**11AP**

**Talking with the Text**

Effective close reading requires active reading, an exchange between the reader and the text that eventually reveals layers of meaning. The first step is to read and reread. That’s a good start, but at some point you will have to talk back, ask questions, make comments. In other words, have a conversation with the text. The following are some close reading techniques that will help you talk with the text.

Asking Questions

One of the simplest ways to talk with the text is to interrogate it – ask questions. Remember that we’re always trying to consider the choices writers make, so as you read, ask yourself why they chose the words or sentences patterns they did. You don’t always need to know the answers to your questions; sometimes, just asking them will give you insights into a writer’s choices.

Let’s take a look at this excerpt from Ralph Ellison’s “On Bird-Watching and Jazz,” an essay in which the writer considers the legend – and style – of jazz saxophonist and composer Charlie Parker, nicknamed Yardbird. In the essay, which was published in the *Saturday Review* in 1962, Ellison refers to both Robert Reisner’s *Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker* (a collection of interviews of Parker’s friends, family, and colleagues) and Roger Tory Peterson’s *A Field Guide to the Birds* (the bird-watcher’s bible) as he comments on jazz as art and examines the myths surrounding Parker’s nickname.

Assignment:

1. Read the passage closely, marking up the text with your own comments and questions about why Ellison might have used the language he did.
2. Reread the passage closely and answer the questions about Ellison’s style that follow the excerpt.

**From *On Bird, Bird-watching and Jazz***

RALPH ELLISON

Oddly enough, while several explanations are advanced as to how Charles Parker, Jr., became known as "Bird" ("Yardbird," in an earlier metamorphosis), none is conclusive. There is, however, overpowering internal evidence that whatever the true circumstance of his ornithological designation, it had little to do with the chicken yard. Randy roosters and operatic hens are familiars to fans of the animated cartoons, but for all the pathetic comedy of his living—and despite the crabbed and constricted character of his style—Parker was a most inventive melodist; in bird-watcher's terminology, a true songster.

This failure in the exposition of Bird's legend is intriguing, for nicknames are indicative of a change from a given to an achieved identity, whether by rise or fall, and they tell us something of the nicknamed individual's interaction with his fellows. Thus, since we suspect that more of legend is involved in his renaming than Mr. Reisner's title indicates, let us at least consult Roger Tory Peterson's "Field Guide to the Birds" for a hint as to why, during a period when most jazzmen were labeled "cats," someone hung the bird on Charlie. Let us note too that "legend" originally meant "the story of a saint" and that saints were often identified with symbolic animals.

Two species won our immediate attention, the goldfinch and the mockingbird—the goldfinch because the beatnik phrase "Bird lives," which, following Parker's death, has been chalked endlessly on Village buildings and subway walls, reminds us that during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries a symbolic goldfinch frequently appeared in European devotional paintings. An apocryphal story has it that upon being given a clay bird for a toy, the infant Jesus brought it miraculously to life as a goldfinch. Thus the small, tawny-brown bird with a bright red patch about the base of its bill and a broad yellow band across its wings became a representative of the soul, the Passion, and the Sacrifice. In more worldly late-Renaissance art, the little bird became the ambiguous symbol of death and the soul's immortality. For our own purposes, however, its song poses a major problem: it is like that of a canary—which, soul or no soul, rules the goldfinch out.

Τhe mockingbird, *Mimus polyglottos*, is more promising. Peterson informs us that its song consists of "long successions of notes and phrases of great variety, with each phrase repeated a half-dozen times before going on to the next," that the mockingbirds are "excellent mimics" who "adeptly imitate a score or more species found in the neighborhood," and that they frequently sing at night—a description which not only comes close to Parker's way with a saxophone but even hints at a trait of his character. For although he usually sang at night, his playing was characterized by velocity, by long-continued successions of notes and phrases, by swoops, bleats, echoes, rapidly repeated bebops—I mean rebopped bebops—by mocking mimicry of other jazzmen's styles, and by interpolations of motifs from extraneous melodies, all of which added up to a dazzling display of wit, satire, burlesque, and pathos. Further, he was as expert at issuing his improvisations from the dense brush as from the extreme treetops of the harmonic landscape, and there was, without doubt, as irrepressible a mockery in his personal conduct as in his music.

Questions:

1. Why do the first two sentences contain qualifiers (“Oddly enough,” “however”)?

2. Why does Ellison suggest that his audience might be “fans of the animated cartoons”?

3. Why does Ellison think a book about bird-watching might be more edifying () than a biography of Parker?

4. Why does Ellison say “hung the bird on Charlie” (para. 2) instead of “nicknamed him”?

5. What is the effect of Ellison’s references to the story about the infant Jesus (para. 3)?

6. Why does Ellison provide the mockingbird’s scientific name (*Mimus polyglottos*) (para. 4)?

7. How does Ellison manage to make this description of jazz sound so jazzy: “by long-continued successions of notes and phrases, by swoops, bleats, echoes, rapidly repeated bebops – I mean rebopped bebops - …” (para. 4)?

8. What is the effect of the dashes in the phrase above?

You may notice that these questions fall into the two categories we talked about in relation to Queen Elizabeth’s speech: the choice of words (**diction**) and the way the words are arranged (**syntax**).

When we talk about diction, we might look for interesting or powerful vocabulary, but we also consider parts of speech like:

**Metaphors** – figure of speech that compares two things without using *like* or *as*.

**Similes** – figure of speech that compares two things using the words *like* or *as*.

**Personification** – attribution of a lifelike quality to an inanimate object or idea.

**Hyperbole** – exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally.

When we consider syntax, we also want to notice interesting constructions like:

**Parallelism** – similarity of structure in a pair or series of related words, phrases, or clauses.

**Juxtaposition** – placement of two things closely together to emphasize similarities or differences.

**Antithesis** – opposition, or contrast, of ideas or words in a parallel construction.

Along with sentence types, such as:

**Compound** – has two independent clauses or sentences. The independent clauses can be joined by a coordinating conjunction (such as "and," "for" and "but") or a semicolon.

**Complex** – contains an independent clause and at least one dependent clause. An independent clause can stand alone as a sentence and makes a complete thought and a dependent clause cannot stand alone, even though it has a subject and a verb.

**Periodic** – sentence whose main clause is withheld until the end.

**Cumulative** – sentence that completes the main idea at the beginning of the sentence and then builds and adds on.

**Imperative** – sentence used to command or enjoin.

We also might look at the **pacing** of a piece of work: Does the writer reveal details quickly or slowly? How does he or she build suspense?