

## ◆◆ Chapter 37

# *Critical Thinking and Language Arts*

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### *Abstract*

*In this paper, originally published as a chapter in the Critical Thinking Handbooks for 6<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> Grades and High School, Paul and Binker outline a critical approach to teaching language arts, emphasizing the need to help students gain command over language. Binker and Paul outline the essential disciplined and questioning attitude of the ideal student of the language arts (as critical reader, writer, and listener), outline characteristics and goals of language arts instruction (emphasizing mastery of the logic of language), point out common flaws in standard texts, and list generic questions students could learn to raise about the aspects of language arts (reading, writing, listening, and grammar).*

### ◆ *Introduction*

Language arts, as a domain of learning, mainly covers the study of literature and the arts of reading and writing. All three areas — literature, reading and writing — deal with the art of conceptualizing and representing *in language* how people live and might live their lives. All three are primarily concerned with gaining command of language and expression. Of course, there is no command of language separate from command of thought and no command of thought without command of language.

Very few students will ever publish novels, poems, or short stories, but presumably all should develop insight into what can be learned from literature. Students should develop a sense of the art involved in writing a story and, hence, of putting experiences into words. At its root is the need everyone has to make sense of human life. This requires command of our own ideas, which requires command over the words in which we express them.

In words and ideas there is power — power to understand and describe, to take apart and put together, to create systems of beliefs and multiple conceptions of life. Literature displays this power, and reading apprehends it. Students lack insight into these processes. Few have command of the language they use or a sense of how to gain that command. Not having a command of their own language, they typically struggle when called upon to read literature. They often find reading and writing frustrating and unrewarding. And worse, they rarely see the value of achieving such command. Literature seems a frill, something artificial, irrelevant, and bookish, outside of the

important matters of life. Reading, except in its most elementary form, seems expendable as a means of learning. Writing is often viewed as a painful bore and, when attempted, reduced to something approaching stream-of-consciousness verbalization.

The task of turning students around, stimulating them to cultivate a new and different conception of literature, of reading, and of writing, is a profound challenge. If we value students thinking for themselves, we cannot ignore this challenge. If a basic goal of English classes is to instill the love of lifelong reading, we must seriously confront why most students have little or no interest in literature. We need to think seriously about the life-world in which they live: the music they listen to, the TV programs and movies they watch, the desires they follow, the frustrations they experience, the values they live for.

Most teachers can probably enumerate the most common features and recurring themes of, say, students' favorite movies: danger, excitement, fun, sex, romance, rock music, car chases, exploding planets, hideous creatures, mayhem, stereotypes, cardboard characters, and so on. The lyrics and values of most popular music are equally accessible, expressing as they do an exciting, fast-moving, sentimentalized, superficial world. Much student talk consists in slang. Though sometimes vivid it is more often vague, imprecise, and superficial. (He, like totally freaked out! It was awesome. He got totally weird.) Most quality literature seems dull to students in comparison.

Good English instruction must respect and challenge students' attitudes. Ignoring student preferences doesn't alter them. Students must assess for themselves the relative worth of popular entertainment and quality works. Students need opportunities to scrutinize and evaluate the forms of entertainment they prefer. They need to assess the messages they receive from them, the conceptions of life they presuppose, and the values they manifest. As instruction is now designed, students typically ignore what they hear, read, and reiterate in school work and activities. They may follow the teacher's request to explain why a particular classic has lasted many generations, but this ritual performance has little influence on students' real attitudes. Critical thinking can help encourage students to refine their tastes, and we should encourage it with this end in mind. Nevertheless, under no conditions should we try to order or force students to say what they don't believe. A well-reasoned, if wrong-headed, rejection of Shakespeare is better than mindless praise of him.

### ◆ *The Ideal English Student*

In addition to the need to enter sympathetically into the life-world of our students, appreciating how and why they think, speak, and act as they do, we must also have a clear conception of what changes we want to cultivate in them. We must clearly see the ideals we are striving for as teachers. Consider language itself and the way in which an ideal student might approach it. We want students to be sensitive to their language, striving to understand it and use it

thoughtfully, accurately, and clearly. We want them to become autonomous thinkers and so command, rather than be commanded by, language.

#### AS CRITICAL READER

Critical readers of literature approach literature as an opportunity to live within another's world or experience, to consider someone else's view of human nature, relationships, and problems. Critical readers familiarize themselves with different uses of language to enhance their understanding and appreciation of literature. They choose to read literature because they recognize its worth. They can intelligently discuss it with others, considering the interpretations of others as they support their own.

Critical readers approach a piece of nonfiction with a view to entering a silent dialogue with the author. They realize they must actively reconstruct the author's meaning. They read because there is much that they know they do not know, much to experience that they have not experienced. Thus, critical readers do not simply pass their eyes over the words with the intention of filling their memories. They question, organize, interpret, synthesize, and digest what they read. They question, not only what was said, but also what was implied and presupposed. They organize the details, not only around key ideas in the work, but also around their own key ideas. They not only interpret, they recognize their interpretations *as interpretations*, and consider alternative interpretations. Recognizing their interpretations as such, they revise and refine them. They do not simply accept or reject; they work to make ideas their own, accepting what makes most sense, rejecting what is ill-thought-out, distorted, and false, fitting their new understanding into their existing frameworks of thought.

#### AS CRITICAL WRITER

Command of reading and command of writing go hand-in-hand. All of the understanding, attitudes, and skills we have just explored have parallels in writing. When writing, critical writers recognize the challenge of putting their ideas and experiences into words. They recognize that inwardly many of our ideas are a jumble, some supporting and some contradicting other ideas, some vague, some clear, some true, some false, some expressing insights, some reflecting prejudices or mindless conformity. Since critical writers recognize that they only partially understand and only partially command their own ideas and experiences, they recognize a double difficulty in making those ideas and experiences accessible to others.

As readers they recognize they must *actively* reconstruct an author's meaning; as writers they recognize the parallel need to *actively* construct their own meanings as well as the probable meanings of their readers. In short, critical writers engage in parallel tasks when writing to those of reading. Both are challenging. Both organize, engage, and develop the mind. Both require the full and heightened involvement of critical and creative thought.

### AS CRITICAL LISTENER

The most difficult condition in which to learn is in that of a listener. People naturally become passive when listening, leave to the speaker the responsibility to express and clarify, to organize and exemplify, to develop and conclude. The art of becoming a critical listener is therefore the hardest and the last art that students develop. Of course, most students never develop this art. Most students remain passive and impressionistic in their listening throughout their lives.

Yet this need not be the case. If students can come to grasp the nature of critical reading and writing, they can also grasp the nature of critical listening. Once again, each of the understandings, attitudes, and skills of reading and writing have parallels in listening. There is the same challenge to sort out, to analyze, to consider possible interpretations, the same need to ask questions, to raise possible objections, to probe assumptions, to trace implications. As listeners we must follow the path of another person's thought. Listening is every bit as dialogical as reading and writing, though harder, since we cannot go back over the words of the speaker as we can when reading.

What is more, our students face a special problem in listening to a teacher, for if they listen so as to take seriously what is being said, they may appear to their peers to be playing up to the teacher, or may appear foolish if they seem to say a wrong or dumb thing. Student peer groups often expect students to listen with casual indifference, even with passive disdain. To expect students to become active classroom listeners is, therefore, to expect them to rise above the domination of the peer group. This is very difficult for most students.

The ideal English student, as you can see, is quite like the ideal learner in other areas of learning, in that critical reading, writing, and listening are required in virtually all subject areas. Yet the language arts are more central to education than perhaps any other area. Without command of one's native language, no significant learning can take place. Other domains of learning rely on this command. The ideal English student should therefore come close to being the ideal learner, and while helping our students to gain command of reading, writing, and listening we should see ourselves as laying the foundation for all thought and learning.

### ◆ *Ideal Instruction*

Considering the ideal reader, writer, and listener paves the way for a brief overview of ideal instruction. We should use our understanding of the ideal as a model to move toward, as an organizer for our behavior, not as an empty or unrealistic dream. Reading, writing, and listening, as critical thinking activities, help organize and develop learning. Each depends on recognizing that if we actively probe and analyze, dialogue and digest, question and synthesize, we will begin to understand alternative schemes of meaning and belief. The world of Charles Dickens is not the same as that of George Eliot,

nor are either the same as those of Hemingway or Faulkner. Similarly, each of us lives in a somewhat different world. Each of us has somewhat different ideas, goals, values, and experiences. Each of us constructs somewhat different meanings to live by. In ideal instruction, we want students to discover and understand different worlds so that they can better understand and develop their own. We want them to struggle to understand the meanings of others so they can better understand their own.

Unfortunately, most texts do not have a unified approach toward this goal. They are often a patchwork, as if constructed by a checklist mentality, as if each act of learning were independent of the one that precedes or follows it. Texts typically lack a global concept of literature, language, reading, writing, and listening. Even grammar is treated as a separate, unconnected set of rules and regulations. This is not what we want, and this is not how we should design our instruction. Rather, we should look for opportunities to tie dimensions of language arts instruction together. There is no reason for treating any dimension of language arts instruction as unconnected to the rest.

Thus far, we have talked about reading, writing, listening, and literature as ways of coming to terms with constructing and organizing meanings. We can now use this central concept to show how one can tie grammar to the rest of language arts instruction, for clearly grammar itself can be understood as an organized system for expressing meanings. Each "subject" of each sentence, after all, represents a focus for the expression of meaning, something that we are thinking or talking about. Each "predicate" represents what is said about, the meaning we are attributing to, the subject. All adjectives and adverbs qualify or render more precise the meanings we express in subjects and predicates. By the same token, each sentence we write has some sort of meaningful relationship to the sentences that precede and follow it. The same principle holds for the paragraphs we write. In each paragraph, there must be some unifying thing that we are talking about and something that we are saying about it.

To put this another way, at each level of language arts instruction we should aim at helping the student gain insight into the idea that there is a "logic" to the language arts. This key insight builds upon the idea of constructing and organizing meanings; it makes even clearer how we can tie all of the language arts together. It reminds us of the established uses for all facets and dimensions of language, and that the reasons behind these uses can be made intelligible. Basic grammar has a logic to it, and that logic can be understood. Individual words and phrases also have a logic to them, and, therefore, they too can be understood. When we look into use of language realizing that there is intelligible structure to be understood, our efforts are rewarded. Unfortunately, we face a special obstacle in accomplishing this purpose.

Usually, students treat the meanings of words as "subjective" and "mysterious". I have my meanings of words, and you have your meanings of them. On this view, problems of meaning are settled by asking people for their personal definitions. What do *you* mean by 'love', 'hate', 'democracy', 'friendship',

etc.? Each of us is then expected to come forward with a “personal definition”. *My* definition of love is this .... *My* definition of friendship is that ....

To persuade students that it is possible to use words precisely, we must demonstrate to them every word in the language had an established use with established *implications* that they must learn to respect. For example, consider the words ‘rise’, ‘arise’, ‘spring’, ‘originate’, ‘derive’, ‘flow’, ‘issue’, ‘emanate’, and ‘stem’. They cannot be used however one pleases, according to a merely personal definition in mind. Each has different implications:

‘Rise’ and ‘arise’ both imply a coming into being, action, notice, etc., but ‘rise’ carries an added implication of ascent (empires *rise* and fall) and ‘arise’ is often used to indicate causal relationship (accidents *arise* from carelessness); ‘spring’ implies sudden emergence (weeds *sprang* up in the garden); ‘originate’ is used in indicating a definite source, beginning, or prime cause (psychoanalysis *originated* with Freud); ‘derive’ implies a proceeding or developing from something else that is the source (this word *derives* from the Latin) ‘flow’ suggests a streaming from a source like water (“Praise God, from whom all blessings *flow*”); ‘issue’ suggests emergence through an outlet (not a word *issued* from his lips); ‘emanate’ implies the flowing forth from a source of something that is non-material or intangible (rays of light *emanating* from the sun); ‘stem’ implies outgrowth as from a root or a main stalk (modern detective fiction *stems* from Poe).

Or consider the words ‘contract’, ‘shrink’, ‘condense’, ‘compress’, and ‘deflate’. Each of them, too, has definite implications in use:

‘Contract’ implies a drawing together of surface or parts and a resultant decrease in size, bulk, or extent; to ‘shrink’ is to contract so as to be short of the normal or required length, amount, extent, etc. (those shirts have *shrunk*); ‘condense’ suggests reduction of something into a more compact or more dense form without loss of essential content (*condensed* milk); to ‘compress’ is to press or squeeze into a more compact, orderly form (a lifetime’s work *compressed* into one volume); ‘deflate’ implies a reduction in size or bulk by the removal of air, gas, or in extended use, anything insubstantial (to *deflate* a balloon, one’s ego, etc.)

There is a parallel insight necessary for understanding how to arrange sentences in logical relationships to each other. Our language provides a wide variety of adverbial phrases that can make connections between our sentences clearer. Here, as above, students need to learn and respect this established logic.

### Connectives

besides  
what’s more  
furthermore  
moreover  
in addition

### How they are used

To add another thought

for example for instance in other words	To add an illustration or explanation.
therefore consequently accordingly	To connect an idea with another one that follows from it.
of course to be sure although though	To grant an exception or limitation.
still however on the other hand nevertheless rather	To connect two contrasting ideas.
first next finally meanwhile later afterwards nearby eventually above beyond in front	To arrange ideas in order, time, or space.
in short in brief to sum up in summary in conclusion	To sum up several ideas.

#### ◆ *Common Problems With Texts*

A critical thinking approach to language arts instruction, with its emphasis on helping students understand the *logic* of what they study, can provide a strong unifying force in all of the basic dimensions of the language arts curriculum: reading, writing, language, grammar, and appreciation of literature. Unfortunately, this unifying stress is rare in language arts textbooks. Consequently, the emphases in reading, writing, language, grammar, and literature do not “add-up” for students. They don’t recognize common denominators between reading and writing. They don’t grasp how words in language have established uses and so can be used precisely or imprecisely, clearly or vaguely. Their lack of understanding of the logic of language in turn undermines their clarity of thought when reading and writing.

Similarly, grammar seems to students to be nothing more than a set of arbitrary rules. Most texts take a didactic approach. They introduce principles or concepts, then provide drills. Specific skills are often torn from their proper contexts and practiced merely for the sake of practice. Yet, without context, skills have little or no meaning. An occasional simple reiteration of basic purposes or ideas is insufficient. Students need to see for themselves when, how, and why each skill is used specifically as it is.

Texts rarely even mention that most crucial distinction: well written versus poorly written. Students rarely, if ever, evaluate what they read. Students do not explore their standards for evaluating written material, or distinguish for themselves when a written work is clear or unclear, engaging or dull, profound or superficial, realistic or unrealistic, well-organized or disjointed, and so on.

Texts occasionally have a short lesson or activity on “describing plot”, “identifying theme”, and “finding the main point”. But students are rarely, if ever, called upon to describe the plots of selections they read. Yet these basic concepts are worthy of frequent discussion. Students should continually be required to describe the plot and state the theme of literature they read or state the main point of nonfiction passages.

Unfortunately, texts seldom have students examine work for themselves, discovering strengths and flaws, distinguishing main points from details, exploring the use of various techniques, formulating their conceptions of these, plots, and themes.

#### SOME QUESTIONS TO RAISE ABOUT THE LOGIC OF LANGUAGE AND GRAMMAR

Keeping in mind the idea that language and grammar are, on the whole, logical, we should ask questions that help students discover this logic. Students should learn *how* to use grammatical distinctions, and *why*. For example, though students “cover” the distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs, they see no reason to make this distinction when they read or write. They should learn to supply implied objects of transitive verbs when they read or write. They should *use* grammatical analysis to help them read vague or difficult writing and to edit writing, not merely practice parsing sentences as drill.

“What is a sentence? How is it different from a group of words? What is a paragraph? How is it different from a group of sentences? What are words for? What do they do? How? How are words alike? Different? What kinds of words are there? How is each used? Why are some ways of using a word right and others wrong? What different kinds of sentences are there? When and how should each be used? Why follow the rules of grammar? How does punctuation help the reader? How does knowing about grammar help me write? Read? When do I need to know this distinction or concept? How should I use it? How does knowing this help me as a writer? A reader? Why and how do different types of writing differ? What do they have in common?”



**SOME QUESTIONS TO RAISE ABOUT THE LOGIC OF LITERATURE**

Stories have their own logic. Events don't just happen. They make sense within the meanings and thinking of their authors. When we ask a question, there should be method to it. The questions should lead students to discover how to come to terms with the logic of the story. We should always have students support their answers by reference to passages in the story. It is not their particular answers that are of greatest importance, but rather how they support their answers with reasons and references to the story.

"What happened? Why? What is the author trying to convey? Why is this important? What is the main character like? How do you know? What parts of the book gave you that idea? What has shaped the main character? How has this person shaped others? Why do the characters experience their worlds as they do? How do those experiences relate to my experience or to those of people around me? How realistic are the characters? How consistent? If they aren't (realistic, consistent) why not? Is it a flaw in the work, or does it serve some purpose? What conflicts occur in the story? What is the nature of this conflict? What is its deeper meaning? What relationship does it have to my life? What meaning does that conflict have for the character? For me? Though the world, society, lifestyle, or characters are obviously different than what I know, what does this work tell me about my world, society, life, character, and the characters of those around me? What needs, desires, and ideas govern these characters? Can I identify with them? Should I? How does the view presented in this work relate to my view? To what extent do I accept the conception of humanity and society expressed or implicit in this work? To what extent or in what way is it misleading? How does it relate to conceptions I've found in other works? How good is this work?"

**SOME QUESTIONS TO RAISE ABOUT THE LOGIC OF PERSUASIVE WRITING**

Persuasive writing has a straightforward logic. In it, an author attempts to describe some dimension of real life and hopes to persuade us to take it seriously. We, as readers, need to grasp what is being said and judge whether it does make sense or in what way or to what degree it makes sense.

"What parts of this work do I seem to understand? What parts don't I understand? What, exactly, is the author trying to say? Why? How does the author support what is said with reasons, evidence, or experiences? What examples can I give to further illuminate these ideas? What counter-examples can I cite? How could the author respond to my counter-examples? What are the basic parts of this work? How are the pieces organized? Which claims or ideas support which other claims or ideas? What beliefs does this claim presuppose? What does it imply? What are the consequences of believing or doing as the author says? What kind of writing is this? How has the writer attempted to achieve this purpose? Given that this is what I think is meant, how does this statement fit in? Could this be meant instead? Which of these interpretations makes more sense? How does the writer know what he or she claims to know? Have I good reason to accept these claims? Doubt them?"

How could I check, or better evaluate what it says? How are such questions settled, or such claims evaluated? What deeper meaning does this work have? What criticisms can I make? What is left out? Distorted? How are opponents addressed? Are these opponents represented fairly? Does the evidence support exactly the conclusions drawn? If not, am I sure I understand the conclusions and evidence? What is the source of the evidence? How should I evaluate it? What is left unexplained? What would the writer say about it? Of all the ideas or concepts, which is the most fundamental or basic? How are these concepts used? To what other concepts are they related? How does the writer's use of concepts relate to mine and to that of others? Should other concepts have been used instead? How can I reconcile what has been said with what others have said?"

#### SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE WRITING

Writing has a logic. Good substance poorly arranged loses most of its value. Whatever the principle of order chosen, thought must progress from somewhere to somewhere else. It must follow a definite direction, not ramble aimlessly. In the entire piece, as well as in section and paragraph, ideally, each sentence should have a place so plainly its own that it could not be shifted to another place without losing coherence. Remember, disorderly thinking produces disorderly writing, and, conversely, orderly thinking produces orderly writing.

"What do I want to communicate? Why? What am I talking about? What do I want to say about it? What else do I want to say about it and why? What else do I know or think about this? How is what I am saying like and unlike what others have said? What am I sure of? What questions do I have? What must I qualify? How can I divide my ideas into intelligible parts? What are the relationships between the parts? How can I show those relationships? How does this detail fit in? How does that claim illuminate my main point? What form of expression best gets this idea across? Would the reader accept this? What questions would the reader have? How can I answer those questions? If I word it this way, would the reader understand it the way I intended? How can I clarify my meaning? How could someone judge this idea or claim? How can it be supported? How would others refute it? Which of those criticisms should I take into account? How can I reconcile the criticisms with my ideas? How should I change what I've said? Will the support seem to the reader to justify the conclusion? Should I change the conclusion, or beef up the support? What counter-examples or problems would occur to the reader here? What do I want to say about them? How am I interpreting my sources? How would someone else interpret them? How can I adjust or support my interpretation? What implications do I want the reader to draw? How can I help the reader see that I mean this and not that? Which of all of the things I'm saying is the most important? How will the reader know which is most important? Why is this detail important? Have I assumed the reader knows something he or she may not know?"

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◆ *Conclusion*

As a teacher of language arts, you should develop a clear sense of the logic of language and of the unity of the language arts. If you model the insight that every dimension of language and literature makes sense, can be figured out, can be brought under our command, can be made useful to us, your students will be much more apt to make this same discovery for themselves. Remember that students are not used to unifying what they study. They are more used to fragmented learning. They are used to forgetting, for everything to begin anew, for each part to be self-contained.

Furthermore, they are not used to clear and precise use of language. They are usually satisfied with any words that occur to them to say or write. They are unfamiliar with good writing. Disciplined thinking is something foreign to their lives and being. Therefore, don't expect the shift from a didactic approach ("The teacher tells us and we repeat it back" "We do the sentences in chapter one, then in chapter two.") to a critical one ("We figure it out for ourselves and integrate it into our own thought") to occur quickly and painlessly. Expect a slow transition. Expect the students to experience many frustrations along the way. Expect progress to come by degrees over time. Commit yourself to the long view, to what Matthew Arnold called "the extreme slowness of things", and you will have the attitude necessary for success. Teaching critically, with a critical spirit, is a global transformation. Global transformations take a long time to achieve, but their effect is then often permanent. And that is what we want — students who learn to use language clearly and precisely for the rest of their lives, students who listen and read critically for the rest of their lives, students who become critical and creative persons for the rest of their lives.