One good way to begin a writing task is by asking questions. These questions can begin as personal responses (Do I like this? Why or why not?) or comprehension questions (What does this mean? What else do I need to know here?), but your goal should be to move from internally focused questions to questions that will help you discuss what you’re reading with other people in your disciplinary community (your classmates, your professors, other scholars who study similar subjects). This semester, we will get in the habit of asking questions, both as a way of engaging with what we’re reading, and to providing starting points for writing projects.

Assignment description
Since provocation questions are so important to engaging critically with anything you read, you’ll be responsible for writing a substantive provocation question about one of the course readings each week. These provocation questions will provide a jumping-off point for the close reading assignments you’ll write over the course of the semester, as well as for class discussion.

Submission instructions

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Every week, you will

Write your question
Use the guide on the following pages to compose your provocation question.

Post your question
On the day and time assigned to your group, post your provocation question as a blog comment on the appropriate entry. Feel free to respond your classmates’ provocation questions in the comments.

Grading
Provocation questions are worth two points each and will be graded on a check plus/check/check minus basis (a check plus is equal to 2 points, a check to 1.3 points, and a check minus to 0.7 points). Over the course of the semester, you will submit eleven provocation questions; I will average the top ten.
As we’ve discussed, the first step in the close reading process is reading carefully and paying attention to details and individual words, rather than jumping straight to interpretation. In other words, instead of starting by asking what a text means, focus first on what it says, and then, once you’ve figured that out, begin to ask why a text says what it says, why it says something in a particular way, and what the effect of saying something in that way might be. That’s where the provocation question comes in.

How to write a provocation question

Remember that your question is intended to help you analyze the reading. As such, it should be substantial, detailed, and specific. It should pose one of the why or how questions that you ask after you’ve completed a careful close reading of a text.

Begin with several sentences (at least 2, but no more than 4) that describe what you noticed in your reading that led you to ask your question. Be specific and detailed in describing the situation as clearly as you can. If your question is prompted by contextual or historical information, include that in your description, but remember, your question should focus primarily on what’s happening on the page. Include any relevant short quotations that show the words or phrases that are important to your observations, but be judicious with your use of quotation. The analytic question should demonstrate your ideas and queries; it should not repeat large sections of the text. Be sure to cite page numbers for each quotation in parentheses after the quotation marks.

Once you’ve described in 2-4 sentences what you observed in your reading, pose your question. It should be a why or a how question that addresses what is happening in the text. You don’t need to have an answer to your question, although you should have a few ideas.

Some example provocation questions

Though most of the story is in the past tense, there are times when the narrator slips into the present tense, or even the imperative. Toward the end of the story, the narrator seems to be instructing Sylvia, saying, “Now look down again, Sylvia” (204). What is the effect of shifting from simple past to present tense, and even into direct address, especially at this climactic moment in the story?

Not only does Sylvia often imagine the sea, but much of her natural world is also described in terms of the ocean. When she finally climbs the great pine tree, it is “like a great main-mast to the voyaging earth” (203). What is the relationship between the sea, which Sylvia only glimpses toward the end of the story, and the woods in which Sylvia lives? How does Sylvia’s attitude toward the sea fit in with her other characteristics?

The description of Sylvia’s climb up the tree returns several times to bird’s claws: Sylvia’s fingers and feet “pinched and held like bird’s claws,” the twigs “scratched her like angry talons,” and two hawks fly “with slow-moving pinions” (203). What’s the effect of focusing on birds’ claws, specifically? How do claws, talons and pinions relate to the rest of the description in this scene?

Questions to avoid

Again, provocation questions are intended to provoke discussion. This means that they should require considerably more than a yes or no answer. Other types of questions that are not appropriate for analytic questions include:

Questions that are a matter of taste or opinion
Don’t you think this story is boring? Isn’t Sylvia kind of stupid?

Questions of definition
What are “pinions”?

Questions beyond the scope of the text
Is Sylvia so quiet because she suffered some sort of traumatic event when she lived in the manufacturing town?

Questions that are clearly answered by the text
Does Sylvia give up the heron’s location?

Questions only the author’s ghost can answer
Why did Jewett write this story? On page 204, why does Jewett use the present tense?

How not to disturb the author’s ghost

Note that the last question to avoid is very similar to the first example provocation question above. Framing something in terms of why an author did something a certain way is often tempting, but that sort of question doesn’t get us very far. Since we usually can’t ask the author him or herself, all we can do is speculate, which isn’t all that helpful. And even if we could ask the author, the answer would just be the beginning of a series of more important questions: Do we think the author’s answer is supported by the details of the text? How, if at all, does this change our reading of the text? Ultimately, what the author might have to say is less important than how what’s happening on the page affects the way we read and engage with the text, and that’s what you want your questions to focus on.