Working Questions for Literature Essays

Metro State Writing Center, Fall 2023

Think of literary research questions as falling into two basic categories: internal questions refer only to the text, and external inquiries are about the wider context (how the piece was made, how it was received, etc.) Here are some suggestions for how to interpret prompt questions to shape an essay.

# **For Analysis**

**How questions** ask about the format or the function of specific elements.

**Why questions** ask about the meaning or purpose of the work.

**“So what?” questions** ask about the relationships between claims and evidence or the reasons a reader should believe and care about those observations.

# **For Evidence**

**Who Internal:** characters, point of view  
**Who External:** author’s biography, their place in literature

**What Internal:** plot, dialogue, format, tone  
**What External:** publication details, genre, history

**When Internal:** setting, timelines  
**When External:** era of publication, history of criticism

**Where Internal:** setting, point of view  
**Where External:** place of publication, where it is read

**Why Internal:** aesthetic, tone, themes, imagery   
**Why External:** Purpose, Audience, Reception of the work