

Teaching *Fast Food Nation*

by George Layng
English Department
x5334 or glayng@wisdom.wsc.ma.edu

The following strategies for helping your students approach *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser's best-selling exposé, are necessarily general because they're intended for faculty and staff across campus. Those of you who already have a lesson planned for the book, though, might find the ideas useful for fine-tuning your approach. And those of you who have yet to design a lesson might find one or more of these suggestions useful as starting points.

Critical Thinking: for class discussions and brief writing assignments

1. **Summarizing**: ask your students to write a summary of a chapter or the entire work. Keep the length brief—anywhere from a few sentences, to a paragraph, to 250 or so words. This can be done as a homework assignment leading into a class discussion or at the start of class as a way for students to gather their thoughts. It is also possible to have pairs or small groups develop summaries.
2. **Quoting/Paraphrasing**: have your students focus on one or more specific passages from a chapter or the entire text that they consider especially important or revealing. Limit the size of the passage—from a sentence or two to a paragraph. You can have your students select this passage before class or within class. This approach also lends itself to group work: students can discuss with each other (and the entire class) their reasons for selecting the passage they did.
3. **Analyzing**: Once students have come to terms with Schlosser's argument, they can then start to examine Schlosser's approach and the context for his work by exploring the following:
 - What question(s) is Schlosser trying to answer?
 - What is/are Schlosser's purpose(s)? What does he want his readers to do?
 - What is his tone? What are his attitudes towards the subject? How does he present himself? (angry? fair?)
 - What are the implications of Schlosser's argument?
 - How precise is the book?
 - To what extent does the book consider opposing arguments?
 - What are the unstated assumptions behind Schlosser's argument?

All of these critical thinking activities can be used separately. They also can be used together to provide students with preliminary work for a later, more in-depth writing assignment.

(continued)

Writing Assignments:

1. **Journals:** You could ask students to take the conventional approach by keeping a reading journal for questions and observations about a chapter or the entire work. But because there's a good chance many of your students eat fast food every day, you might want to ask them to keep a fast-food journal in which they reflect on their meals and Schlosser's work.
2. **Short Essays (3 to 5 pages):** Essay topics can develop from any of the activities mentioned above or from asking students to make connections to larger topics and issues in your class. Also consider
 - inviting students to draw on their personal experiences with fast food as one source of information.
 - brainstorming as a class to develop questions about Schlosser's work. You could then have students individually choose one of these questions as a starting point for the short essay.
 - asking students to write a response to Schlosser from the perspective of one of the people he includes in the work or from people who would be influenced by or interested in fast food.
3. **Research Essays:** Students can develop more involved responses to Schlosser's work through a variety of approaches, including the following:
 - Responding to published book reviews about *Fast Food Nation*. Have students collect reviews from a variety of publications—conservative, liberal, industry trade journals, consumer & health organizations, leading newspapers, etc....
 - Examining some of the sources Schlosser uses. How thorough is Schlosser? Does he use facts, figures, and excerpts fairly?
 - Interviewing people who work or eat at fast food restaurants.
 - Updating Schlosser's work. Has anything changed since he published his investigation?

Again, these ideas for critical thinking and writing assignments are general. If you have a more specific lesson, please contact me. I'd like to let others know about the various approaches by using the teaching forum or by creating a website. Thank you.