

## What it means to “Engage with a text”

To engage with an author or an idea or a conversation or a reading is to do more than just read or attempt to comprehend what someone believes or what they assert in an essay. Or, in the case of a literature class, to engage with a short story or poem or novel or play is going to be more than reading it in effort to comprehend the plot, character, setting, figurative language, and so forth.

To engage is to participate or become involved with those ideas put forth by the author or those ideas that you draw out of a text, to establish meaningful connections with those ideas in ways that require thinking about not only what they mean but what they do and what they do to us.

In other words, when I ask students to “engage with a text,” I want them to do more than read the essay or story or poem or novel or play. I want them to really try to understand what the author is claiming or what they feel the text is proposing and then think about how that claim or those proposals affect how they see, experience, or feel the world.

To engage is also to critique a reading or idea or author, not by dismissing it or he/she immediately as wrong, but by working through a reading or an idea, exploring its limits and possibilities and by debating it.

To engage with ideas is to resist them: to refuse to merely accept them as the truth, to push back and talk back at them, to trouble and disrupt them. It is also to be generous with them: to be open to taking them seriously and to allow them to disrupt your worldview. And sometimes it can be kind of scary to have your worldview disrupted. But that means that you are expanding your views and beginning to think in a more critical kind of way, which is a good thing.

Perhaps the biggest key to engaging is to be an active, involved, serious participant in the process of learning, thinking, and feeling about the readings, ideas, or authors that you encounter.

**Below is a helpful framework for engaging with an author/text. This is geared more toward engaging with essay-style or argument-based texts, but it can be applied to literature as well, especially when it comes to writing about them.**

**It involves three key elements: appreciation, critique and construction:**

**APPRECIATION** involves figuring out what the author is saying and demonstrating a clear understanding of their argument and how they develop and defend it. Appreciation does not require that you agree with the reading. Instead, it requires that you clearly state the author’s argument. What is their main argument? What is the purpose of that argument? How do they defend it? This element of engagement is crucial; you can’t have a critical conversation about (or with) an author until you spend some time really thinking about what they are claiming.

**CRITIQUE** involves assessing what the author is saying. Critique should not involve a total rejection or dismissal of the reading. Instead, it could involve raising some critical questions and/or exploring the benefits or limitations of the argument. An important thing to note here: critique does not mean trash (or reject or dismiss). Critique involves entering into a critical conversation or debate with the argument; it’s hard, if not impossible, to do that if you enter the conversation with the intractable position, “this author is absolutely wrong!”

**CONSTRUCTION** involves applying the concepts from the reading to your own thoughts, areas of interest and research or experiences. It could also involve applying the reading to the topics/discussions of our class. This element is especially important for engaging. Construction is about *doing something* with the author’s argument: applying it, translating it, re-working it to function in unexpected ways, taking it in new directions.

Adapted from the following:

Puotinen, Sara L. "What Does It Mean to Engage? Part One." Web log post. Making, Being, Staying in TROUBLE.

WordPress, 22 Aug. 2011. Web. 22 Aug. 2014. <<http://trouble.room34.com/archives/3618/comment-page-1>>.