

AP English Literature and Composition Handout – Dialectical Journal

What is a dialectical journal?

According to the New Oxford American Dictionary, “dialectical” means “relating to the logical discussion of ideas and opinions.” As we read poetry, short fiction, dramas and novels this year, you will be asked to keep track of your thinking in a specific way. For each major work we read as a class, you will be practicing your close reading skills by keeping notes. These notes will serve you well in various ways: they might provide some content for an essay, they might prepare you for a seminar discussion, they might help you to formulate questions about the work, its author, or its time period, and they should serve as a source for review as you prepare to take the AP exam in May. The overall goal of keeping this type of journal is to record what you are thinking as you are reading, so that your impressions, questions, and ideas about the text are not lost.

How do I create these notes?

The setup is simple. At the top of the page, list the title and author of the work. Divide your paper in half vertically. At the top of the left hand column, write “quotes”, and at the top of the right hand column, write “notes.” It is up to you to determine whether you handwrite or type your journal entries, but you are ultimately responsible for having them with you as part of your class notebook. If you prefer to type at home, print them and place them in your notebook.

What might a sample dialectical journal entry look like?

Think of this journal as a place for you to interact with the text. As we read, we often have “Aha!” moments. Something on the page really resonates with us for some reason. Copy that portion of the text, citing its page number. Use of ellipsis (...) is fine for long quotes. Then, record your thoughts about the language use, a word that confuses or intrigues you, plot, characterization, theme, allusion, a personal interpretation, a connection to other texts or to your own life. Recently, I read Ian McEwan’s novel, Atonement. Here are two sample dialectical journal entries from its first chapter:

Quotes	Notes
“But hidden drawers, lockable diaries and cryptographic systems could not conceal from Briony the simple truth: she had no secrets...Nothing in her life was sufficiently interesting or shameful to merit hiding; no one knew about the squirrel’s skull beneath her bed, but no one wanted to know.” (5)	The author is creating a unique character here. He shows her need for order, her creativity, and the fact that Briony thinks about her own existence in a way that makes me feel sympathy for this young girl and curiosity about her keen intelligence and sense of purpose in life.

“Yes. Unable to push her tongue against the word, Briony could only nod, and felt as she did so a sulky thrill of self-annihilating spreading across her skin and ballooning outward from it, darkening the room in throbs. She wanted to leave, she wanted to lie alone, facedown on her bed and savor the vile piquancy of the moment, and go back down the lines of branching consequences to the point before the destruction began.” (14)

I’m very impressed with McEwan’s ability to inhabit the mind and the emotions of this character. He captures her wish to start over, to undo what she has unwittingly begun. But he also reveals that she feels some type of pleasure in this pain... his diction here is pitch perfect and demonstrates the angst of this thirteen year old girl and the idea that everything is such a big deal to her.