

Digging Deeper: Understanding Levels of Meaning

*Sick of being told you are being too descriptive or not analytical enough?
That your readings of texts are too literal or superficial?*

Many students suffer from this problem. They are able to describe what happens in the text, and even state what it might mean, but they fail to articulate how they got there. A lot of analysis actually happens very quickly in our heads; your 'job' as a student is to explain those steps for your marker. Articulate what made those synapses fire in your brain – the language devices, intertextual connections, values, contextual understandings, generic features and so on that you subconsciously drew on to make meaning in your text.

Firstly, what are the different levels of meaning?

Denotative	Understanding the literal situations represented in the text	Little Red Riding Hood is the story of a young girl who strays from the forest path on the way to visit her grandmother and is accosted by a wolf who wants to eat her up.
Connotative	Understanding the more abstract ideas or feelings associated with the language choices in the text	LRRH, as a young child, has connotations of innocence and vulnerability. The wolf has connotations of wildness, danger, violence or a threat.
Symbolic	Understanding how situations within the text, constructed through language choices, are used to represent other situations or concepts	LRRH symbolises any young child who, through not following parents' instructions, might put themselves in danger. The red cape might symbolise menarche; a young girl experiencing puberty.
Thematic	Understanding how the various elements of the text can be drawn together to create complex meanings or messages	LRRH serves as a warning to young women to obey their parents, lest they fall victim to predatory strangers, particularly those men who might take advantage of them.
Ideological	Understanding how texts operate within wider contexts to circulate meanings or messages, sometimes covertly	LRRH reinforces patriarchal beliefs that suggest young women are not only likely targets of men, they must paradoxically bear the responsibility for their own safety, as men cannot control their natural predatory, animalistic nature.



What are the levels of comprehension?

Literal	You can describe what happens in the text	<i>What happens</i>
Inferential	You can infer or understand what this is likely to mean	<i>What it means</i>
Critical	You can explain the processes by which you arrived at the meaning, such as by analysing textual features, drawing on contextual information, considering intertextuality etc.	<i>How you got there</i>
Evaluative	You can evaluate the significance of such meanings	<i>Why this is important</i>

Critical comprehension: how did I make meaning?

- This is the step often missed by students. They fail to explain how they arrived at their interpretation.
- There are a number of factors which may contribute to your interpretation:
 - **Your analysis of language and other textual features**, such as your interpretation of the tone in a character's dialogue, the proxemics in a still image, the structure of a documentary or the metaphors in a poem.
 - **Your contextual knowledge of the text and its creator**, such as understanding that a particular advertisement was created in the 1950's, when gender beliefs and values were different to today.
 - **The intertextual connections you make**, such as understanding the role of the 'final girl' because you have seen other horror films, or the wider reading you have undertaken about the novel you're studying.
 - **Your own context, beliefs, values and attitudes**, such as understanding that a text is about overcoming prejudice because you have struggled with discrimination at times.
- To successfully demonstrate critical comprehension, you must be able to explain, step-by-step, the processes that led to your interpretation. This includes providing evidence, such as quotes that you deconstruct, to support your explanation.

Evaluative comprehension: the 'so what?' test

- After identifying your interpretation (your reading) of a text, always ask yourself 'so what?'
 - What are the implications arising from this text?
 - Why has the composer done this?
 - What are the effects or outcomes of this?
 - Why is this important?
 - What is going on underneath?
 - How am I being positioned to respond?
 - How does this respond to dominant ways of thinking?
 - Who is being privileged or disempowered by this?
 - What does this suggest about the real world and/or its people?