

How to Learn from a Book

David Kern

Imagine if you will, that you want to know what a frog is. How will you find out? Some of you will simply look it up on Wikipedia. Others of you will capture a frog, drop it onto a dissection table, and take a scalpel to it. But do either of these actually tell you what a frog is? I would argue they do not. They might tell you what a frog has—organs, limbs, etc.—but they do not reveal what a frog actually is. If you want to know what a frog is you should visit your local pond for a few hours and observe the frogs as they play, eat, and survive.

When we as teachers make analysis our first goal, we are essentially the same as Gradgrind. We are more concerned with facts than experience, more interested in dissection than imagination.

However, if we focus on the experience that reading great literature is and on the development of the imagination, then we can guide our students toward what David Hicks calls normative ends: toward contemplation of truth, goodness, and beauty, and if not analysis, then what? and, if our goal is to guide our students toward contemplation of that which is good, true, and beautiful then we must teach them to first see that which is good, true, and beautiful. Thus we must help them to read attentively. We can do this via three simple paths: first, teach them to read in layers; second, teach them to observe; third, teach them to identify passages they especially enjoy.

First, we should teach our students to read in layers. This is not as complicated as it sounds. Have them use a pink highlighter and quickly—very quickly, without concern for comprehension at first—scan whatever work you are assigning. As they are scanning they should highlight in pink any names, dates, and places they encounter. Thus, while they will not comprehend what is happening in the work, they are identifying the work's key players as well as the context in which the story takes place. If they start with this, then, when they go back to read the book again at a normal pace, they will be more prepared to understand what they are reading. Beyond this practical benefit, this activity plants seeds that lead to questions. As they scan and highlight the names, dates, and places, they will begin to be curious about character A and what he is doing, and they

will grow curious about the nature of the world in which that character moves.

Next, have them use a green highlighter and scan for indications from the author as to what is coming next, a structural approach sometimes referred to as meta-discourse (meta: its own category, and discourse: from the Latin word for running to and fro). You probably want to have them do this in portions, especially if you are reading a longer novel or poem. This exercise is guiding them deeper into the world of the work one simple step at a time. It introduces them to the form and structure of the work while also revealing what the author is talking about. And again, in so doing, students will naturally grow curious and that curiosity will lead to questions.

Finally, once your students have scanned twice and highlighted in pink and green, ask them to read the work (or the assigned portion) at a regular pace.

As they are reading, teach them to observe. This is as simple as it sounds. Teach them to see what is there. If a character has red hair, notice it. If the author makes frequent use of a specific literary device or figure of speech, notice it. If Achilles gets more and more angry with each ensuing book, notice it. Things matter, as I tell my students. The skilled writer makes conscious decisions that give each image, sentence, phrase, and word meaning. By teaching them to observe, you are leading them along the path of recognition.

Of course, you also want your students to be interested; you want to discuss things that intrigue them and about which they have questions. So do it. Ask them what they are interested in. Well, those trusty highlighters can help here, too. Ask them to use a blue highlighter and this time, instruct them to identify and highlight lines, passages, or scenes they like. Then when you arrive to your next class, ask them to open their books and share their blues. Unless my students are wildly out of the ordinary, you will likely find that many

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kids highlighted passages that others decidedly—and purposefully—did not. Let the fireworks commence.

Teach your students to experience literature purposefully and they will begin to experience truth. And so will you.

Highlighting Guidelines:

Pink highlighting: Words, names, dates, and places that seem important. Nouns that answer *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*.

Green highlighting: Lists, questions, and structural clues such as ordinal numbers (first, second, etc.) and conjunctive adverbs* (although, consequently, finally, however, then, therefore...).

Orange highlighting: Examples and figures of speech.

Blue highlighting: Interesting or important quotes—things to share with another person.

**Trivium Tables*[®]: *English Grammar*