

HOW TO READ LITERATURE LIKE A PROFESSOR (Revised May 2025) **by THOMAS C. FOSTER**

Okay, students, I realize this isn't exactly beach reading for your summer vacation. However, I do think Foster has a nice tone and an entertaining style (as far as this kind of writing goes). My goal in having you read this work is 1) to continue to shape your ability to talk about literature and 2) to continue to challenge the way you 'see' literature and the author's intentionality and purpose within the story. The goal of our course this year is really to equip you to use the language of literature, or the "language of reading" as Foster calls it, so that you can read deeply and discuss literature in a nuanced, analytical, and insightful manner. I think Foster sets that framework nicely, and I believe reading this work will serve you well this year.

I would like you to answer the following questions. They are due on the first day of school. They can be handwritten or typed and should be answered in complete sentences. This is informal writing, so you may use "I" and answer the questions personally when appropriate.

1. **Introduction:** What does Foster mean by a "language of reading" (xxv)? What three items does Foster say separate the "professional reader" from the crowd, and why are these so important in interpreting literature? What elements of reading well require practice?
2. **Chapter 1:** You have read a lot of stories about quests. What does Foster say the quest story is really about? What is a quest story you have read and enjoyed (other than those he mentions), and what was that quest "really about"?
3. **Chapter 2:** What is Foster trying to say about communion here? What role do meals serve in literature (and art)? Discuss a story you have read where a meal served an important role in the story.
4. **Chapter 4:** What does Foster mean when he claims, "there's no such thing as a wholly original work of literature" (24)? Do you agree or disagree with his statements here? What is intertextuality, and how does it impact us as readers?
5. **Chapters 5-6:** How do these chapters connect to the previous chapter? In what ways do Shakespeare's works and the Bible (and fairy tales, though I didn't assign that chapter) impact the texts we read? Discuss a story you have read that intentionally references or alludes to another work or works.
6. **Chapter 8:** How does Foster define "myth"? What is the impact of myth in literature (and art)?
7. **Chapter 9:** Explain how rain and snow are often paradoxical symbols.
8. **Chapter 10:** What point does Foster make about the purpose of supporting characters in a story? What are flat and round characters? What are dynamic and static characters?
9. **Chapter 12:** What is Foster trying to say about the recognizing and defining symbols? Does he mean that there is no right or wrong answer as to what functions as a symbol and what a symbol stands for? Explain.
10. **Chapter 14:** In this chapter Foster asserts the importance of recognizing and understanding Christian imagery. Why does he believe that you need to "put aside your belief system, at least for the period during which you read" (126-127)? Do you agree? Explain.
11. **Chapter 18:** What role can "baptism" and drowning play in a text? Explain.
12. **Chapters 19-20:** In these chapters, Foster is trying to assert that the author makes deliberate choices about his or her setting, and readers should pay attention to these choices. What is a story that you have read where the geography or season greatly impacts the story, and what is the impact of that setting?

13. **Chapter 21:** What role can physical deformities play in a story? Explain.
14. **Chapter 22:** What role can blindness play in a story? How does Foster use *Oedipus* as an example of this?
15. **Chapter 24:** Cliff Fadiman said, “When you reread a classic you do not see more in the book than you did before; you see more in you than there was before.” How does this quote clarify or relate to Foster’s assertions in chapter 24? What does he mean by the title of the chapter?
16. **Chapter 27:** What did you notice in the story? Did this chapter help you see anything you didn’t in your first read-through? Explain.

Reflection:

17. Consider the novel you chose for summer reading this summer. Pick one of the assigned chapters from *How to Read Literature* and explain how that chapter is demonstrated in your chosen (or assigned) novel. Your answer should be a paragraph or two in length.
18. Pick a second assigned chapter from *How to Read Literature* and explain how that chapter is demonstrated in your chosen (or assigned) novel. Your answer should be a paragraph or two in length.