

## AP Lit & Comp – Dialectical Journal Instructions for the Independent Reading Project

### **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 some of the 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 prior to any tests. 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. Clearly, if your handwriting is difficult to read, you should type them.

### **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, face-down 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.

**Feel free to use any/all of the following in your dialectical journal entries:**

- 1. Quotes that reveal significant details about characterization** (this could be just good character description, details that surprised you; characterization that seems out of the ordinary for the character; characterization that marks an important change in the character, etc.)
- 2. Passages that you feel a strong reaction to** – this could include areas that cause you to feel confusion, anger, agreement, disagreement...etc. You can also include questions you have as you're reading here.
- 3. Passages or lines that include especially resonant (strong) description** – record the passage on the left side of your journal, and then comment about that description on the right hand side. What techniques/literary devices does the author use to create this passage? What makes it strong writing?
- 4. Lines or passages that reveal symbolism, motifs, or themes** – explain how the selected passage accomplishes these things.
- 5. Specific examples of the author's style** – again, write out the line and then comment upon it on the right hand side.
- 6. Start with a quotation from a chapter and comment on it – connect it to something larger than the book itself.** Why is it important to society or to the human condition in a universal sense?
- 7. Read between the lines:** Sometimes it's what characters don't say that matters. Cite a passage and explain what's really going on. Show how you know this.
- 8. Cite and explain an ironic passage.** How does irony function in this work?
- 9. Choose a passage and look closely at the literary devices** the author uses to create meaning in the passage. Such devices could include diction, figurative language, imagery, syntax, tone, mood, characterization, etc.

\*\*Choose your entries from varying sections of the novel: some from the beginning, middle, and end.

**Remember:** For your independent reading journals, you need 7-9 dialectical journal entries. **ALL of your COMBINED journal entries should be a total of 1500-1800 words (no more, no less).** Thus, if you have seven entries, they would be about 225-250 words each (1575-1750). If you had nine entries, they would be about 200 words each (for a total of 1800 words).