Task: Look Again

Situation: This is essentially a reading task, although it may be used with clients who are in the drafting stage of papers based on written text, especially if it seems that the problem is the result of a superficial reading, or a reading that has been conducted on the basis of some (probably mistaken) preconceived notion of what the text is about, or what it can be used for.

Instructions: Explain to the client that it’s important to clear the mind of any prior concept of what’s important in the text, or what needs to be drawn from it. Then have the client perform each of the following steps, reporting the results of each one to you before finding out from you what’s next:

1. scan the text to find one interesting feature; this may be thematic or formal. The absolute necessity is that the feature must be interesting to the client, and the client must be able to explain what’s interesting about it.

2. scan the text to find another feature that seems somehow related to the first; “related” does not have to mean similar: the relation can be reverse, converse, contrapositive, etc. Again, the client must be able to explain and characterize the relationship.

3. With the characterization of the relationship in mind, scan the text again to find another feature that shares at least some of the characteristics (sharing all is not necessary). Looking again at this group of three, re-characterize the relationship to include all features equally, if necessary.

4. Free-write for at least 5 minutes (no stopping allowed, including stopping to refer to the text; at this stage the writing must be based only on the writer’s memory) about the nature/meaning/value of this relationship to an understanding of the text. Have the client share and discuss the results.

Outcome: The point is to get the client to forget, for a moment, what he or she “needs” the text to be, and to see it for what it is, discovering in the process a way of looking at the text that can lead to new understanding.

NB: this task is based on the method of critical reading described in Matthew Goulish’s “Criticism”