

## Teaching Philosophy

---

*“My course, among other things, is a kind of detective investigation of the mystery of literary structures.”*

--Vladimir Nabokov

If I had to describe my pedagogical approach in one sentence, I would be tempted to reproduce this statement by Nabokov. I also see my courses as “a kind of detective investigation” into the forms, meanings, and contexts of discourses. I came to this understanding, in part, thanks to my research into nineteenth-century crime fiction’s development of the literary detective. Detectives both interpret and create *narratives* about crime, and I find that the same skills used by the detective are shared by the most successful readers, writers, and interpreters of texts. In my courses, I often encourage students to adopt the mantle of the detective as an interpretive strategy designed to foster critical thinking skills.

This process begins with daily classroom activities and course assignments that are designed to introduce students to complex narratives that must be investigated, interpreted, and analyzed. Each semester begins with familiarizing students with close-reading skills, which I describe as the forensic toolkit of the literary detective. I explain to students that close reading is the art of making narratives out of small details and I have them read selections from the Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle. Together, we draw parallels between Holmes’ ability to “read” the story of a lost hat or muddy boot and the process of close reading. I place an emphasis on active learning, which I encourage by placing students into small groups and having them answer thought-provoking questions on the text. Just as the detective must sift through competing evidence, the students are encouraged to form opinions based upon their analysis; a favorite activity of mine is to have student groups prepare arguments about competing interpretations of the text to demonstrate the critical possibilities of close reading. When we move on to our research writing projects, I again emphasize the importance of thinking like a detective. I assign my students annotated bibliographies that require them to learn the processes of identifying, searching for, and locating the most appropriate critical sources. These skills not only benefit the English major, but translate to other fields as well.

Finally, the good detective brings a variety of experiences to bear upon their work. Similarly, I find that experiential learning can bring diversity of experience into the classroom. When I teach R. L. Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde* in my survey courses, I have students examine the Victorian sociologist Charles Booth’s London Poverty maps and apply their observations to an analysis of the novel. This activity not only helps students understand how the duality of Stevenson’s London connects to the larger theme of man’s duality in the novel, but it also gets them to synthesize information across a variety of different texts. For my upper-level and graduate courses, I bring to the classroom 150 year old texts that the students read, transcribe, annotate and critically examine. This activity demands good detective skills, as students uncover the identity of anonymous authors or hunt down the definitions of archaic words. I publish their finished work on my research website, so they gain an understanding of how scholarly research works and feel that they are making a real contribution to the field of English studies. After all, my goal in teaching is to encourage students to become active interpreters of texts and confident voices in their intellectual communities.