

## Reading Rubric

### Strategies for earning points through using margin notes.

If a student attempts to answer the questions which follow a reading, the scorers are authorized to look at the student's margin notes to determine whether the student has met the standards. (If no questions are attempted, then they will not look at the margin notes). Therefore, it is important students make use of the margin notes.

The following key questions usually or lines of inquiry usually fall in support of the adjacent strand on the Scoring Rubric, although there is some overlap with other strands too.

Literary/Informational Text  
DEMONSTRATING  
UNDERSTANDING  
“Getting the gist”

1. After each paragraph, offer a brief one-sentence summary of what happened.
2. Identify and/or summarize sequence of events or the relationship between ideas.
3. Can you pose questions which show you can differentiate fact from opinion?
4. Put a box around any word you are unsure about the meaning of.
  - ↳ Then (in the margin notes) write “I am unsure of what this words means, but based on the sentence and context, I think it means \_\_\_\_\_”
5. Offer questions you may have which show what you are wondering about as you read.

Literary/Informational Text  
DEMONSTRATING AN  
INTERPRETATION  
“Reading between the lines”

1. Present reasonable (perhaps obvious) interpretations, conclusions, generalizations, connections or predictions.
2. Prove text evidence
  - ↳ This may be done by “the statement \_\_\_\_\_ asserts that...”
3. (Informational text): Engage in historical inquiry
  - ↳ Pose questions in **sourcing**: Who created the source? What do we know about the source? Who/what was the intended audience?
  - ↳ Pose questions in **corroboration**: “Do other sources exist which are relevant to this subject? If other sources are not in agreement, what might the differences tell us about the author's intent?”
  - ↳ Pose questions in **contextualization**: Try to place the document in a time/place to help understand how these factors shape its context. “How might the circumstances in which the writing was created affect its content?”

Literary/Informational Text  
ANAYLZE TEXT  
(Informational): “Looking  
at the author's craft”  
(Literary): “Applying  
knowledge of literature”

1. Select any two sentences in the reading, and connect relevancy between them.
  - ↳ “This sentence (use arrow) builds on this one (use another arrow to point out sentence from another paragraph) by elaborating on the first sentence's expression.”
  - ↳ “This quote (use arrow) does not support the assertion (use another arrow). How do we know which is true?”
2. If there is a particularly powerful, well-chosen quote or example used in the work, make a point of stating that.
3. Make reasoned judgments about the author's ideas (support, reasoning, use of sources)
4. (Literary text): Have you any observations about how the author's literary elements?
  - ↳ This includes theme, character, plot, setting, voice, narrator, characterization, tone, and/or mood
5. (Literary text): Have you any observations about the author's literary devices?
  - ↳ This includes figurative language, imagery, points of view, foreshadowing, flashbacks, and/or symbolism.

## Everything Burns: The Psychology and Philosophy of the Joker

Of all the villains in the history of pop culture, the Joker is without doubt one of the most enduring and iconic, sharing ranks with the likes of such immortal fiends as Darth Vader and Hannibal Lecter. And though he has always been popular, it is **Christopher Nolan** and **Heath Ledger's** mesmerizing interpretation in 2008's *The Dark Knight* that has indelibly branded the character onto our consciousness forever.

But why, despite being a psychopathic, nihilistic murderer, is the character so popular – so loved, even? Why do we see that freakish red scar of a smile on so many t-shirts, posters and memes even to this day, years after the film? Why do people say that *The Dark Knight* is one of the few films that has you rooting for the bad guy?

To fully understand the reasons why, we have to delve as deeply as Nolan, Ledger and writer David S. Goyer themselves did while re-envisioning the character. We have to find and recognize that dark, hidden part of our psyche that the Joker's words and actions arouse, a part so deeply embedded that it took a renowned psychologist to uncover. We have to study the psychology and philosophy of the Joker.

### **AGENT OF CHAOS – “When the chips are down, these civilized people...they'll eat each other.”**

People think too much of themselves sometimes. Have you noticed? I'm not saying that's bad, or wrong. I'm not calling people stupid, either. It's very understandable.

We like to think of ourselves as noble, honest, and good, especially in comparison to other people. We like to believe we'd never hurt someone, or cause any damage of any kind. Psychologists tell us of what's called “illusory superiority,” the cognitive bias in us all that causes a person to think far too highly of their positive qualities, and far too little of their negative ones. In their heads, they're much better people than (let's be honest) they really are.

Again, this doesn't make us bad or wrong. It's just something our minds need to do in order to get through the day.

During the English Civil War of the 1600s, a guy named Thomas Hobbes was a bit ahead of the curve in terms of this “illusory superiority” thing, even if he never exactly recognized it as such. He didn't agree with most people's idea that they're inherently moral and righteous. Instead, he theorized that without enforced rules, humanity would revert right back to a brutish and immoral nightmare of a society – one chaotic, hellish and burning. One in which you'd blow up a ferry full of innocents to stay alive.

Today, Hobbes is recognized mostly for his theories in political philosophy, whose ideas laid virtually the entire foundation of Western Civilization. His most famous work was a horrifically dense tome called *Leviathan*. It contains perhaps his most famous quote of all, what amounts to his justification for the existence of government: “...no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Hobbes is saying that without the structured control of government (what the Joker calls the “schemers”), people become animals. Killers. Thieves. In the 17th-century, this was especially influential, and was the major reason Hobbes and guys like him caught on: government, law and order were absolutely necessary.

Basically, much of your life is what it is now because Thomas Hobbes wrote some things down. That's no exaggeration.

Now, if this was Ethics 102, Hobbes and the Joker would be sitting right next to one another, passing notes and giggling. They agree with one another on one thing: when the chips are down, "civilized" people eat each other.

Were we in Political Science 102, however, the Joker and Hobbes would be the guys always getting into fights with one another. If Hobbes could somehow possess Bruce Wayne's technology, *The Dark Knight* would more or less be the same film, except that we'd have a white-bearded Batman instead.

Hobbes supported government for fear of immoral chaos. The Joker, on the other hand, because he's a downright anarchist psychopath (or psychopathic anarchist), would love nothing more than to see that happen.

It's why he puts bombs on ferries. It's why he murders government officials. It's why he tries to corrupt the one person who's a symbol that we don't have to be afraid of people like him (though we really do). The Joker wants to push a whole city into the wicked gravity of madness and anarchy.

But make no mistake: there is a method behind his madness. It annoys me that the Joker only gets credit for being "an agent of chaos" or a raving psychotic inflicting random cruelty. Corrupting the city (that great symbol of civilization) by bringing it down to a primal state, devoid of any meaning or rules, is what the Joker is after. But his "non-plan" is the work of a mastermind. It is anything but chaotic or meaningless. It is logical, clear, and has definite purpose (no matter what Alfred may say). It just so happens to employ an element of randomness. The end result is that the Joker becomes the personification of a philosophical argument taken to its extreme, supporting his nihilistic thesis with the chaos that results from his actions.

Though eventually defeated by Batman, it appears the Joker does indeed prove his point. Harvey Dent was Gotham City's White Knight, the walking epitome of justice, order and nobility. But the Joker turns him into Two Face who then goes on to murder five people, two of them cops, using a chaotic, absurdly meaningless method of flipping a coin to determine their fates. This alone symbolizes the Joker's philosophy and mission to disrupt civilized society's sense of "illusory superiority" and to humble it by bringing it back down to its savage roots.

**I HAD A VISION – "Do I really look like a guy with a plan?"**

Now, let's go in even deeper. To really understand *The Dark Knight's* version of the Joker it is necessary to examine one of his creators, Christopher Nolan. Christopher Nolan directed *Following*. And *Memento*. There was that *Inception* movie too. He started out indie and his films were well-thought-out explorations of Existentialism, the stuff of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus.

Existentialism, as I'll explain more in a minute, asserts the total absence of rules, morals, and codes – except the ones we make up in our heads to feel better about an existence with no purpose whatsoever, period. A terrifying idea. He may be more Hollywood these days, but he still slips in the heavy stuff here and there – he certainly does so with the Joker, his most famous creation yet. He saw in the character an opportunity to play with significant Existential material, a risky angle on a classic villain that paid off.

At the very least, it demonstrates how a society's core philosophies manage to bubble up in all its various forms of pop culture. Philosophy describes ways of looking at the world. Apparently, Nolan dug Existentialism, and it makes sense

that his beliefs and values would inform the choices he made as a director, if even unconsciously.

**A FUNNY WORLD WE LIVE IN – “*I believe whatever doesn’t kill you simply makes you...stranger.*”**

There’s more to this Existentialism stuff insofar as it concerns the Joker. It’s no wonder the quote above is really the first substantial thing you hear the Joker say in *The Dark Knight*. You could say it’s his thesis and that the rest of the film becomes his way of supporting it. With some rather extreme evidence.

Indeed, just what *does* the Joker believe in? What’s interesting is where the quote comes from. It’s a one-letter twist on a phrase you’ve undoubtedly heard before. I don’t even need to repeat it. The guy responsible for that original version was named Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche and his boys, such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, put forth a lot of bizarre ideas at the end of the last century. Those ideas opposed damn near everything that came before them, and scared some people half to death.

What had them so freaked was the apparent hopelessness of Existentialism. While “hopeless” may be too strong a word for it, it does appear depressing. (Don’t plan a date after your Existentialism class; you wouldn’t be any fun at all.)

And here’s the real kicker of everything I’ve been rambling on about: Existentialism has caught on. You notice it lately, indirectly, in such trends as secularism, skepticism, and scientific literacy. Those blogs are everywhere. They embrace the idea of a universe without any preordained values (as assigned by a god, say); they embrace the opportunity to chase their own values of science and exploration. Make no question that most people do choose what we call “good” values, but a lot of them do so with an understanding that they chose this or that for themselves, not because anyone or anything told them to.

People these days, whether they know it or not, base a lot of their opinions and beliefs on Existential ideas – or at least in response to them. That’s what their unconscious minds grew up with, whether they realized it or not. They almost can’t help it, as a lot of the movies they’re given to watch these days rely on Existentialism as well. (If you don’t believe me, watch *Fight Club*, *The Matrix*, *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life*, *Taxi Driver*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, *Groundhog Day*, *Apocalypse Now*, and even *Toy Story*.)

You hear a lot of people these days questioning “rules.” Rebelliousness and skepticism is a rule of cool for some, ironically enough. Haughty critics in 2043 will write of the prevalence of Existential themes throughout the films of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

The Joker is so popular today because he expresses Existential values and ideals in such an entertaining way. And Existential just happens to be in right now, so it’s no surprise that he caught on the way he did. That’s how pop culture works – a lot of people, deep down, believe in what he says – at least partly. A part of them wishes they could agree with him to a point of even rooting for him, shotgun blasts in the face and all.

**WHY SO SERIOUS? – “*The only sensible way to live in this world is without rules.*”**

Now that we’ve reviewed what Existentialism is, here are just a couple of specific examples of Existential principles and how *The Dark Knight* demonstrates them, particularly through the Joker:

### **The Will to Power:**

Mustache-Man wrote a lot about concepts called the “*ubermensch*” and “will to power.” In Existentialism, there are no rules. So how is a person to live? If the Absurd is true (we’ll get to that), then that’s pretty damn scary. We might not know what to do with our lives anymore, eh, Bats?

The *ubermensch* is an individual who overcomes that fear, that dread, and is able to define his own values, meaning, and purpose. He decides the course of his own life, in no way influenced by anything outside of himself.

Batman, of course, is willing power as well, but while he sometimes struggles with this, the Joker has dived right in. He has embraced his will to power in the world (what an *ubermensch* does) and tried to assert power and change in the world around him.

The Joker puts Batman through challenges that force him to question what he believes in, to teeter on breaking the “one rule” that he clings to, and that is one reason people repeatedly watch this movie so much. We are held in suspense over what decision Bruce Wayne will make – kill, and abandon the rules that hold his soul together...or not?

Batman does, in fact, achieve *ubermensch* status himself when he turns out to be truly incorruptible. He stands by the values and codes he honors in himself as a knight.

This is why, on some level, this film has remained (and *will* remain) popular for so long. Sticking to our values, no matter what, is something we’d like to believe in. Whether it’s Batman’s idealism or the Joker’s nihilism, *TDK* lets us experience both sides vicariously.

### **The Absurd:**

The Joker is all about the Absurd. Not surprising for a clown, when you think about it. Absurdism rejects the notion that there is any value or meaning or purpose in the universe at all. The Joker obviously agrees with this, and he says it flat out several times. That’s scary to think though, isn’t it? That there is literally no purpose for us being here? Most Existentialists actually enjoy this to some degree. For them, it is the chance to define our own values for ourselves, and we can choose to be whatever kind of a species we want to be.

What’s scary about the Joker though, and what makes him such a horrifying and effective villain, is that not only does he fully embrace Absurdity, he just so happens to enjoy chaos, violence, and mayhem. He’s a guy of simple taste, enjoying dynamite, gunpowder, and gasoline. Those are the things he values. Those are the things he wills.

### **A GUY LIKE ME – “*See, I’m not a monster. I’m just ahead of the curve.*”**

We have seen the philosophical mold in which the preexisting character of the Joker was recast by Nolan and company. Next, I’ll explain precisely why we are so captivated by him and why, furthermore, it is healthy for us to be (to a degree).

Carl Jung was an early 20th-century psychologist and psychotherapist, highly influenced by Sigmund Freud. While controversy surrounds his theories today, one idea of his has stuck around that most people regard as true: we all break bad every once in a while.

Jung explained this phenomenon with a concept called the “Shadow.” The Shadow is the part of a person’s psyche they refuse to acknowledge. It’s the part of you that wishes you could beat up your boss and then steal his wallet.

It's the part of you that wishes you could rob a bank in a clown mask, or hurl down a public street in a semi firing off rocket launchers.

It's the part of you that wants to abandon rules, like the Joker did.

According to Jung, a person must recognize those negative impulses to maintain mental health. We must acknowledge the darkness within us but not identify with it. When you don't acknowledge the Shadow, what happens is that it breaks free, takes on a life of its own and comes back to terrorize you and shatter your "illusory superiority."

One way we do this is through movies, comic books, and games. Famous, beloved villains jibe with our Shadows, our primal states, and do so in an entertaining fashion that has no undesirable consequences in real-life (so long as you keep it in the realm of fiction). Admit it: you killed the hooker and then stole your money back in *Grand Theft Auto*. We've all murdered a chicken in Hyrule.

The Joker is simply an outlet for the Shadow, and such a compelling one that that millions have been captivated by him and have vicariously lived out the depravities of their psyche's Shadow. It is precisely because the Joker bombs and murders and corrupts that so many viewers get a kick out of watching him. He acts in ways that we sometimes wish we could, deep down, and we get a vicarious rush out of seeing him indulge in such behavior, without anyone real getting hurt.

**NOW WE'RE TALKING – “It's not about money. It's about sending a message.”**

So there you have it. I've given you a brief tour of the philosophical ideas and influences that went into the creation of the Joker, ideas that the Joker himself believes in whole-heartedly and methodically goes about trying to bring into reality.

We've also seen the psychological reason why a character like this can command such a widespread appeal and why, despite his evildoing nature, there is a part of us that is hopelessly in love with him.

The version of the Joker that appears in *The Dark Knight* has become such a pop culture icon, in part, because he represents a philosophical question that cuts to the very heart of who and what we are. Are we moral animals? Or just animals? The idealist in us wants to side with Batman and believe that humanity, when put to the test, will pass with flying colors. The cynic in us wants to say “f\*\*k people” and side with the Joker as he lets all hell break loose.

This is why the Joker is as essential to the Batman mythos as Batman himself. The two are locked in a perpetual yin-and-yang embrace representing numerous human dichotomies: order and chaos, meaning and absurdity, the light and the shadow. And just as Jung declared that acknowledging the Shadow was essential for a truly balanced psyche, we love the Joker for reminding us of our baser natures, for humbling our loftier fantasies with a dose of brutal reality, and for puncturing our sense of “illusory superiority” when it gets out of hand.

Ahead of the curve indeed.

DEMONSTRATING UNDERSTANDING

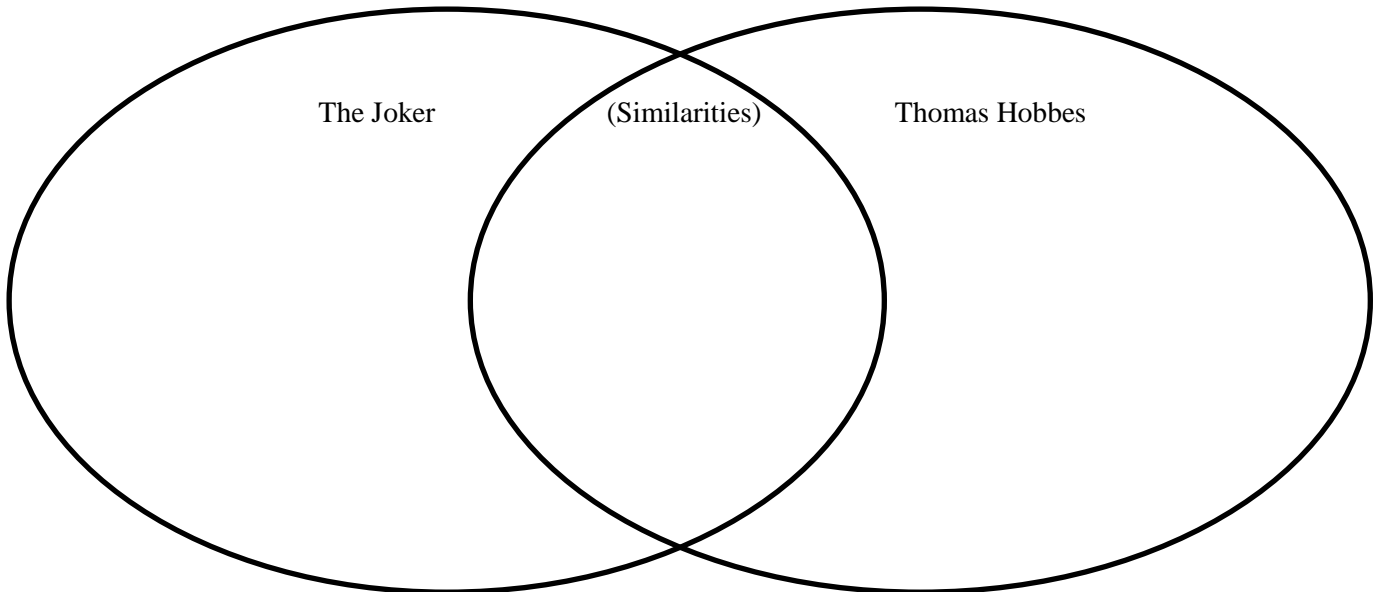
1. If you were trying to summarize this article for someone who has not read it, what would you say about it?

2. Find at least one fact and one opinion in the article, and explain why you think it is a fact or opinion

Fact:	Explain why this is a fact:
Opinion	Explain why this is an opinion:

DEVELOP AN INTERPRETATION

3. Using the Venn diagram below, compare the Joker to Thomas Hobbes. Include both similarities and differences from the article and your own experiences.



4. Although the article does not explain directly how Christopher Nolan (the director) feels about Existentialism, the author does give some clues about his attitude. Explain how Mr.Nolan may view Existentialism, using examples or quotes from the article to support your perspective.

5. Were you to choose a title for this article, what would it be, any why?

ANALYZE TEXT

6. What is the author's purpose in writing this article? Remember to support your answer with evidence from the article.

7. Using the chart below, give two examples of language from the article, and explain how each example helps make the writing or explanation more effective or more understandable

Text from the Article	How it makes the Writing Effective
1a	1b
2a	2b