Task: Looking for Trouble

Situation: this is an advanced reading task, useful for clients who have no difficulty deciphering the basic meaning of a text, but who cannot seem to find anything interesting in it, or think of anything worth doing with it. Also, it works best with narrative and argumentative texts, although it can be used with just about anything (including visual and audio texts).

Instructions: not as bad as it sounds. The idea is for the client to scan the text looking for any apparent contradictions, inconsistencies, ambiguities, or signs that the “message” of the text is somehow split or divided with respect to its aim or intended audience. There are no hard-and-fast rules for this, so tell the client that if there’s ever a question as to whether something could be “trouble,” it’s best to assume it is. Have the client make note of as many of these as possible, and then discuss them together. Try to help the client see that these are not flaws in the text, but rather indications of its richness and complexity.

Outcome: learning this skill takes practice, but once acquired, the client will have it for a lifetime. Anyone who can scan a text for signs of complexity has half of the academic game mastered.