



**TEXTUAL
LENSES**
lite

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

What are
textual lenses?

Socio-Cultural

Historical

Gender

Race

Psychological

Spiritual

Scientific

WHAT ARE TEXTUAL LENSES?

To understand the basics of textual lenses, you have to understand reading as inherently subjective. This means that the way one person reads a text (or listens to a song, watches a show, looks at a painting, etc.) will always be informed by their individual experiences, cultures, and ideologies. The way one person reads a text will differ from the way another person reads the same text.

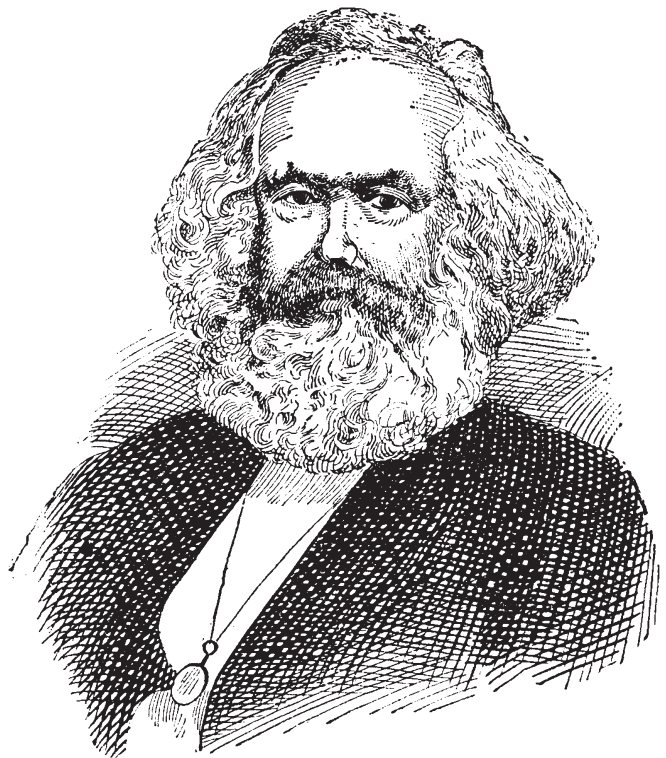
When we say we're "reading through textual lenses," it's just a fancy way of saying that we are intentionally borrowing different perspectives in order to read a text from another point-of-view. Another way to think about this is reading a text through a lens. If you look at the world through a red lens, the world will look red. If you are looking at a text through, say, an economic lens, you might notice how the values of capitalism are played out within the text. (Don't worry. We'll get to examples soon!)

IDEOLOGY: A SYSTEM OF IDEAS AND IDEALS, WHICH FORM THE BASIS OF ECONOMIC OR POLITICAL POLICY

The notion of reading through textual lenses comes from a field of literary study known as *critical theory*. Practitioners of critical theory are concerned using particular lenses (e.g. Marxism) to critique society and culture in order to challenge power structures.

Since the immediate purpose of this class is not social revolution, we will be borrowing methods from critical theory in order to develop a reading strategy. The following lenses resemble those used by critical theorists but are more appropriate for the work we will be doing:

- socio-economic
- historical
- gender
- psychological
- spiritual
- scientific



ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

In order to help first year writers understand how lenses works, we need a text, so we'll start with the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.

For those who need a reminder, Goldilocks is a little girl who wanders through the woods and into the three bears' house. The bears, reportedly, are out for a walk while their porridge cools. Goldilocks proceeds to help herself to the bears' porridge and determines the first bowl is "too hot," the second is "too cold," and the third is "just right." This pattern continues as Goldilocks makes her way through the rest of the house and, eventually breaks baby bear's bed.

Upon returning home, the bears immediately notice that someone had been eating their porridge, sitting in the chairs, and sleeping in their beds. Goldilocks wakes up, finds herself surrounded by bears, and flees the scene.



If you want to use the socio-economic lens to read a text, you need to be prepared to think about how social class and economic systems play out with regards to a particular topic.

WHAT ABOUT GOLDILOCKS?

If you're reading *Goldilocks* through a socio-economic lens, you would start by asking if Goldilocks was taking from the Bears because she felt entitled or because she didn't have resources of our own. This central question about Goldilocks' motives allows us to think through the nature of the interaction between the girl and the bears had she stayed rather than run away. By leaving the Bears' reactions as a mystery, we will never know the degree to which, as a comfortable middle class family, the bears felt a social responsibility to provide for Goldilocks. By leaving this as lingering question, the reader of the story is left to judge Goldilocks based on their own economic ideologies.

If you want to use a historical lens to read a text, you want to be prepared to think about how it represents a particular moment in time and/or the concerns of a particular generation.

WHAT ABOUT GOLDILOCKS?

Some sources date the first publication of Goldilocks at around 1837. A quick Google search on the year 1837 indicates that the world was in a great economic panic. Should we choose to read the story through the Bears point-of-view, we see a family following the rules of the social contract, eating porridge, sitting in chairs, and sleeping in beds, having their belongs devalued through the interference of Goldilocks (symbol of banks and credit) in their home. The fact that Goldilocks runs away before they have their say speaks to the powerlessness of the borrower in the face of big banks.

If you want to read a text through the lens of gender, you need to think about how a text relates particular values and attitudes about sex and gender.

WHAT ABOUT GOLDILOCKS?

As a young cub growing up in a complex world, Baby Bear sees his father as a model of masculinity. At what point will he have to eat porridge that is too hot, sit on overly firm chairs, and sleep in a hard bed? Will he learn to associate masculinity with hardness and femininity with cool softness? Goldilocks eats his "just right" food and breaks his "just right" bed, thus accelerating his journey to adulthood, at which time Baby Bear will be socialized into particular ideals of masculinity.



If you want to read a text through the lens of race, you need to consider what race related attitudes are represented or perpetuated by the text.

WHAT ABOUT GOLDBLOCKS?

Named after her golden hair, Goldilocks embodies white privilege as she helps herself to the bears' home and resources. That she escapes unpunished, leaving a trail of damaged and spent resources in her wake, speaks to the degree to which our society holds different races to different standards.



If you want to read a text through a psychological point-of-view, you must be prepared to consider what it reveals about patterns of human behavior, as identified by popular and scholarly conceptions of psychology.

WHAT ABOUT GOLDILOCKS?

The story's emphasis on "just right" is symbolic of the cultural emphasis we place on perfection. We see Goldilocks engage in a compulsive quest for the most temperate and the most comfortable. The fact that she damages everything she touches symbolizes the unattainability of such perfection. When Goldilocks fails to achieve perfection, she is, in her mind, attacked by a group of vicious bears. Her subconscious sees imperfection as danger.



If you want to read a text through a spiritual lens, you need to think about how it might be understood as a symbol of or a response to spiritual concerns and faith based matters.

WHAT ABOUT GOLDBLOCKS?

In Buddhism, the "middle way" speaks to the idea of a practical life that avoids extremes such as self-denial and over-indulgence. As innocent children, Goldilocks and Baby Bear, in their cultivation of "just right" are able to walk the middle path, while the adult bears are lost to extremism.



To use the scientific lens, you discuss how a particular scientific concept or question is represented, challenged, or illuminated by a particular text.

WHAT ABOUT GOLDBLOCKS?

Goldilocks, the human being in the story, represents encroachment on the bears' habitat and the damage to their ecosystem. Not only are the resources that the bears need to survive depleted and destroyed, the encounter between Goldilocks and the bears represents the dangers both species pose to one another.



CONCLUSION

Several of these readings of Goldilocks border on the absurd, but they do demonstrate how this kind of thinking works. When bringing these lenses to bear on your own work, you will combine the text you are studying with texts that represent and articulate concepts related to the lens you are using.

