Guiding Questions – “An Essay on Criticism”

Directions: The intent of these questions is to guide your reading and to focus your attention on key words and ideas in the selection from “An Essay on Criticism.” The language is “tightly packed,” as it were, and it requires a bit of “unpacking” for the ideas to come forth. On we forge!

1. Pope’s essay includes what amounts to a set of “how-to” rules for writing, a kind of Poetry for Dummies. One of the primary rules he offers is to “First, follow Nature.” Why, according to that stanza, should one do that?

   a. What does he mean by calling Nature a “clear, unchang’d, and Universal Light”?

2. Why does Pope think that the “Rules of old” by which one should be guided as a writer are “discover’d, not devis’d”? That is, what is the difference between something “discovered” and something “devised”?

3. What does it mean to “methodize” Nature?

4. The line, “A little Learning is a dang’rous Thing” is a fairly famous one from this essay. Think of one experience you have had in which someone (maybe you) got in trouble or “danger” because of having only “a little Learning.” What happened?

5. The “Pierian Spring” was an ancient spring in Greece that was devoted to the Muses, those sources of inspiration for knowledge and art. The Pierian Spring was believed to be a fountain of wisdom, in essence, filling the person who drank from it with inspiration. Why, according to Pope, do “shallow Draughts” (little sips) “intoxicate” the brain, but taking large gulps (“drinking largely”) is the cure that “sobers” us?

6. What is Pope’s attitude to nitpicking a piece of work and criticizing it for trivial faults?

7. Pope says that most judge how good a poem is based on “numbers”; that is, on whether it has a decent meter – basically the equivalent of saying, “Yeah, that song’s awesome. Why? Well, because it has a great beat.” He compares people who like a poem just for its “beat” to people who go to church only to do what? What are those people missing by going to church only for this reason?

8. An “expletive” isn’t (just) a synonym for “a cuss word.” It’s also a word that means “an extra word added to a line for no other reason than to make the meter (beat) come out right.” Answer one of the questions below – your choice.
Guiding Questions – “An Essay on Criticism”

a. Can you think of a song (or rap) where clearly, extra or unnecessary words have been added just to make the beat come out right? What example can you think of?

OR

b. Why does Pope think that one of the characteristic qualities of a lousy poem is when expletives have been added just to make the meter come out right?

9. In the line beginning, “And ten low Words...,” how many words are in that line?

10. Pope then turns to the issue of lame rhyme. What does he mean by criticizing poems for providing “expected Rhymes”?

a. Fill in the blank with the rhyme that you might expect to be there.

“I called you last ______
‘Cause the feeling’s so_____
I called you at _____
But you won’t pick up the ____.”

Now do you understand question #10 a little better?

11. In what two ways does Pope mean that “The reader’s threatened (not in vain) with Sleep”?

12. An alexandrine is a line of iambic verse with 12 syllables (6 iambic “feet”) total. In the lines beginning, “A needless Alexandrine,” how many syllables appear in the next line, the one beginning, “That like a wounded Snake...”?

a. Why does Pope compare an alexandrine line to a wounded snake?

13. Several times, Pope uses a technique I will officially call “Showing, not (just) telling,” in which he deliberately uses the techniques of lousy poetry to show you why lousy poetry is, well, lousy. Where were two moments of “Showing, not (just) telling” here?

14. Why does Pope say that those people who “move easiest” are those who have “learn’d to Dance”?

a. What does Pope mean by saying that real expertise in writing comes “from Art, not Chance”? What is the difference between expertise coming from “art” versus from “chance”?
15. Another famous line from this piece is the idea that “The Sound must seem an Echo to the Sense.” Pope gives two examples of what he means by that idea, both in discussing the sound of water under two different conditions. What are those two conditions?

a. How do his lines beginning, “And the smooth Stream…” and “The hoarse, rough Verse…” illustrate his meaning about the sound echoing the sense?