

## Reading for Composition Exercise: Making Criteria Explicit

Meg Gorzycki, Ed.D.

### Purpose

The objective of this exercise is to enhance students' understanding of critical reading, and to foster proficiency in their critical reading. The purpose is also to improve their expository writing skills.

### Directions

Read the following passage on the subject of Soviet Realism in Literature and then compare and contrast two short answers in response to the prompt, **“What does the author imply about critiquing Soviet literature, and how might this universally apply to reading all literature?”** The students were told to keep their short answers to 5-8 sentences.

Next, students will determine which is the better composition and why. This task will be followed by a class discussion of the elements in the compositions that influenced their evaluation of them. The class discussion will lead to the instructor's presentation of a rubric that will be used to assess students' responses to their course reading assignments. The rubric will be made available to students, and they are encouraged to refer to the document when writing their own short answers. **[Note: Errors are Embedded in Essays A and B for Instruction]**

**Excerpt from: James, C. J. (1973). *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. P. ix.**

Of course, the Western reader may prefer to judge Soviet writing only by the 'universal' criteria by which he judges other literature; but an important dimension may well be thought lacking if such writing is not also regarded from the point of view of the explicit aesthetic criteria of the society in which the author lives and writes. Certainly, any *scandales* concerning such authors as Pasternak, Sinyavsky, Daniel, or Solzhenitsyn in anything but the crudest political terms is rendered doubly difficult in the absence of detailed points of reference in the sense of a grasp not only of the 'formula' of Socialist Realism but of the principles that underlie it and, at least to some extent, of the history of their evolution.

### Short Answer A

It is not good to judge a book by its cover and the author of this article reminds us about that. He is telling us that. The main idea is that when you understand Soviet writers you have to understand where they are coming from. I think that he is right and that when you read a story by Soviet writers you have to know about them. If you don't understand their lives you might not understand their stories or their points of view and all of the life experiences actions and details that are into making the point of view their personal perspective. This is true for all writers not just Soviet writers. All writers not just Soviet writers have a past.

### Short Answer B

The author suggests that by having a deep understanding of the context in which Soviet writers produce their work, readers are better able to assess the quality, meaning, and significance of the work. He

implies that aesthetic criteria, which might be sensitivity to the narrative's presentation of characters, time, and place, can best be evaluated when readers understand and appreciate the author's sensitivity to his society's standards of aesthetics. The author also implies that it is not enough for readers to know the formula utilized in Soviet Realist literature, to grasp the subtle and complex insights of the stories, readers must also what has brought both the writer and his society to the ideologies, values, and assumptions operant at the time of the composition. The author's assertions are applicable to all forms of literature, as writers organically synthesize experience, social norms, and prevailing ideologies in their narratives, often in ways that escape the attention of the casual reader.

### Analysis, Assessment and Discussion

Instructors may facilitate a class discussion based on the following prompts. The subordinate letters in each prompt below are notes that may helpful in guiding students' thinking. Instructors may want to record student answers and discuss them before "filling in" the gaps in what students observed.

1. What are the differences between the two short answers?
  - a. "A" has seven sentences and "B" has four sentences.
  - b. Paragraph "A's" sentences are shorter than paragraph "B's" and less complex in structure.
  - c. Paragraph "A" has some grammatical and syntactical errors; note the absences of commas where they are needed in the third sentence (after "I think that he is right") and sentence four, which is problematic as it is clumsy in structure.
  - d. Paragraph "A's" topic sentence is an editorial assertion, while paragraph "B's" topic sentence is focused on the author's assertions and what it means.
  - e. Paragraph "A" notes that it is important for readers to understand something about the writer and the writer's background in order to understand the writer's work. Paragraph "B" indicates the same thing, but also offers insight to the meaning of aesthetics and the salience of "experiences, social norms, and prevailing ideologies." Further, Paragraph "B" stats that the writing process itself is an "organic" process of synthesis, and in so noting, conveys to readers that he or she understands that writers naturally blend and combine memories, beliefs, assumptions, observations, judgements, and invented scenarios to create stories. This alerts the instructor to the depth at which the student is thinking about the author's statements and the sophistication of his or her understanding of the creative writing process. The author of paragraph "A" does not convey as deep of an understanding.
2. What criteria might be appropriate in the evaluation of short answers in an academic setting?
  - a. Grammar, spelling, syntax, and semantics. When poorly executed, these elements of writing can confuse the reader, or frustrate the reader's willingness to interpret what the writer means to say. In the academic setting, the way expository writing is written provides the reader with clues about the sophistication and depth of understanding that the writer brings to the subject. Syntax is important because it concerns the arrangements of words in a sentence, which may either confuse or clarify matters for readers. Semantics are important as they concern word choice. The words writers use have the potential to clarify and confuse readers, and also to convey the writer's ignorance or biases.
  - b. Organization. Well-written short answers are concise and present information in a sequence that is logical—which is to say it presents a clear topic sentence that followed by supportive or explanatory statements in a sequential order that helps the reader stay sharply focused on the topic at hand. It avoids redundancy and tangents.

- c. Accuracy. Generally, short answers based on prompts compel students to appropriately use facts or information extracted from a given source or experience. Whether the writer accurately represents events and information provided in sources is important as distortions or false claims compromise the credibility of the writer’s response.
- d. Depth of Understanding. It is not always easy to discern the depth of the writer’s understanding, but it is reasonable to assess students’ compositions based on what was actually written, and not on “what the writer meant to say.” Writers often communicate their depth of understanding why they:
  - i. Offer examples of ideas or concepts
  - ii. Draw or explore inferences from sources
  - iii. Identify and explore implications of assertions
  - iv. Synthesis information or insights from multiple sources
  - v. Appropriately use lexicon used by experts in the field
  - vi. Fairly and systematically explain the meaning and/or the significance of something

3. What might be a helpful rubric for assessing short answers?

A Sample Rubric for Assessing Short Answers Using a Four-Point Scale

Criteria	Exemplary (4)	Accomplished (3)	Emerging (2)	Nascent (1)
Organization and Focus	Strong, clear topic sentence directly related to prompt; sequential statements sharply aligned with topic sentence	Strong, clear topic sentence directly related to prompt; sequential statements largely aligned with topic sentence	Adequately clear topic sentence directly related to prompt; sequential statements somewhat aligned with topic sentence	Vague topic sentence marginally related to prompt; sequential statements not aligned with topic sentence
Accuracy	Outstanding use of facts and information; statements are fair in representing sources, concepts, and events; abundant reference to facts	Good use of facts and information; statements are largely fair in representing sources, concepts, and events; many facts referenced	Sufficient use of facts and information; most statements are fair in representing sources, concepts, and events; few facts references	Inappropriate use of or distortion of facts and information; statements convey bias; few facts in evidence
Depth of Understanding and Insight	Excellent insights; abundant discussion of examples, implications, inferences, significance, or synthesis of sources	Good insights; some discussion of examples, implications, inferences, significance, or synthesis of sources	Few insights; little discussion of examples, implications, inferences, significance, or synthesis of sources	Few insights; lacks discussion of examples, implications, inferences, significance, or synthesis of sources
Grammar, Spelling, Syntax, Semantics	Evidences mastery of semantics and syntax; void of grammatical and spelling errors	Good execution of semantics and syntax; few minor grammatical or spelling errors	Emerging proficiency with semantics and syntax; several minor grammatical or spelling errors	Major errors in semantics and syntax; several minor grammatical or spelling errors

Note that the “mechanics” of writing (such as grammar, syntax, and organization) receive lots of attention. This is to help student appreciate the importance of how scholarly work is composed, and that sometimes even when students have good ideas, they can get lost in poorly written compositions.