

Name: _____

Date: _____

Success Center

Directed Learning Activity

Reading Strategy:

Literary Analysis

R010.1

Directed Learning Activity – Reading Strategy: Literary Analysis

Description: *In this Directed Learning Activity (DLA), you will learn how to first summarize and then analyze literature – concentrating especially on interpreting metaphors.*

Step One: Assessing Your Prior Knowledge of *Metaphor*



The Trojan Horse in Homer's epic poem *The Iliad* is one of the most famous symbols in Western literature. It also serves as an excellent example of the purpose and function of ***metaphor*** in literature.

Before you begin this Directed Learning Activity, take a few moments to write down anything you already know, or think you know, about ***metaphor***. There are no right or wrong answers here. Just try to put down some thoughts about this topic.

Step Two: Understanding the Definition of *Metaphor*

A metaphor is a ***literary device*** writers may use, a ***comparison*** used to express something that otherwise might be inexpressible, or just less interesting to read, using only descriptive language. Think about the last time you were telling a friend a story where you wanted to emphasize a point, or communicate a strong feeling; instead of simply saying, "I felt sad," you may have said something like "My heart turned to ice," or rather than say "I was happy," you may have said something like "I was jumping out of my skin!"

Both of these statements can help us understand the purpose and role of metaphor. Metaphors can sometimes help us communicate strong feelings or ideas better than simple adjectives can. We use metaphoric phrases like “on pins and needles” and “running on empty” to illustrate an abstract idea or feeling. We also use metaphors to compare in order to illustrate and render things in a more vivid way to our readers; for example, we may compare a football game to a military battle or a well-cooked meal to a symphony.

But why? In fiction, metaphors are *symbols*; they represent something, usually an idea or message. Sure, a writer could just come out and tell us what they are saying, but how much artistry or creativity does that take? The best kinds of fiction writers generally respect their audience, and assume they are educated, well-read individuals; an educated, well-read audience doesn’t want to be spoon-fed obvious messages or clichés; they want to be challenged, and they want to have a unique reading experience.

That’s what good writers (and good metaphors) do: they challenge and entertain us.

A writer of effective fiction is like a personal trainer for our brain. Would you pay a trainer who had you sit on a couch and watch them while they did all the sweating, grunting, and heavy lifting? Not if you wanted to improve your physical health. A good writer will make you do the heavy lifting by giving you clues about the meaning, or meanings, of their text through the use of metaphor and symbolism – not spelling it out for you in an obvious manner. Just like with a personal trainer, a writer pushes and challenges you, so in the end, with enough hard work, you will reap the benefits that comprehending a piece of fiction on a deeper level can provide – such as knowledge, enrichment, and education.

Writers use metaphors in a very sophisticated manner; they elevate the metaphor to the level of a fine art. We may never know if the Trojan Horse was an actual structure built by the Greeks to get inside the walls of Troy, and it may not matter, because – as a metaphor – it is masterful. This is one of the reasons why we’re still reading works like *The Iliad* thousands of years after it was written down.

As classic a metaphor as the Trojan Horse is, not all metaphors are so easy to identify and interpret. *The Iliad* was written roughly 3,000 years ago, and a lot of books and poems have been written since then. The use of metaphor since the time of Homer has in many ways become more sophisticated and subtle, and it takes attention to detail and critical engagement by the reader to notice and interpret these symbols in text.

Consider the following statements, and based on what you’ve read, briefly explain why each statement is *true* or *false*.

Metaphor is a technique writers often use to confuse and frustrate readers.

You haven’t eaten for 3 hours, and you tell your friend, “I am starving.” This is an example of a metaphor.

Step Three: Understanding the Importance of Seeing What Isn't Most Obvious

Among other things, the Trojan Horse might be a metaphor for what happens when we fail to look deeper. Homer could have been saying that when we see only the surface of things, we may be missing out on some extremely important information, and that what we don't know could really hurt us. In this instance, it definitely hurt the Trojans not to look inside the Horse, which was full of Greek soldiers.

It's easy to see what's on the surface – what's most obvious. It doesn't take an extremely critical reading of George Orwell's short story "Shooting an Elephant" to know that the story is about a guy who shoots an elephant; in fact, we can pretty much tell this from the title. Our goal as readers is to see beyond the obvious, and to do this, not only is an understanding of metaphor essential, but also is an understanding of *summary* and *analysis*.

One of the main obstacles many students encounter when interpreting a text is they fail to understand the key differences between summary and analysis. Analysis and summary are quite different both in terms of their purposes and their structures. While *summaries* are concerned primarily with restating an author's ideas in order to demonstrate our understanding of a text, the goal of *analysis* is to respond to an author's ideas or arguments. In a piece of fiction such as a novel, short story, or poem, the goal of analysis is to *decode* and to *interpret*.

However, summary plays an integral role in analysis; it forms the foundation upon which an analysis can be constructed. Without first comprehending the facts of a text, which includes the ability to summarize its structural characteristics (point of view, characters, and setting) as well as its main events (plot), an analysis is virtually impossible.

Think of an analysis as an investigation. Most of us have seen on TV, or at least heard of various *Crime Scene Investigation (CSI)* shows. Think of what forensic detectives do when they are analyzing a crime scene. They don't simply look around for a few minutes, then say "Wow, that's messed up" and leave. They slip on the rubber gloves and get down to business. They dig in. They look very closely at all the small – oftentimes, microscopic – details in order to try to see beneath the most apparent and obvious. They analyze.

Similarly, when we analyze what we're reading, we are trying to see beyond the most obvious in order to come to deeper understandings about a given text. Most of the readings we are assigned in a college classroom are texts rich in things like metaphor and symbolism, and it is our goal as critical readers to analyze these things in order to understand text on a deeper level (beyond the obvious) and write about it in a thoughtful manner. We make critical observations that are not be simply restating facts about a text.

Let's develop these critical reading skills of summarizing and analyzing – as well as interpreting metaphors – by working with a text almost as old as *The Iliad*: Aesop's fable of "The Wolf in the Sheep's Clothing."



The Wolf in the Sheep's Clothing **By Aesop**

A Wolf found great difficulty in getting at the sheep owing to the vigilance of the shepherd and his dogs. But then, one day, it found the skin of a Sheep that had been flayed and thrown aside, so it put it on over its own pelt and strolled down among the sheep. The Lamb that belonged to the Sheep whose skin the Wolf was wearing began to follow the Wolf in the Sheep's clothing; so, leading the Lamb a little apart, he soon made a meal of her, and, for some time, he succeeded in deceiving the rest of sheep – and enjoying hearty meals.

To establish a factual foundation for your analysis, first *summarize* the events in “The Wolf in the Sheep's Clothing.” In composing your summary, try to answer the traditional journalist questions: *Who? What? Where? When? How? Why?*

Next, *interpret* the *metaphor* of the Wolf in the Sheep's Clothing. What might it *symbolize* – that is, what types of characters might we encounter in our real lives who could be compared to it?

Last, *analyze* the fable. What is the *meaning* of this story – that is, what is the *lesson* that Aesop wants readers to learn from the events of this story? How is it related to the metaphor of the Wolf in the Sheep's Clothing?

PRINT STUDENT NAME

STUDENT #

Tutor Feedback:

_____ The student comprehends and is able to articulate the key concepts of metaphor.

_____ In Step 2, the student answered the questions and can explain their answer for each.

_____ In Step 3, the student completed all exercises and demonstrates comprehension of the subject matter.

PRINT INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR NAME

DATE

INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR SIGNATURE

STUDENT – DO NOT FORGET TO TURN THIS SHEET IN AT THE FRONT DESK!

*You may not get credit for completing this DLA if you fail
to leave this sheet with the front desk receptionist.*