By Christine Gorychka and Bill Martin

# Difference, Design, and Dominance: A Way to Wake Up Passive Readers

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"Did you do the homework reading? That snake poem?"

"Yeah. I even notated it."

"Well, I highlighted it."

"Did you understand it?"

"No. I mean, it was about a snake, but what was the point? I really don't have a clue."

"Did you have any questions about the poem? Anything you thought was interesting?"

"Hey, I just read it. That's as deep as I got."

Many students read, do the homework, and even annotate, but most students will, at least some of the time, read only passively and annotate only dutifully, passing their eyes over the page and passing their highlighters over occasional lines. If they read a text more than once, they read it more than once "for the first time." They do not alter their reading strategy or question the text; they simply read it again in the same way.

What can we do? Probably the two most important things we can do are to teach our students to question and to convince them to reread. This is, however, not an easy task.

### The Three Ds

Students are more likely to question and reread if they are reading a second time for a different purpose and questioning with a different focus. The series of challenges we call "The Three Ds"—reading to find *difference*, reading to find *design*, and reading to find *dominance*—will motivate students to reread and provide an incentive to question from the three lenses of difference, design, and dominance.

We think this approach has the strength of being both simple and flexible. Simple because it asks students to do something (simple) to a text and then see what happens. Flexible because it will work with any text. It is similar to asking students in a science class to find out about a substance by poking it, heating it up, and getting it wet—then looking at the results of these actions. This is an important way we learn about the world: causing a change and looking for effects. The 3Ds approach is about watching for reactions after poking at a text.

Students, in a sense, read each time as a different person with a different interest or focus in mind. This shifting focus leads to a better sense of the whole text; by seeing the same text in three different ways, students see the text more completely.

Using these three lenses to focus the reading encourages students to reread with a different purpose, even though they are reading the same text. This method encourages what Collier (2013) calls a "multi-draft reading" (p. 8). Students, in a sense, read each time as a different person with a different interest or focus in mind. This shifting focus leads to a better sense of the whole text; by seeing the same text in three different ways, students see the text more completely.

As a first step, we ask students to find two players, two aspects, or two elements of the text that can be contrasted. The text might be a poem, a short story, a novel, or an essay. The players could be two people, a person and some aspect of the setting, a person and a decision, or two nonhuman players—a tree and the wind, for instance. It is, of course, possible to choose two completely incidental and uninteresting elements, but students who do this soon realize that a different set of players should be selected if they are going to raise questions in an interesting way. The first reading, then, is to find contrasting players that will lead to some interesting ideas. This "finding-players" task is easy to understand, and students do not have to be anxious about choosing the "correct set" of players since there is no single "correct set." If students choose different sets of players, it is a benefit to the group and a challenge to each of the students in the group to make his or her set of players work. The choice of players is an easy entry into a text, a "stepping in" as Langer (2013, p. 8) calls it. This entry is a chance for students to feel successful in the first reading, even if this reading doesn't yield much understanding. In other words, students don't need to worry if they feel that they haven't understood the text (yet).

In *The Literature Workshop*, Blau (2003) writes about a student who said his first reading of a poem was "a complete waste of time." In response, Blau asked the student why he didn't just "skip [the] first reading and go directly to [the] second" (p.197). Blau is making the point that the "first reading," even when it doesn't seem to help, is essential. By asking students to read a first time just to choose a pair of contrasting players, we give them a way to productively "skip the first reading." They make the essential first step into the text in a very painless way. The selection of two contrasting players also encourages students to look at texts as sites of conflict or tension, a habit that is useful in developing an attitude of active reading.

**A Narrow Fellow in the Grass**
**Emily Dickinson**

A narrow fellow in the grass
Occasionally rides;
You may have met him—did you not
His notice sudden is,
The grass divides as with a comb,
A spotted shaft is seen,
And then it closes at your feet,
And opens further on.

He likes a boggy acre,
A floor too cool for corn,
But when a boy and barefoot,
I more than once at noon
Have passed, I thought, a whip lash,
Unbraiding in the sun,
When stooping to secure it,
It wrinkled and was gone.

Several of nature's people
I know, and they know me;
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality.
But never met this fellow,
Attended or alone,
Without a tighter breathing,
And zero at the bone.

*Figure 1*. Emily Dickinson's poem "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass"

Exploration: We undertook an experiment with the 3Ds process before we used it in the classroom, working our way through a text using the three lenses. We decided to use a poem as the text for our experiment because a poem is compact and at the same time, complex. The poem we chose, selected more or less at random, was Emily Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass." (See Figure 1.)

We began our exploration with the selection of the two players. What follows are excerpts from our written comments after we made our selections.

> **Chris:** To begin with, I read the poem a couple of times and determined two aspects or elements. In other words, I asked myself who the players are in Dickinson's poem and decided to go with the snake and a male narrator who is looking back on an incident from his boyhood. Another player could be nature or fear. But for me, it's easiest to begin with the speaker and the snake.

**Bill:** I took a more abstract pair: event and response. They aren't antagonists. More like co-stars. I'll be exploring what happens if one of the co-stars is favored. In other words, what happens if one becomes the star and the other one is reduced to a supporting role?

### Difference

After students have identified players, they look at them using the first of the three lenses: difference. They should ask what difference it would make to their reading if one of the two players were not represented by the language of the text. The idea of looking at texts with the question "What difference would it make?" is from *The Making of Meaning* (Berthoff, 1981, p. 45). We are not, of course, asking students to imagine that one of the players is removed (leaving no conflict). Instead, we are asking students to imagine a text in which one of the players is not given significant textual presence. It's like actors in a movie getting screen time; in this case, students imagine that one of the players is not given significant text time.

Students should note how the meaning of the text changes when one of the players is not referred to, and then note how the text changes in a different way when the other player is not referred to. After students write their responses out individually, they should discuss their responses with their group. This focus for discussion gives students a better way to "get into" the text than questions such as "What did you think?" or even "What impressed you?"

Exploration: The following are excerpts from our written comments at this point in the experiment. These comments imagine what students might write and then read aloud or describe during their group discussion.

**Chris:** After choosing the players, I bracketed the lines pertaining specifically to the speaker and those that described the snake. It is a bit difficult to divide the speaker lines from the snake lines, although for me, it's still a good idea to approach the poem this way. Then I thought about what difference it would make if the lines of either of the players were missing in the poem.

**Bill:** It's important to be able to imagine the poem or essay or story with a part missing, not something dispensable but something important—in this case, the description of the snake. We could certainly tell this event with no description of the snake. If this had happened to me, I probably wouldn't have given as much attention as the poem does to the description of the snake and its behavior. Also, we could tell the event with no description of the narrator's response.

**Chris:** Without the lines that pertain to the speaker, we really don't have much left in the poem, just a description of the snake: how it moves and what habitat it prefers. I noticed that there are fewer lines in the poem that describe the snake than lines that describe the speaker. Also, the description of the snake often contains figurative language and is, therefore, not necessarily scientific or objective. Take, for example, "A narrow fellow in the grass / occasionally rides." We don't know who the narrow fellow is until about the sixth line. Dickinson could have said, "A snake moves through the grass every once in a while."

**Bill:** So what difference does it make if we tell the event with no description of the snake? It might go something like this: "I know a lot of creatures of nature, and it seems that they know me too and are not afraid of me. We get along. However, whenever I meet a snake, I am startled by it, which is different from being afraid. It's just a sudden shock to my whole body." That does mention the snake, but it leaves out all the description of the snake and its behavior.

**Chris:** If the lines about the snake were left out of the poem, the mystery within the poem would disappear. The reader wouldn't be wondering what it is that is riding through the grass. And there would be no contrast between the pleasant tone of such descriptions as "narrow fellow" and "a boggy acre" and the end when Dickinson sends a chill up the reader's back with "And zero at the bone."

**Bill:** The most intense phrase is that last line: "And zero at the bone." It doesn't even make rational sense, which could be the point of the whole poem. There are moments when our rational vision of the world falls apart and not in spite of the way the world works but because of our human-centric view of the world. That line is about the reaction, but it needs the lines describing the snake to make it "pay off."

Our sharing of ideas about difference has raised several topics that could be pursued in writing a paper about this poem, for instance, figurative language versus objective language or rational response versus physical response. The generation of such ideas and connections with the text should always be privileged in this process rather than an agreed-upon interpretation. That's the whole point of doing this. Students should be reminded that the goal is not consensus within their groups but ideas and questions. In fact, groups might make a list of questions and ideas as they discuss the text through each of the lenses.

### Design

The second lens focuses on design. This focus asks students to view the text from a distance, just as we might view a city from an airplane or a battlefield from a hilltop. Looking at the text in this way, students consider questions such as these: What is the effect of the placement of the parts?, Which player comes first?, Do the players alternate or interweave?, and Are the portions of the text given to the players symmetrically arranged? Within their groups, students should make some written comments, looking at their players through this focus on design. After everyone is finished writing, they share responses.

Exploration: We read the poem again, this time looking for questions and ideas about design. Then we continued our written comments.

> **Bill:** Basically, the poem is divided into two parts, the first being two stanzas describing the event of seeing the snake and the second being one stanza describing the narrator's response. We can say that Dickinson gives the description of the event twice as much text space as the response. And the description of the event comes first, which seems important. Of course, there is no response possible until there is a snake, but it is not necessary for the poem to begin with all the "sympathetic" description of the snake being both unpredictable and beautiful. In other words, Dickinson obviously made a choice to design the poem in this way. It could have been written in a different way, with a different design.
>
> The event that comes just before the end of the second stanza is the narrator reaching down to secure something, an object both familiar and also an instrument of control, a whip. Then a sudden shift and all that was assumed about "the whip lash" is dashed: suddenly the familiar object, which seemed to be losing composure, "unbraiding," becomes the ultimate composed being, the fleeing snake. All that is secure and controllable turns upside down in that moment. It's not about a snake leaping out and attacking. It's just an upsetting of an understanding of the world—something that challenges an idea about human control. It's similar to a person in love saying, "I don't understand what happened. I thought I knew him, but I guess I didn't know him at all." This is the end of the "event" section of the poem. This section ends, then, with a disruption. In the next section, it is almost as if the narrator catches his breath with some general comments about his relationship with nature and then reflects on what has just happened.
>
> **Chris:** I see the poem with a plot framework like a short story that builds to a climax at the end. The first two stanzas build camaraderie between the speaker and reader: "You may have met him," and then the strange syntax "His sudden notice is." In the beginning of the second stanza, the speaker reminisces about seeing a snake at noontime. The reader begins to wonder what the speaker means by "When stooping to secure it." Was he trying to trap the snake? Then in the final two stanzas, the speaker continues to talk to the reader as a friend by boasting about his friendship with nature. And the final four lines climax the speaker's experience. The poem ends rather abruptly and the reader is left with a smack in the face.

During this sharing time, Bill looked at design by considering the positions given to the players. Chris looked at the focuses of different stanzas. A student looking for a writing topic in response to this poem could fruitfully explore the ebb and flow of control in the poem or could think of the effect of being "smacked in the face" by a narrative—does this evoke the way we learn or the way we can change? Does the organization of the poem challenge the common assumption that humans are in charge of the natural world? Ideas for further thinking and for responsive writing are, in other words, being generated by sharing about both difference and design.

**Dominance**

After students have read a text through the lenses of difference and design, they reread through the lens of dominance. Viewing through this lens, they struggle with deciding which of the players dominates in the text. We found that even though one player may have more text time, it did not necessarily mean that that player had more textual power. It is very likely that students will differ on this aspect since it is the most subjective of the three ways of looking at a text. This possible difference of opinion is not a problem, however, but an opportunity. After all, we are seeking a conversation about the text, not an answer that will close off discussion. We are not as concerned about a correct decision about a final meaning as about some good critical thinking—critical thinking prompted by student dialogue and student ideas.

Exploration: After writing about dominance, we shared our comments:

> **Chris:** Of the two players—the snake and the speaker—for me, it seemed at first that the speaker would dominate. He is definitely "in charge." The speaker's tone in the first and second stanzas is relaxed and pleasant using descriptive diction; the reader can picture a snake moving through the grass and the grass dividing "as with a comb." I'm thinking this section of the poem could provide the basis for a good paper topic if a student is interested in diction. In the second stanza, the tone changes a bit. The reader doesn't know what the implication is of describing the snake as a "whip lash unbraiding in the sun." "Whip lash" suggests a harshness for the first time. Then the final lines of the stanza surprise the reader by suggesting that when the speaker tries to pick up the snake, it disappears. In the last stanza, the speaker switches back to his pleasant tone acknowledging that he has many friends in nature. But the final four lines smack the reader with a realization we can all relate to: snakes are scary, and they make us nervous. So in the end, contrary to our normal—human-centric—perspective, the snake turns out to be the dominant player, while the speaker "plays" along.
>
> **Bill:** We can't allow ourselves to cop out and say that both parts—the event and the response—are equally important, that neither is really dominant. The point here is not to rewrite the poem but to see it more clearly. What do we remember after reading the poem? It seems that what we remember is very likely the dominant element. I think what we remember is the phrase "zero at the bone." That phrase is part of the response. Also, to me the response includes the best language, the truest and most powerful rhymes: "me" and "cordiality" and then the strong masculine rhyme: "alone" and "bone." The stronger rhymes could indicate stronger substance. Given the organization of an event and a response, the response seems more important. And in fact, by asking the question "You may have met him—did you not?", the speaker suggests that the first part of the poem—the event—is a common experience and not the main point.

## The 3Ds Activity Sheet

1. Read through the text by yourself, or follow along as your teacher reads it aloud. You are reading only to form a first impression. Then work through the following questions and challenges to prepare for discussing the text with a partner or a group (at Step 4).

2. Read the text a second time, and find two opposing elements, aspects, characters, or "players." Highlight or mark them on the text and then write them here.

_____ and _____.

3. Next, bracket the lines that describe or refer to each "player." You may find some overlap and possibly some lines you don't bracket. In a longer text, you might simply put a note in the margin to indicate sections that designate each of the players.

4. Talk with a partner or group about the opposing elements you selected. It's important to note that you may not have the same players because there are no "right" answers in this activity.

5. Think about **Difference**. As you read a third time, ask yourself what difference it would make if one of the players were not represented in the text? Remember, the conflict is still present, but one of the players is not given textual presence. Write your ideas below:

_____
_____
_____

6. Next, write about how the text would be different if the <u>other player</u> were not represented in the text.

_____
_____
_____

Share your ideas about difference with your partner or group before you go on to Step 7.

7. Look at the text through another lens: **Design**. Reread to see how the author has organized the parts of the text. Write your ideas below and then share with your partner or group.

_____
_____
_____

8. Read the text a final time through the lens of **Dominance**. Focus on which of the elements or players is dominant in the text and explain why below:

_____
_____
_____

9. Share the rest of your ideas with your partner/group. Write below some of the new ideas you learned.

_____
_____
_____

10. Think about what you have learned and make some notes here about ideas you could write about in an essay.

_____
_____
_____

*Figure 2*. The 3Ds Activity Sheet.

During this sharing time, we noticed more topics being generated for further conversation or writing: exploration of diction and tone, common responses as subject matter for poetry, memorable elements of the poem, rhyme as a meaning-producing element, and in relation to the last lines, the way that power works in the poem. This is the direction we want students to go. We want them to use the 3Ds to enter into the text, but then eventually move beyond the limits of the 3Ds to other observations, questions, and connections. (See Figure 2 for an activity sheet.)

**Summary**

These lenses for reading are not intended to exhaustively mine the text for all possible aspects of meaning. Students should not think of the lenses as a way to get to the "real meaning" of the text. Rather, they should see these heuristic perspectives as ways to open up thinking about the text, ways to extend and complicate their thinking. As they work through the three readings, students may have insights about the text that have nothing particularly to do with difference, design, or dominance. They may find, and want to pursue, an idea that is only tangentially connected with these perspectives. This is both permissible and helpful. Our discussion, as evidenced by the excerpt that follows, often involved ideas that were not directly related to the three lenses.

> **Chris:** An interesting idea about the snake is that the speaker calls it a "fellow" in the first line of the poem and then again in the last stanza. I sense a tone of respect along with one of fear. I'd be interested in thinking about the tone established by the use of "fellow" and how it creates the unexpected reversal at the end of the poem.
>
> **Bill:** The narrator uses the term "fellow" to refer to the snake, so there is cordiality about the relationship in spite of the irrational shock at the end of the poem. So what Dickinson leaves for us to figure out, or at least what I would like to pursue, is in what other life experiences we have an irrational first reaction followed by a more reasoned reaction that may be nearly opposite to that first impression. Is this similar, for instance, to meeting new people, who are perhaps from different cultures or who wear different clothing or have different ways of speaking? I think the poem suggests a conversation about how we can deal with our responses to the unfamiliar or the unexpected.

The three readings using difference, design, and dominance are not intended to result in three completely different readings but to support a multi-layered reading that has been challenged and enriched by slightly different readings of the text.

Once students become familiar with the approach, they can apply it to any text they want to see more clearly and understand more completely. Because of the ease of implementation and the flexibility of the results, the 3Ds approach is a good fit for students who need a way to become more actively engaged with a text. Not only that, the 3Ds can be useful in developing in students a consciousness of their place in the world.

In "Letter to North-American Teachers," Paulo Freire (1986) makes the point that teaching a student "how to learn" can never be done directly: "It is by teaching biology or economics that the teacher teaches students how to learn" (p. 213). By using the 3Ds, we want to teach students how to explore and question their lives, but we do this by exploring and questioning a text. By engaging students in an inquiry of a written text, we are attempting to teach students how to engage in an inquiry of the text of their lives. Freire (1970) stresses the importance of "hopeful inquiry" without which, he says, "individuals cannot be truly human" (p. 72). It is, of course, important and valuable for students to develop skills in reading literature so that literature can give them the rewards of wisdom, empathy, and enjoyment. However, it is also important for students to develop their skills of inquiry so they can engage with their situation in the world as "truly human" individuals. In using the 3Ds, we hope students will develop in both these ways.

If students have questioned a text using the 3Ds, the conversation at the beginning of this article might look more like this:

> "Did you read that poem? The snake poem?"
>
> "Yeah. I actually have a couple of ideas about it."
>
> "Hey, do you know what? So do I."

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