Short Assignment for
Methods: and Cultural and Literary Interpretation
Spanish 350

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Introduction for Faculty Colleagues

These multiple short assignments are for SPN 350 Methods: Cultural and Literary Interpretation, a 6th semester Spanish course necessary for any student wishing to major in the language. The course introduces students to the various (research) methods used in the analysis of cultural and literary texts, of any sort, within our field. The course revolves around the study of genre and how understanding certain conventions helps us better interpret a text. There are very concrete skills that students need to practice in order to read and analyze texts in a discipline-specific way. This grouping of short assignments is intended to take students through most (definitely not all) of those skill sets so that they can analyze any cultural or literary text that they encounter, in my course in their other coursework for the Spanish major. One of the things that I am specifically attempting to do with these short assignments is be explicit, for myself and for the students, about the process in which we analyze texts in our field. These short assignments will be mostly ungraded, but will form the core of our in-class discussions and activities; they were also designed to compliment, practice for, and enhance the “Becoming the Author” final project. For me, it is highly important for students to understand how meaning is dialogic and constructed in community, thus most of the assignments are structured as group work, but each individual must prepare in advance what they will contribute to that creation of a deeper meaning. In the past I’ve always conducted these activities in-class, on-the-spot and while some students were able to catch on quickly, others floundered miserably because of the varying linguistic levels with which students come into the course. My hope is that by having these assignments written out and circulated in advance, with the process broken down into discrete steps (for the individual and group work), students will be much more successful at interpreting texts, making meaning together, and articulating their substantiated ideas. Only when I look at the students’ final “short” assignment (entitled “From Start to Finish”) in conjunction with their final “long” assignment will I know if all this explicit skill-building practice has been successful.
The Assignment I Distribute to Students

SPN 350 - Methods: and Cultural and Literary Interpretation

Becoming the Researcher Project: “Give Me a Text, Any Text”

Textual Analysis

An overarching goal of the Spanish program and of this course is to read, think, and write more critically. Why have such a goal? So you can take ANY text and analyze it deeply. Why is being able to take any text and analyze it deeply so important?! For a myriad of reasons, but here are a few standout ones: so you can examine how authors perceive and process their world to better understand and make sense of your world; so you can figure out how the big picture is enhanced by the details and how the details are enhanced by understanding the big picture; so you can question all texts and seek out missing information or areas in which you need more inquiry, reflection, and learning; and all of this so you do not accept any text at its face value and therefore ably defend yourself in a world in which you are constantly bombarded with information (some reliable and other not so much so).

“Big Picture”

You are going to be doing multiple assignments to practice the analytical skills necessary for effective, deep textual analysis.

[For all three Narrative, Poetry, and Drama Units]

Assignment - Creating the Context PP
(individually, but rotates person in group)

Assignment Description

You will create and present to the class a 1-slide Power Point that situates a short story, poem, or drama within a context.

Process

1. Research and answer—Who is the author? When did he/she live? What were the important discussions or cultural concerns related to events at the time? How did the artistic expressions (literature in this instance, but it could be art, music, architecture, etc.) of the time respond or process such discussions or concerns?

2. Create a PP slide and present info to the class in a 5 minute maximum presentation.
Assignment - Genre Specific Conventions and Devices PP
(as a group)

Assignment Description
You will create a 1 or 2-slide Power Point that identifies and defines the characteristics of the genre AND the literary devices typically used in that genre.

Process
1. One person in the group drafts a PP slide with common characteristics of the genre.

2. One person in the group drafts a PP slide with typical literary devices used for that genre.

3. A second person in the group finds examples from the readings that exemplify those characteristics and adds it to the PP slide.

4. A second person in the group finds examples from the readings that exemplify those literary devices and adds it to the PP slide.

5. As a group you read over the PP slides, figure out what content can be improved or clarified, and revise both slides.

6. Post your slide on Moodle.

Assignment - Carving Up the Text
(individually)

Assignment Description
You will write notes in the margin of an assigned text.

Process
1. Print out a hard copy of an assigned text. Read it.

2. Based off the model in class: Write questions in the margin. Highlight the connections you see. Indicate where you don’t understand what is going on in the text. Identify what you need to know more about to understand the text better (context, time period, culture, etc.).

3. Make a pdf copy of your “carved up” text. Post it on Moodle.
Assignment - Using Textual Support  
(individually)

Assignment Description
You will use examples from the text to explain how they come together to create a central theme of the work.

Process
1. Pick one topic the text touches upon.
2. Find examples of scenes, language, characters, images, etc. that demonstrate that theme. You should have at least 4-5 concrete examples.
3. List those examples, with page (or line) numbers.
4. Look at that entire list of examples and refine the topic so that it is more specific. (What do all those examples have in common other than the topic?) Write a 1-2 sentence summary of that theme.
5. Choose one example from the text and explain in 6-8 sentences how it demonstrates that theme. Be as specific as possible.
6. Submit to Profe Nina for feedback.

Assignment - Finding the pieces—What does the Quote Say?  
(individually and as a group)

Assignment Description
You will create a paragraph (6-8 sentence) explanation of a quote.

Process
1. Choose one quote from the text that you think is important or crucial because it exemplifies something central about the text.
2. Circle the various pieces in the text and write notes on those pieces (we’ll model this in class so follow the same process).
3. Write a one sentence “translation” of the quote (basically, what does the quote say using your own words). This is the literal meaning of the passage/quote.
Assignment - Seeing the Big Picture AND the Small Details (individually)

Assignment Description
You will explain how various smaller themes build and coalesce to create an overarching message or deeper meaning of the text.

Process
1. Write down what you consider to be the “message” or meaning of the text (the “on the surface” and the “below the surface” meanings).

2. Note at least 4-5 themes you notice present in the text. Write a 1-sentence explanation of each of those themes.

3. Find a few concrete examples from the text that exemplify each of those themes (specific words, quotes, images, character conflicts, literary devices, etc.) and jot them down (including page or line references).

4. Briefly explain how those textual examples illustrate or demonstrate the themes.

5. Look at the examples and themes—pull out or find a larger, overarching idea that encompasses the various themes. Write it down and explain it in 1-sentence.

6. Go back and look at the examples again. Do you see anything more in those textual examples now that you have a larger, overarching idea (ie. “big picture”)?

7. Go back to your message or meaning of the text (step 1). Revise it based on the overarching idea and examples you found.
8. Briefly explain how the big picture or overarching idea helps you understand the textual examples AND how the textual examples help you understand better the big picture or message of the text.

9. Submit to Profe Nina for feedback.

Assignment - Adding Layers to your Interpretation
(individually and as a group)

Assignment Description
You will write an annotated bibliography entry for 1 academic article.

Process
1. As a group, decide on one assigned text you’d all like to research or discuss further.

2. Find one academic article in the MLA database about the text that your group decides upon.

3. Write a 2-3 sentence interpretation of the literary text (this needs to be your OWN interpretation), plus an brief explanation of how you came to that interpretation.

4. Read the scholarly article. After reading it, summarize the article in 1-2 sentences.

5. Then, answer: What does the author argue and “prove”? What interpretation of the text does the author provide? What perspective does the author take or HOW does the author “prove” his/her interpretation?

6. Once you’ve answered these questions, write the annotated bibliography entry. Make sure to properly cite the entry (MLA style, please).

7. Using a GoogleDoc share your annotated entry with your group members. Read your group members’ entries before class. In your notes, write a 3-4 sentence explanation of how the academic article adds, enhances, complicates, refutes, etc. your original interpretation.

8. In small-group class discussion, use the various annotated bibliographic entries to come to an integrated interpretation of the text. As a group write a 2-3 sentence interpretation of the text and explanation of how you came to that interpretation.
9. Submit your group annotated bibliography and interpretation to Profe Nina for feedback.

Assignment - Making Connections
(individually and as a group)

Assignment Description
You will write a group essay.

Process
1. Before class, create a graphic organizer of how the various readings in the unit connect or overlap. Brainstorm ideas as to how to respond to the essay questions (posted on Moodle).

2. In your small groups, share those connections and responses. Find a consensus on the one or two most prominent connections or responses.

3. Find concrete examples in the text that support your ideas.

4. Turn the essay question into a thesis statement; revise the thesis statement so that it is as specific as possible and proposes what you are going to prove or argue in your response.

5. “Chunk out” the various parts of the essay (introduction, body paragraphs with specific examples from the texts, conclusion).

6. Read and revise, read and revise.

7. Submit group essay to Profe Nina for feedback.

Assignment - Writing a Prospectus
(individually and as a group)

Assignment Description
You will write a prospectus for an academic research paper you will potentially write.

Process
1. Go back to all of your prior assignments and look them over, particularly your group annotated bibliography. Decide what interpretive problem, complexity or research question you want to address in one (or two) of the
assigned texts. Explain and show how the problem, complexity or research question arises from your chosen text.

2. Write a brief interpretation based on the themes and overarching idea you find in the text. Find and write down concrete textual examples that support and substantiate your logical, plausible interpretation of the text.

3. Write a preliminary thesis statement stating what you are going to “prove” or argue about the text. Make sure to indicate why it is an important issue to look into or explore.

4. Go out and find at least 3-4 academic/scholarly sources on the topic or text. Write annotated bibliography entries for each of your sources (and if done as a group, add them to the GoogleDoc to share). Also, add 1-2 sentences explaining how the academic sources complicate, support, exemplify, etc. your interpretation of the text (in other words, what do the academic sources add to your interpretation).

5. Explain how and in what way your interpretation and the scholars’ interpretation advance our understanding of the text (and the embedded culture, socio-historic conflicts, context, etc).

6. Put all these pieces together and write a prospectus about the paper you would write (if you had the time!): What text are you analyzing and why? What question or problem are you trying to resolve? How did that question or problem arise from the text? How does that question or problem fit into the larger conversation about the text? Why is that question or problem important or significant (or what does the question or problem help explain about the text)? What textual examples support or substantiate your claims about the text? What do other researchers say about the question, problem, or text? How does your interpretation add, contest, expand, refute, etc. what others say? Ultimately, what are you going to prove or argue about the text and how?

7. Submit prospectus to Profe Nina Namaste for feedback.
1. Reflect on all the ways we’ve practiced the skills related to analysis throughout the semester. Pick your favorite book, song, poem, movie, drama, artwork, score, advertisement, etc. Explain, step-by-tiny-step, how your go about making sense of that text. Think: How do you physically “read” it? How do you make a preliminary interpretation? How do you go about getting the necessary “outside” information to create a richer context of when, why, how, where the text was produced? How do you find out what others think of the text? How does your interpretation change based on others’ views? How do you incorporate, use, or change others’ views to make your own understanding of the text more meaningful? How does the text connect to other works, past or present? How do you connect with the text? How does the text help you understand something larger about the world in which we live? How does all this analysis help you “see” something about the text that you didn’t see before? As a result of all this analysis, what questions arose or opened up about the text that you hadn’t considered before?

2. Submit to Profe Nina at the final exam time.