"Opening" A Text: Some Questions

When we read closely and critically, we analyze a text's rhetoric—its discernible design and the purpose behind that design. Authors, we assume, want to persuade us of a particular point of view (sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly), and so we examine various means of persuasion to determine that point of view. When we analyze this rhetoric in an essay, we try to persuade our reader that our statements about the meaning and intention of the text (or some specific and limited aspect of it) are true, or at least are worth thinking about. We do this in discussion as well. You will be better able to find interesting and fertile topics for discussion and for papers if you learn to ask these basic questions of the texts you read:

"What?" the level of information—plot summary in fiction, paraphrase in exposition and argument.

"How?" the first stage of a text's rhetoric—those devices of language that direct the reader's attention to important concepts in the work, e.g., characterization and metaphor in fiction, the various forms of reasoning in exposition and argument.

"Why?" the second stage of a text's rhetoric—the apparent overall purpose of the text; why, that is, the author wrote it, or what effect was intended* for it. This can range from an explicit call to action to a more subtle direction of the reader's attention toward an idea or an emotion (in other words, to see something—an act, an object, an individual, a concept—in a certain way).

"So What?" refers to our interpretation and discussion of a text. Here we consider the consequences of the first three questions for our reading of and writing about the text.

*By intention we are referring to the apparent consequences for the work as determined by an analysis of its rhetorical design.