ENG104
Reading Strategies

“One must be an inventor to read well. There is then creative reading as well as creative writing.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson in “The American Scholar

The Russian writer, Vladimir Nabakov, once explained that readers of fiction must engage as scientists and as artists, which suggests in part that we need to read more than once, that we need to engage not only our intellect and imagination, but our emotions as well.

First Readings: On your first reading, read for pleasure. Relax and enjoy yourself. Try to read the entire story in one sitting. Don’t try to make sense of everything on a first reading. And don’t expect that the story will reveal all its mysteries on this first reading. Once completed, contemplate how the story makes you feel. Did you feel anger, fear, resentment, pity, sorrow, happiness, light-heartedness? Did your feelings change about any of the characters during the course of the story? After you finished reading? Did you have connections with the setting or the time period of the issues conveyed?

An excellent way to engage with the stories is to keep a response journal. Try this: after a first reading, write down your reactions to characters, images, language, actions, or any other elements that catch your attention or imagination as you read. These initial impressions often provide paths into a work; they may provide the material for a lively class discussion or lead to an exciting story analysis. At the very least, you’ve given yourself the opportunity to discover how you feel and what you think about the story by writing.

Second Readings should bring out your “scientific temperament.” If you don’t already have a dictionary by your side for the first reading, be sure to use one now. Notice how the author uses language. GO SLOWLY. “Concentrate,” our editor Ann Charters advises, “so that the words of the story can live within you.” Think as you read. Ask questions of the text. Establish relations between characters, actions, images, or whatever else seems important. Read the parts you think are important, beautiful, or simply pleasurable over and over.

circles As you read, get in the habit of annotating your text. Develop your own system for engaging. (If you don’t want to mark in your book, use note cards and write down page numbers so that you can easily go back to the passage.) It’s best if you can write in the margins of your text; record your reactions; ask questions; make comments as you’re reading. If you don’t, you’ll surely lose the thought. Highlight, underline, draw boxes and circles around important words and phrases.

It is like cycling, reading is. Can you feel the air, the pure passage of the spirit past the exposed skin?”  William Gass