, “When you leave, you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street” (Cisneros 110).

These are just a few of the questions you can ask as you read to help you better read critically. By answering these questions as you read, you will be acquire the skills necessary to write constructively and analytically for your classes.

