REFINING THE PARAMETERS OF THE BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

The brief encounters should help you to become talented as a close reader. As part of your entry into the profession, you want to be careful, precise, accurate.

One example we can use to illustrate the kind of reading that is useful at this juncture is from *Strangers in a Strange Land*. It's the role of what are called "Fair Witnesses." Point to a <u>white</u> house and ask a Fair Witness what color it is and the witness will tell you "white on this side". The Fair Witnesses will not guess that the whole house is the same as the part they can see, but only report what they sense and experience directly. A Fair Witness will *never* render any *opinion* about what is observed, nor *infer* anything that she or he did not actually see or hear.

1. Awareness of what one brings to the text (e.g. knowledge of some Socratic method, views of other professions, our own prejudgments and attitudes). This obviously need not be spelled out in the encounter. Check the impulse toward free association.

2. Attention to the text, particularly to words and phrases. What might be the key words at work in the text? Am I able to define them from within the text itself (immanent reading)? If I think they are important, I should look at another translation, check the original language, and see what comes of those investigations. Is the translation that I am reading introducing oddities, e.g. Socrates mentions in one of the famous Platonic dialogues about rhetoric that he feels as if he has been hit by a boxer. When did boxing originate? Is that an anachronism?

3. Allowance of the text to speak in its language. Obviously, this becomes a more important consideration with ancient texts. One cannot presuppose that words had the same meanings, connotations, impact, and tone.

4. Carefulness about generalizations, assertions, sweeping statements. One danger here is your own education connected to themes, to synopses of time periods, to critics or theorists, to quick explanations of complex arguments and ideas.

5. Whatever claim you make, you have found some piece of evidence from the text that supports that view. No need for footnotes or endnotes or Works Cited. Putting a page number inside parentheses for a citation ought to be enough, since we are all accessing the same text. Do not summarize (i.e., assume that everyone has read the text).

6. Mapping an image, term, phrase. Call it the history of something within a text. (This can be expanded by mapping how the term, image, or phrase is used in an author's other works, though you would need to be wary of time lapses, etc.) An example would be the "where?" that begins the *Protagoras.* Before you begin your next brief encounter, I

will give you some specific instructions on how you might proceed, so that you can produce a more satisfying essay.

7. Here are some samples of entry points into a brief encounter on the *Republic*.

A) What in section 595 is the verb for "deform," since it seems quite important what is being said there about the way(s) in which poetry "deforms its audience's minds"? Another instance of this word occurs in section 605.
B) What are we to make of Socrates' simile at the beginning of the passage from Book II: "as if we were making up a story"? Stories and poems are different? How?
C) Why might the setting of the dialogue be important? Does imagery from nature play a role in the dialogue? How? Does the number of interlocutors matter?
D) In Book II, we have the claim that young people cannot comprehend allegory. Is there evidence for this from within the text? Is allegory considered true or false discourse, as described at the top of p. 46 in the *Norton Anthology*?
E) What are we to make of the English phrasing "one's own inner political system" at the end of section 607? What does the original say?

The Brief Encounter should be no more than 500 carefully chosen words in 12 point font, double spaced, in .doc, .docx, or .rtf format.

In order to make use of each precious word, you would do things like this:

Instead of "the author of the text," you would have "the text's author."

In order to be as precise as possible, you would do things like this:

Instead of "readers would consider the character named Elvira evil and corrupt," you would have "some people might consider the character named Elvira evil and corrupt, based on an incident on page 35, in which…."