

The Three Levels of Reading

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We often read things on many different levels without thinking about them. However, in academic writing we must be conscious of how to read on different levels. For this class, there are three major levels of academic reading: Literal, Figurative/Symbolic, and Cultural.

Literal readings offer us practical information about the who, what, when, and where: plots, characters, actions, dialogue, and other surface level information.

Figurative/Symbolic reading needs to delve into the realm of how and why. How do certain literal instances mean certain things symbolically? Why does a literal element mean something else?

Cultural reading takes the Figurative/Symbolic and places it within the cultural context. For example, while a hat worn backward might suggest a rebellious nature, if placed in its cultural context, the hat might simply be a representation of the blue-collar worker, specifically a welder how must wear the cap backward in order to protect his head while wearing a welding hood. So, a hat backward on a suburban twenty-something doesn't mean the same thing as a hat worn backward on a rural forty-something.

Think of the three levels of reading as dimensions. In order to fully see and understand the text, one must see it three dimensionally: literally, figuratively, and culturally. Furthermore, in design terms, think of the literal reading as the horizontal plane of reading. It gets you from point A to point B (plot devices, character development, etc.). The figurative or symbolic reading adds depth to that horizontal plane, so think of it as a vertical axis upon which meaning fluctuates. The final dimension is the one that places the reading within a kind of "real" realm. The cultural reading takes the movement (horizontal) and the depth (vertical) and gives a kind of "so what?" attitude by adding a temporal expanse to the interpretations. It makes the reading substantial because it gives readers something which they can grab onto and "feel" in a kind of cultural way.