MARILYN PRYLE

Reading with Presence

Crafting Mindful, Evidence-Based Reading Responses

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

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For Tim, who makes space for me to be present

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Foreword

Years ago I held a series of workshops on writing for faculty at the University of New Hampshire. It was a heady experience—to work with brilliant leaders in oceanography, physics, and business. One thing they all had in common was their disappointment with the writing of their students. Many blamed the English Department for not preparing students for their courses, and more specifically they blamed me because I directed the first-year writing program.

I had them all bring in a writing assignment, and then I asked them to read it carefully and circle the key word—the verb that indicated the basic operation they wanted students to perform. It might be *discuss* or *analyze* or *interpret*. It might be *compare and contrast*, one of the most confusing directions: isn't contrasting a form of comparing (or comparing a form of contrasting)?

Once they had the word circled, I asked them if they felt that students knew what they meant by that word. Did students understand the mental operations—the process—for accomplishing it? Or was it a code word for a process that might be habitual for the teacher but foreign to the student, who then fell back on summarizing? Mike Rose has called this error in instruction "assumptive teaching"—assuming that simply by naming a mental operation, the student can do it. A perpetual task for any teacher is to crack open processes that are virtually automatic to us but not to our students.

The great virtue of *Reading with Presence* is its precision, the way Marilyn Pryle *names* the types of reading responses—and makes them manageable and accessible to students. Whenever I see exemplars of academic writing—such as the accomplished papers that appear in the appendices to the Common Core State Standards—I think, *Great, but how do students get there?* How do they develop familiarity with the various moves of academic writing? For example, how do they learn to quote effectively? Raise nonobvious questions? This book shows a pathway to proficiency.

There are four nonnegotiables in the reading responses Marilyn uses—students choose a category of response, use an original thought (i.e., not a summary), cite the text at least once, and write a minimum of a five-sentence paragraph. The categories she lays out—thirty-eight in all—build from more basic responses like stating and supporting an opinion to more sophisticated ones like seeing archetypes in literature

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or examining craft. Students can always choose the type of response to write, but they are encouraged to expand their repertoire—and to reflect on their own reading processes—over time.

As I see it, Pryle provides a manageable entry point for all students, a virtual ticket of admission that all can purchase. She invites students out of hiding. And as we all know there are two basic forms of hiding when it comes to analysis of literature—summary and silence. She asks them to *think*, even if it is nothing more than to have an impression of a character and a reason for that impression.

The book also shows a way to break the frustrating dynamic of the typical class discussion. Even "good" discussions tend to be dominated by a few students, almost always less than half the class. The longer the silent half remains silent, the more difficult it is for them to speak. In the rare occasions when a silent student finds the courage to speak, the reaction is something like "Wow, you have a voice." That sudden spotlight can be unnerving. But in my own sad experience, once this dynamic is set, it is hard to break. Silence soon becomes part of a student's identity. By having something in writing, all students are prepared for class discussion—everyone can enter in. Everyone has a ticket. And as students hear other students, using other categories of response, they can expand their own repertoire.

Another virtue of this approach is the sheer amount of practice students get. There is the old joke about the tourist in New York City who asks a local, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" And the local responds, "Practice." In my view, students are often asked to write longer papers with too little practice writing shorter ones, where they can develop the moves of response. The results are wooden formulaic essays, devoid of what Pryle calls *presence*, of real engagement. As I read this book, I could almost feel students becoming more familiar and at ease with these moves.

Everyone has probably heard another old story, of the tourist, lost in the backroads of Maine, who goes up to a farmhouse and asks an old Mainer, "How do I get to Portland?" And the farmer replies, "You can't get there from here." It often seems that way with analytic writing. It is often difficult to imagine (without rigid formulas) how students can move from where they are to the longer papers they will need to write. This book shows a way forward, with invitations wide enough, attractive enough, and manageable enough—that students will, I believe, decide they no longer need to hide.

—Thomas Newkirk

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Teaching ideas are nothing without students who are willing to try them. First and foremost, I am deeply grateful for the many students who have passed through my classroom and entrusted me with their intellectual and personal growth. This includes students from over a decade ago at East Middle School in Braintree, Massachusetts, where I began experimenting with the Reading Response method described here, and also the students from Abington Heights High School in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania, where I have taught for the past eight years. I am especially grateful to the class of 2019 at Abington, who were in my sophomore classes the year I wrote this book. To all students: I am humbled by your trust, openness, intellect, and heart.

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When school leadership not only allows but encourages teachers to take risks, powerful results happen. I am grateful to Vicki Jones, Andy Snyder, Pam Murray, Mike Connelly, Michael Mahon, and the late Tom Quinn for cheering on my endeavors with confidence and enthusiasm.

My editor, Katie Wood Ray, saw the truest potential of this book even before I saw it; her vision, knowledge, craft, and belief in me has made me a deeper thinker and stronger teacher. I am more worthy of the profession after living through this experience with her. I am also incredibly grateful to be a part of Heinemann, and for the work of Edie Quinn Davis, Vicki Kasabian, Suzanne Heiser, Monica A. Crigler, Steve Bernier, Lynette Winegarner, Kim Cahill, and Brett Whitmarsh.

My parents, Ernest and Patricia Bogusch, taught me to love learning early on, and because of that, I teach. I am grateful for their dedication to my own education and growth, but even more so for their vision of what really matters in this life.

For me, writing happens anywhere and everywhere—in the early mornings and late at night, on marathon Sundays, on beach vacations, in hotels at national monuments, during drives through the desert. My husband, Tim, and our sons, Gavin and Tiernan, support me in all of it. I have come to understand that one of the greatest acts of love is to create space for another to do what brings joy. In that, I have been loved beyond measure, and am grateful beyond words.

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Part One

Reading Responses as Classroom Practice

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I made it through school without ever really having to open my mouth. It was a pattern that began in grade school and continued into college. I raised my hand so rarely that once, in sixth grade, after I had been absent for a day or two and got up the nerve to ask a question in class, the teacher later pulled me aside to thank me for the question and encourage me to ask more. She even gave me a sticker! I felt so proud in that moment—I remember it to this day. And despite my wonderful teacher's best intentions (thank you, Mrs. Stanton!), her pep talk wasn't enough to change my deepest beliefs: I was deathly afraid of being wrong, of looking stupid, of speaking up at all. I didn't even think it was my role as a student to think my own thoughts—my job was to absorb enough of what was being projected to get good grades on the test. And that I did, though I never thought I was smart. Other kids in the class were clearly smart, but not me; I was just doing what was expected, without any real investment in the content.

I took honors courses in high school, but again, compliantly, fearfully at times, putting my time in and not identifying with the smart students. I was seldom called on, and when I was, it was for a one-word, clear-cut answer. I was one of those quiet kids that did her work and didn't cause trouble. I didn't believe I had a voice or a stake in my learning, but I also didn't realize those things were even possible. In class, I often daydreamed. For quizzes and tests, I crammed the necessary information. I never read with my heart. In the end, I graduated in the top 10 percent of my class and got into an honors program at the college I chose to attend.

In most of my college classes, I was able to continue as normal, hanging back, not wanting to be wrong, and not connecting. Others, though, weren't so easy. One day, one of my professors wouldn't let me off the hook. He called on me to comment about the poem we had read the night before, and I was simply too terrified to put forth a thought about it. So I replied in my usual way: "I don't know."

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"What do you mean, you don't know? What do you think?" he pressed.

"I . . . I don't really know." Mortification.

"Did you read it?"

"Yes."

"Then you must have a thought. What did you think about it?"

"I, uh . . ." But I was frozen. My brain locked. The teacher grew impatient and called on someone else, who gave some easy answer about the role of imagery in the poem, an answer which the teacher praised. *I could have said that!* I thought to myself. I didn't realize he would have eagerly accepted something I thought was obvious. I thought he wanted to be dazzled with the meaning of life. In an awkward twist of fate, we boarded the same elevator after class. When the doors closed, he said, "Do you understand that you can't just say, 'I don't know'? You've got to have something to say. You have to speak."

"Yes," I said, wanting to vaporize through the seam of the elevator doors. I understood.

I never forgot that moment. It changed me: Slowly, I began to speak up, to say out loud the connections I made in my mind, the details I noticed in a text, the questions I had, and eventually, the opinions I felt. I already knew I wanted to be a teacher, and I appreciated what my professor had done, but I also knew I never wanted a student to feel like I had felt—dumb despite having understood the reading, and then ashamed for not being able to speak. Of course, I had needed a wake-up call. But I wondered: What could I do to help my future students believe they had something to say, even if it were a seemingly smaller detail? How could I make all students feel like they had something to bring to the discussion, and even feel this way *while* they were reading? My professor was right in his expectation of engagement: If you've read something, you should have a thought. How could I get adolescents to buy in?

Later, as I gained experience as a teacher, I saw that many students were like my younger self, afraid to say anything. They wanted to get good grades,

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but passively—they were too doubtful of their abilities to take charge of their own learning and thinking. Few believed that a purpose of schooling was to develop one's voice (or even knew what it meant to *have* a voice). Of course, I also saw other students who were not necessarily afraid to speak up, but who were completely uninterested in doing work and tried to fake their way through the year. (I've since realized that this could also be a cover for not developing one's genuine voice.) To be sure, there were still other students who were both vocal *and* interested; many of these, however, had trouble coherently formulating their thoughts. As the years progressed, I tried to come up with ways to address all of these situations.

Among the solutions I tried, a system of writing short reading responses—RRs—evolved. This book explains that system. It continues to grow and develop, but the main idea remains the same: *Read, and have a concrete idea about the text to bring to the discussion. You do not have to reveal the meaning of life. You do not have to be "right." You do have to have a thought, one from your own mind, one that is specific, about the reading.* Writing RRs can help all students look more closely at texts and their own thinking, but I've found that there are other benefits that take place over time, below the surface. Students who feel detached from or uninterested in their own learning will start to engage; those who struggle to shape their thoughts will find words. And those who know but are afraid to speak, who get lost in the shuffle of the crowded classroom, will begin to feel the power of their own voices.

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Part Two

Reading Response Categories and Examples

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My family and I spent New Year's 2018 visiting Boston, a special trip that included something for everyone. My goal was to simply walk the Commons and soak in the city air; my husband, Tim, had bought tickets for a special *Looney Tunes* presentation by the Boston Pops; our sons had received Celtics tickets for Christmas. Before we set out for the game, I pulled back the drapes on our thirty-sixth floor hotel room and exclaimed, "Look at how beautiful it is!" I was referring to the Charles River in the sunset. Tim said, "I know! It's a supermoon!" and my sons said, "Cool! How did they get the '18' on the building?" (The Prudential Center had a giant "18" in a perfectly lit pattern in its windows.) We were all looking out through the exact same hotel-sized window, and yet we each immediately assumed beauty in different directions.

This is how each person goes through life—with his or her own perspective, feelings, interests, background, and hopes—even when we are looking at the same thing. So it is with students. They cannot help but see through a personal lens. But with the tools to clarify their thoughts, they can share their perspectives and teach one another. When I told Tim and the boys that I was referring to the Charles turned purple and peach, they noticed it too. I myself marveled at the moon and the "Pru."

I see this phenomenon in class all the time. Once, when a small group was discussing the Hebrew short story "The Book of Ruth," they realized with delight that they had each separately written a different RR about the *same lines* in the story. When Ruth's mother-in-law tells Ruth to go home to her own family, Ruth replies, "Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." Mikayla wrote a Language Recognition RR about parallelism; Ashley wrote a Seeing the Significance RR about the pivotal moment in the plot; Maddie wrote a Character Description RR about Ruth's loyalty; Keena wrote about Ruth's intentions in a

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Mark the Motivation RR. Each student had thought her own response was the obvious one. Each marveled at the insightful perspective of her peers.

In Part 2, you will see a diversity of thought from a beautiful group of student minds through the use of the RR method. The examples in these chapters show students thinking deeply and authentically about a rich variety of texts, old and new, from both whole-class and independent reading. They make meaningful connections and ask important questions; they give thoughtful analyses and find enjoyment in the work of reading and writing. They reflect genuinely about themselves in relation to the texts and the world.

The samples here come from students ranging from sixth to twelfth grade, and the texts referred to include poetry, epics, novels, speeches, memoir, nonfiction, drama, short stories, and art. I have collected these samples from my own high school classroom as well as from middle school colleagues whose students write reading responses using this same method. Compiling the examples for this section was nothing short of an emotional experience for me: reading through a myriad of samples, in a range of grade levels and a variety of genres, demonstrated to me again and again that when students are given a structured and safe space to think in, they will connect with texts in a profoundly meaningful way.

You can use the chapters in Part 2 of this book in whatever way is most helpful to you. Read it straight through to experience the full range of RR possibilities. Use the table of contents to jump to samples that would most excite your students—and share them as mentor texts. Or flip to the categories that personally intrigue *you*. However you read this section, you will find repeated features for each RR category, including specific directions for students, an in-depth explanation of the category, and some teaching tips.

Additionally, each student example of an RR has two kinds of annotations: *nudges* (N) and *observations* (O). The nudges are examples of the kinds of

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questions I might ask to help students extend the thinking in the RR. My hope is that by seeing lots of these examples, you will build a repertoire of strategies for teaching with presence as you interact with your own students. The observations point out important features of students' RRs that will help you better understand the qualities of different kinds of responses.

I've grouped the categories in a way that seems logical to me as an English teacher, with each group revolving around a central motif identified in its title. This felt right to me rather than simply listing all thirty-eight categories in a row. But I don't give students these larger groupings; as described in Part 1, I start the year with the fifteen single categories that I think they can best work with and add categories each quarter. This initial classroom list is culled from categories in the first five groups you'll find in these chapters (The Basics, Parsing the Plot, Going Deeper, Claim and Craft, and Examining Structure). Pick and choose the categories that would engage and benefit your students most, and go from there. My groupings in Part 2 are only meant to help you conceptualize the larger patterns.

These groupings are self-explanatory. The Basics (Chapter 5) are the most popular RR categories, in my experience. Parsing the Plot (Chapter 6) includes categories that focus on plot elements, and the categories in Going Deeper with Inferences (Chapter 7) require more subtle inferences. The Claim and Craft categories (Chapter 8) focus on the authors' main ideas and choices, and the categories in Structure (Chapter 9) ask students to look at the scaffolds that shape texts. The latter groupings, Advanced Connections (Chapter 10) and Literary Theories (Chapter 11), are more challenging. Although middle school examples don't appear in these two groupings, that does not mean middle schoolers couldn't use them; with support, even younger students could succeed with these higher-level lenses. As you read about these more advanced categories, consider your own students and whether or not you think they are within their reach. The final grouping, Responding to Visual

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Texts (Chapter 12), contains categories about responding to art as opposed to written text. Though students can respond to art using several of the other categories, such as Tell the Theme or Mind the Mood, these special visual categories give students specific ways to think about art.

As explained in Part 1, the categories themselves are not fixed entities or "right answers." They are only windows into a text, some more accessible or applicable than others in any one moment. They can shift or evolve, over time or within a single text. Every year, I tweak existing categories or create new ones. Let your own creativity, and that of your students, emerge as you try RRs in your own classroom—because it inevitably will! Use this section as a reference, as an inspiration, and as a springboard to imagine what your own students could do.

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5 Basic Reading Response Categories

Give an Opinion

Directions to Students

Tell what you think or feel about a certain part and why. You can react to an aspect of character, plot, theme, language, tone, style—anything in the text. But you must be specific.

Category Description

This is the most commonly selected RR—when students become comfortable thinking for themselves, they love to give their opinions. But by having to turn the impulse of "liking" something or "not liking" it into a full RR, students are compelled to dig deeper and refine their initial gut reactions. They must take a few steps in their thinking, asking themselves, *Why don't I like this part of the text? Is it the character? The plot twist? The writing style?* Then, they must reread the text and locate a line to link to their feeling. By nudging their minds in this way, they improve their comprehension of the text as a whole.

Some students do have specific opinions right from the start—they know exactly how they feel about a certain element or part of the text. In these cases, the consistent practice of finding a line or paragraph as ground zero for their opinion

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will make them more careful and insightful readers. Often students will have trouble with this—they know how they feel and why they feel it, but pinpointing a line feels limiting. When I ask them which passage they are basing their opinion on, they say, "All of it." They can summarize an entire three pages as evidence, but choosing a specific quote seems daunting.

Student Examples

Give an Opinion for *The Eye of Minds* (James Dashner)
by Noelle, Grade 7

I think it is really sad that Michael doesn't miss his parents. In the book it says, "Between school, the Virtnet, and Helga, he hardly had time to miss them" (location 307). This is depressing. It's like he doesn't even know his parents. Every kid should have the chance to love and bond with his or her parents. Michael is completely fine with not connecting with his. It's almost like he's taking them for granted, which is something no child should ever do because parents are the ones who provide for the children.

N Can you think of a character trait for this quality?

N How do you picture this family in daily life?

Give an Opinion for *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Mitch Albom)
by Joe, Grade 10

I wanted to state my opinion on the quote "Death ends a life, not a relationship" (page 174). I couldn't agree more with this profound aphorism. I do believe in this statement because I think as the memories of a person remain in the living, this allows the relationship to live on. I believe that a relationship is basically two people that have an impact on each other. Even in death, people are going to have an impact on others whether that be lessons they have taught them or the memories they leave behind. I am a firm believer in this because it has happened to me. I still think about my deceased uncle, grandparents, and cousins all the time. What they taught me will always resonate with me. A perfect example of this is when Mitch continues to "chat" with Morrie even after death.

N This RR is definitely an Opinion, but if you wanted to give it another category, what could you say?

O Joe effectively uses a literary term he learned in class. RRs give students a place to try out the new academic language they are learning.

N What did this look like in the book? How and when did it happen?

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Teaching Notes

- In my experience, students have used the Opinion category to examine elements such as characters' choices or traits, plot developments, specific statements made by a character or the narrator, cultural values within the text, the author's writing style, and the applicability or importance of a theme. In the beginning, you may notice students using the Opinion category as a catchall for what they think; as their skills become more nuanced, they will gain confidence in using the other labels.
- You may also find students writing, "It was interesting when . . ." and then proceed to give a five-sentence summary without any substantial original thought. In these cases, push the student to verbalize specifically *why* the moment was interesting: Was she surprised by the character's actions? Intrigued by the description or wording? Excited by the plot turn? You might even tell the student to avoid the word *interesting* in subsequent RRs, in favor of a more specific word. With each RR, students can practice articulating their thoughts, reactions, and understanding more precisely.

Ask a Question

Directions to Students

Write a specific question. This can be a question about something you don't understand in the text, or a larger question (about life, literature, or anything) that the text made you consider. Remember, you must still write five sentences—you can do this by explaining what you understand so far before asking the question, or by trying to answer your question after you ask it.

Category Description

The Question RR is another popular category. In this category, the question itself qualifies as the original thought. Students will write questions not only about confusing moments in the text, but also plot twists, vocabulary, cultural references, and

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the author's purpose. They might ask questions speculating about what will happen. They may even ask philosophical questions about life or metaphysics. One student, Vinny, once questioned not only the vocabulary in a passage from the *Iliad*, but his understanding of vocabulary in general: "My question is, why am I unfamiliar with the vocabulary? Does it have to do with when it was translated and the words I do not know may be outdated?" In this metacognitive musing, Vinny was able to conceptualize the text in a historical context.

In other RR categories, students must prove a point, in a way—they must put forth an idea and offer some bit of evidence. The Ask a Question category, however, is different. It gives students permission to not know, to wonder, to guess. The fact that this category "counts" as much as every other category communicates the importance of *not knowing* to students. It also sets the stage for interesting and productive discussion.

Student Examples

O This type of question—a plot question—is most common.

Ask a Question for *The Hobbit* (J. R. R. Tolkien)
by Mohammed, Grade 10

While reading *The Hobbit*, I wasn't quite sure of why Gandalf kept on disappearing at random moments. In the book, Thorin and the rest of the team was traveling alongside Gandalf, when out of nowhere, he vanished. In fact, it seemed like he was guiding them to a specific area and then disappearing because they could not figure out what to do. For example, the dwarves and Bilbo were riding their horses, and they eventually decided to set up camp for the night and Gandalf disappeared. "Not until then did they notice that Gandalf was missing. So far he had come all the way with them, never saying if he was in the adventure or merely keeping them company for a while" (pg. 67). I think that maybe this was because Gandalf wanted the team to get closer together and know each other better while working as a team to help each other out. I feel like that would be the only logical explanation for this.

O Mohammed answered his own question.

N Why? What is Gandalf's purpose in the book? How is he an archetypal character?

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Ask a Question for *The Maze Runner* (James Dashner)
by Hannah, Grade 7

The situation in the book *The Maze Runner* made me ask myself a question: What if everything that happened in the book happened in real life? What if all of a sudden we found ourselves in a strange place with no memory? How would that make us feel? "That . . . that was the only thing he could remember about his life. He didn't understand how this could be possible. His mind functioned without flaw, trying to calculate his surroundings and predicament" (pg. 1). I would feel scared and worrisome. Also, I would probably get a headache all the time from trying to remember stuff.

O Showing her connection with the book, Hannah asks a series of philosophical questions here instead of a question about plot.

N Explain more about what you think it would be like. Would you recognize your family and friends?

Teaching Notes

- When students link their uncertainties and musings about the text to concrete phrases and lines, they make their questions more incisive—instead of declaring, "I don't get it" or "I don't know" when asked about the text, these students now have very specific topics to bring to a discussion.
- After students reveal their Question RRs in a discussion, their classmates often respond: "I had that question too, but I didn't write about it." Frequently, a Question RR addresses a question the majority of students had, whether they wrote about it or not. Many times, students don't realize they have the same question until they hear a classmate ask it.
- You will probably see that students' own Question RRs are frequently ones that you, as a teacher, would put in a set of comprehension questions if you had made a handout. How much more powerful it is to have students ask the questions of each other.

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