MARILYN PRYLE

5 Questions for Any Text

Critical Reading in the Age of Disinformation

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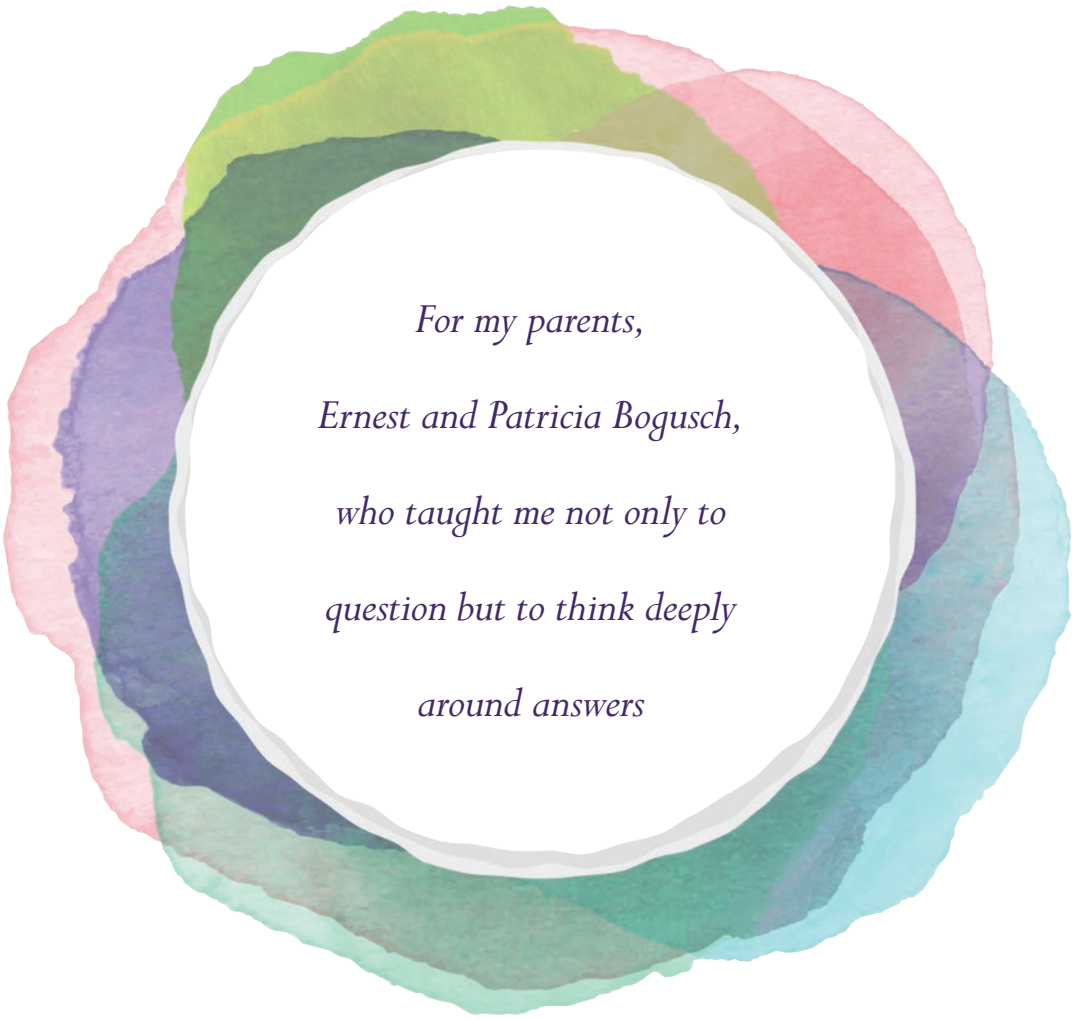

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Introduction

As English teachers, we believe that reading and writing can change lives. That somehow, books and writing expand both the mind and the soul. This is why we chose to teach English.

I always knew I wanted to teach, but I didn't always want to teach literature and writing. I actually started college as a math education major. I was good at math, and I loved the clean balance of it, the way two sides of an equation always funneled down to that right answer, the way something hypothetical could be pinned down, graphed, and measured. But somewhere about halfway through my freshman year, I began to wonder if that was what I really wanted. I have a clear memory of my eighteen-year-old self wondering, *How will we talk about the meaning of life?* I decided that being an English teacher would be the surer path to that goal. I was never a particularly voracious reader; rather, I knew what books could do. I knew their power. Several books had already profoundly or subtly reshaped my life, and I wanted to give that experience to others. And that, combined with a love of writing, convinced me that English was my calling. I wanted to change the world.

I knew some truths early on in my teaching career: That reading meant expanding, that it widened the mind and heart, that it nurtured compassion. I knew that writing was first and foremost about being present, about noticing. Once one is present, they can begin to express their authentic thoughts and feelings. Knowledge, empathy, authenticity, expression—these were the cornerstones of my convictions as a teacher. For most of my career, I believed these cornerstones to be enough, and they were. I found that when I honored students' intelligence, compassion, and sense of self, I saw them exhibit more intelligence, more compassion, and more self-awareness in June than when I'd met them the previous September.

In the past few years, however, I have begun to wonder if students need more. If, in our pandemic-weary, conflict-ridden, anxiety-saturated world, students need more and different kinds of knowledge, tools for empathy, and practices of self-understanding. Our current time feels especially overwhelming and exhausting. We became English teachers to support our students in reaching their fullest potential as humans. What does that mean now?

It's no coincidence that the magical feeling of reading and writing—the feeling of being absorbed, transported, expanded, transformed—began to fade in classrooms proportionately as widespread, frequent, standardized testing seeped into schools. The wonder of reading and writing, the curiosity and agency, died slowly as they were cobbled into skill-sized, testable bits and "right answers," reduced to numbers that we perceive as progress or lack thereof and that children tether to their sense of self-worth.

It is also not a coincidence that, after twenty years of this, few people know how to think critically or have the stamina to do so. We now live in a world where people consume media without question, where cults of personality

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trump facts, and where conflict is rampant but also completely ignorable if one updates their preferences. Civil discussion has all but disappeared. There is only "right" and "wrong," and we want someone to tell us the right answer, one that does not require too much discomfort or change. We then can become entrenched with the online friends, television stations, podcasts, preferred articles, and even living communities that reflect ourselves back to ourselves. And it's not even wholly our own fault: the algorithms are well-engineered, and they're just getting started.

How do we, as English teachers, equip students for such a world? More will be required of them than any generation before them. The struggles of our planet—around climate change, war, refugees, and resources, to name just a few—are guaranteed to increase and impact our daily lives like never before. Solutions will require people to entertain different and multiple perspectives; think critically; view situations from all angles, not just on surface levels; communicate with each other; collaborate; think creatively; and take risks. There are no right answers to our world's dilemmas; we are in new territory. There must be room for trial and error and a tolerance of ambiguity. These are not simply ideals—the survival of our planet literally depends on today's children entering adulthood with these skills.

On top of all that, our modern era demands we fight to preserve our own humanity, the freedom inside each of us to think, feel, love, and choose, when so many forces are trying to interpret, track, and predict our next thought.

I have always believed that small, daily practice is the key to significant change. My teaching reflects this: underlying the big projects or formidable papers are a year's worth of smaller, constant prods to think deeply and critically, to listen to others' perspectives, and to be aware of one's own thinking. This book reflects that practice and maps how to do it. But this book also raises the stakes to reflect today's particular challenges.

1 Teaching Critical Reading in English Classes

Here, I outline five specific questions to teach students how to look beyond a text itself—any text, in any form—and see the influences around it, the voices and sponsors, the craft and rhetoric, the intent and message. A critical, experienced reader wonders, *What am I reading? What is it showing me? What is it hiding? How am I reacting?* and *How does it work?* as they read. As a result, they are able to hold on to their own thinking and not be swayed by inflammatory rhetoric or savvy marketing. They are able to poke at a text like a curious scientist. They recognize their own knee-jerk reactions, biases, and feelings, and they are able to choose how to respond in ways that help further solutions instead of exacerbate conflict.

The 5 Questions are tools that critical readers and consumers of text constantly employ, and they are crucial skills for young people today if we expect them to handle the challenges that await them. In an unprecedented way, we are called to help students develop a critical consciousness and a renewed sense of agency and urgency. The future of our social fabric, our democracy, our planet, and our humanity depends on it.

Teaching English has never been so important.

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Part 1

In order to read texts critically, students (and all readers!) need to understand that texts—whether print, video, audio, or online—are constructed things, made by someone (an individual, a team, or an organization) for an intended audience. Too often, students take texts at face value, without the critical reading skills needed to navigate today's media. The good news is that these skills can be taught and practiced and that students can easily transfer these skills to every aspect of their media consumption, using five simple questions.

It is important to note that critical readers think of these questions in various, repeating, and overlapping orders as they read. They may jump from thought to thought, consciously or unconsciously, as they process a text. Here, I've numbered the questions for the sake of reference, but in reality, threads of inquiry and understanding constantly weave themselves together throughout the entire experience of consuming a text.

1. What am I reading?

When a critical reader encounters a text, their first inclination is to figure out what it is and where it came from. On a basic level, this could mean identifying that a text is a poem instead of a short story, a news article instead of an autobiographical essay, or an instructional video instead of a blooper reel. But deeper questions are embedded in this larger one: in today's world, it can sometimes be difficult to realize that an online review or informational webpage is really a cleverly disguised advertisement or that a seemingly objective news article is really just persuasive propaganda. Asking yourself what you are reading, who wrote it, what the author's background or cultural values are, who the intended audience is, and who is ultimately funding the writing and the circulation of the piece is crucial to critical reading and understanding.

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2. What is it showing me?

The most often asked question by any reader, regardless of experience or skill level, is *What is the text saying?* And of course, it is still a vital question here. But as with the first question, we should help students probe past the surface level. Readers should ask not only what the text is overtly saying but what it is *showing*—what is between the lines—about human nature, society, and specific issues. This might involve looking at questions around class, institutions, gender, race, and abilities; it might include separating pros from cons in an issue or looking at cause and effect. What a text is saying and showing is the information that a reader can glean from the words.

3. What is it hiding?

The question of what's *not* in the text goes hand in hand with the last question, but it's one that readers sometimes miss. A text shows but it also hides. Now more than ever, it is important to help students understand this. Perhaps the author holds biases they are trying to disguise; perhaps they are funded by a source that has an agenda. Maybe the logic pretends to be sound but actually is not. Maybe the cited sources are unreliable or the ethical implications of the shown information are overlooked. And sadly, in today's world, and with children as a target, the algorithms are churning. Readers must ask themselves, *What is this site suggesting I read next? What is it suggesting I buy? Whom is it suggesting I follow? Why? What is it perceiving about my thinking and tastes, and what does it want me to do next?* If we can help students see even a little of this from an outside perspective, it will help them become more critical consumers of media in all forms.

4. How am I reacting?

Instead of addressing this next question at the surface level, by simply asking students, "What did you think?" or "Did you like it?" after they've read a text, we can nudge students to go deeper within their own thoughts and feelings, to name their emotions more precisely, and to think about their relationship to the text. They might have a relevant and insightful connection, a pertinent question, or an informed, reflective opinion beyond "I liked it" or "I didn't like it." They might be in awe of the beauty or sophistication of the piece; they might be inspired to act. Helping students name and explore their reactions will nurture not only their critical reading skills but their critical consciousness as well—something that will benefit them far beyond English class.

5. How does it work?

English teachers excel at helping students answer the question of how a text works, since traditionally our job has been to focus on the craft, technique, and inner workings of a piece of writing. We might direct students to examine the structure, tone, language, or sensory details in a text. But when we help them look more closely, at the rhetoric, the emotional appeal, the attention-getting elements, and the accompanying visuals, we begin to help students go even deeper with the previous questions about showing and hiding. More specifically, we help students see the connection between writing skill and the writer's ability to persuade, move, or manipulate the reader.

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I have found that students enjoy thinking in the framework of the 5 Questions. They appreciate these concrete doorways into a text and the simplicity of the questions themselves. Part 3 of this book shares specific prompts—I call them categories—that I have developed for each of the five questions. The categories act as structured but easily accessible journal prompts that students can use to focus on one small aspect of a text. Having the scaffold of the categories gives students a vocabulary to interact with texts. With regular practice, the categories help students see their own thinking and more precisely discuss the text with others.

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