A. Procedure for today’s workshop
2. Write at least half a page or so about your experience reading this story. What was the process of reading the story like for you? What reactions did it provoke as you read? What was the “world” of the story like for you? What confused, surprised, or frustrated you? (In classes I refer to these writing assignments either as “Reading Reactions” or “Experience Reports.”)
3. In a group of 3 or 4 participants, take turns talking through what you wrote and also read an excerpt of it, a sentence or two that seems to capture best your experience with the story. (I like the idea of students reading aloud their entire “Reading Reaction,” but many have said that it makes their group interaction awkward so I’m experimenting with alternatives.)
4. Talk together about your group’s reactions to the story—differences or similarities you notice between participants’ reactions and ways of reading it, and any questions or confusions.
5. Choose a spokesperson for your group and decide together what he or she will report to the large group to characterize your discussion. Especially helpful are any striking similarities or differences in reactions, as well as questions or confusions that still remain.
6. In a class of 25 or so, each small group would report back to the whole class. Here each small group should find one other group with whom to share their report.
7. Back in your role as instructor rather than participant, what areas of focus for analysis of “The Fat Man’s Race” do you see emerging from your group’s discussion?

B. Considerations for classroom use
1. This approach asks students to take on a different role from that to which they may have grown accustomed in their past schooling. Discussing those differences at the outset of a course can help them adjust to the new expectations. I emphasize that in my classes students are expected to speak as much as to listen, that I will not serve as the only producer of knowledge but that we will learn from one another, and that honest questions and disagreement are more valuable for our learning than “right” answers because differences of perspective build awareness.
2. “Reading Reactions” are possible to “bluff” if one hasn’t done the reading, so I warn students that they won’t receive credit if I see little evidence of actual reading in what they’ve written. But, more importantly, at the start of a semester I attempt to help students understand and buy into this instructional approach and their vital role in it. I describe the class as a collaboration between all of us in the classroom, dependent on what each student contributes, in contrast to the antagonistic relationship between students and instructor where each party tries to outsmart the other. Students usually know teachers who seem to distrust them, but many haven’t realized the role students play in developing that level of animosity by attempting to get away with not doing their work. A conversation about their role in the class’s effectiveness seems to help.
3. Because I ask students to contribute their own thoughts, questions, and reactions in class, something socially risky for many especially in their first year or two of college, I work from our first meeting to establish a safe, receptive environment in the classroom. I begin most class sessions with a simple “warm-up question” for students to discuss with one or two classmates. This helps students get their minds and mouths moving, and gets them more comfortable talking with one another.
Likewise, when I ask a discussion question in class, I often have students talk to a partner first before asking for responses in a large group. I also work to find value in every student comment. Nothing will silence a class more than fear of saying something “stupid.”

4. To avoid overly directing and constraining what might transpire between a particular student and an assigned text, in advance of their reading I try to tell students only what’s most essential about a text—the author, the time and place the text was written, and any essential context.

5. I read over students’ “Reading Reactions” after class and use them along with the class discussion to shape and inform the focus of future class sessions on that particular text. For instance, when students were frustrated that Homer’s *Iliad* ends before Achilles dies or Troy falls, we spent the next class session examining the main events of the epic from its opening to its ending in order to see what its narrative arc suggests about its central themes. In this way we turned their complaint into a question that led to greater insight into the text.

C. Rationale (beyond the benefits of student-centered instruction generally)

1. **This approach facilitates students’ understanding and experience of literature’s value.** If, as J. Hillis Miller claims, “Literature is a use of words that makes things happen by way of its readers” (*On Literature*, 2003, 20), then literature’s value in the world exists primarily in its effect on those who read it. A novel sitting on a shelf has value only in its potential to be read and to make some difference in a reader’s knowledge, perspective, or experience. Understanding and appreciating literature’s value, therefore, requires paying attention to what happens to and through readers when they engage with texts. This approach invites students to do just that.

2. **This approach exploits and builds on what students themselves did in their initial encounter with the text, and so keeps the textual analysis undertaken in a class relevant to students’ capacities, perspectives, and interests.** Even a sophisticated scholarly analysis of a text began with a first read full of guesses, confusions, surprises, and misunderstandings, a reading “performance” likely much more approachable for students than the readings usually visible in literary study. Rather than ignoring that early stage, this method makes use of it as the ground on which more sophisticated readings are built. In this approach the course “content” serves a purpose as answers to questions or solutions to problems that students have raised.

3. **This approach both offers a means of accountability and motivates active engagement with a reading assignment while minimizing the ways that school work can over-determine what students do or discover in their encounters with texts.** An open-ended assignment like the “Reading Reaction” helps to motivate students to complete the reading and also to reflect on the reading and their experience with it. More significantly it acknowledges the unpredictability of the encounter between reader and text by making space for whatever the students notice rather than directing their attention to specific matters that the instructor chooses. Areas of resonance or other reactions are difficult to anticipate, but they are a key source of literature’s power and appeal. This instructional approach makes space in the classroom for the unanticipated ways that particular readers and particular texts interact.

For more on this approach and its rationale, see my book: *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching*, Bloomsbury (formerly Continuum), 2011.