

DIALECTICAL JOURNALS

The term “Dialectic” means “the art or practice of arriving at the truth by using conversation involving question and answer.” Think of your dialectical journal as a series of conversations with the texts we read during this course. The process is meant to help you develop a better understanding of the texts we read. Use your journal to incorporate your personal responses to the texts, your ideas about the themes we cover and our class discussions. You will find that it is a useful way to process what you’re reading, prepare yourself for group discussion, and gather textual evidence for your Literary Analysis assignments.

PROCEDURE:

- As you read, choose passages that stand out to you and record them in the left-hand column of a T-chart (*ALWAYS include page numbers*).
- In the right column, write your response to the text (ideas/insights, questions, reflections, analysis, and comments on each passage)
- Label your responses. The following is a list of **sample** codes:
 - (CH) Characterization – Analyze details or dialog the author gives you to build his/her characters.
 - (C) Connect – Make a connection to your life, the world, or another text
 - (P) Predict – Anticipate what will occur based on what’s in the passage
 - (L) Literary Device – analyze the author’s craft using literary terminology
 - (R) Reflect – Think deeply about what the passage means in a broad sense – not just to the characters in the story. What conclusions can you draw about the world, about human nature, or just the way things work?
 - (T) Theme - Determine the author’s overall message about some aspect of life through a close reading of a passage.
 - (M) Mood – Determine the mood or tone of a scene and explain how that might be important.

Sample Dialectical Journal entry: *Blues Ain’t No Mockinbird* by Toni Cade Bambara

Passages from the text	Pg#	Commentary
<p>“The puddle had frozen over, and me and Cathy went stompin in it. The twins from next door, Tyrone and Terry, were swingin so high out of sight we forgot we were waitin our turn on the tire. Cathy jumped up and came down hard on her heels and started tapdancin. And the frozen patch splinterin every which way underneath kinda spooky. ‘Looks like a plastic spider web,’ she said. ‘A sort of weird spider, I guess, with many mental problems.’”</p>	1	<p>(CH) In this first paragraph of the story Bambara indirectly characterizes the narrator using rural Southern dialect to let us know our setting is the South and our narrator may be smart, but may not be “educated.” We also learn that the characters are children from the activities described. (L) Nice thermal imagery about the puddle freezing over to let us know how cold it is in the scene. (C) The visual imagery of the twins swinging high on the tire swing reminds me of my own childhood when I had to wait in line forever to use the swing. And how exciting it was once it was my turn. (L) There is more great visual imagery about the splintering puddle, and the kinetic imagery of the “tapdancin.” I especially liked the simile about the spider web and the humor of spider with mental problems. (M) The mood of the story seems to be playful and humorous. (P) I wonder if the entire story will be this way, too? Overall, I am drawn into the story and am already laughing.</p>

CHOOSING PASSAGES FROM THE TEXT:

Look for quotes that seem significant, powerful, thought provoking or puzzling. For example, you might record:

- Effective &/or creative use of stylistic or literary devices
- Passages that remind you of your own life or something you've seen before
- Structural shifts or turns in the plot
- A passage that makes you realize something you hadn't seen before
- Examples of patterns: recurring images, ideas, colors, symbols or motifs.
- Passages with confusing language or unfamiliar vocabulary
- Events you find surprising or confusing
- Passages that illustrate a particular character or setting
- If you find an extremely long passage that moves you, don't hesitate to use it, just employ ellipses (...) to shorten your writing load. You'll have the page number so that if you decide to share your entry, the class can easily find and read along.

RESPONDING TO THE TEXT:

You can *respond* to the text in a variety of ways. The most important thing to remember is that your observations should be **specific and detailed**. You can write as much as you want for each entry. You can use loose-leaf paper for your journals or download the template from the my website: Dialectical Journal Word Template, and type your responses on the computer.

To Get Started: Beginner Responses

- Raise questions about the beliefs and values implied in the text
- Give your personal reactions to the passage
- Discuss the words, ideas, or actions of the author or character(s)
- Tell what it reminds you of from your own experiences
- Write about what it makes you think or feel
- Agree or disagree with a character or the author

Sample Sentence Starters for Beginners:

- I really don't understand this **because**...
- I really dislike/like this idea **because**...
- I think the author is trying to say that...
- This passage reminds me of a time in my life when...
- If I were (name of character) at this point I would...
- This character reminds me of (name of person) because...

The Target: Higher Level Responses

- **Analyze the text for use of literary devices (tone, structure, style, imagery) and how they contribute to the Theme**
- **Make connections between different characters or events in the text**
- **Make connections to a different text (or film, song, etc.)**
- **Discuss the words, ideas, or actions of the author or character(s)**
- **Consider an event or description from the perspective of a different character**
- **Analyze a passage and its relationship to the story as a whole**