

English 200: Reading (and Rereading) Hamlet

Guidelines for Close Reading of Drama

In addition to answering the question, “What does this play, scene or passage mean,” a **close reading**, or **explication**, answers the question, “**How** does this play, scene or passage mean?” How, that is, does the play, scene or passage unfold? How do the language, imagery, structure, and ideas contribute to its overall meaning and effect? Close reading is a technique used to break up dense or complex ideas and language, or to draw attention to individual parts, in order to make meaning clearer and to understand more precisely the relationship between the **form** of the play, scene or passage and its **content**.

When doing a close reading, you will want to think about the following thematic, linguistic, and structural components of the play, scene or passage. They may occur separately or together; their relative importance will vary.

- 1) **Imagery:** What sorts of images, simile or metaphors, are used? What is their effect? Is there a pattern of imagery?
- 2) **Language:** Are repetition, formal or informal language, conventional or unconventional syntax (word order) important to the way the meaning is produced in the passage? What words are especially significant, and what are their connotations? Consider also the presence—or absence—or rhyme, rhythm, assonance (repetition of vowel sounds), and alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds).
- 3) **Allusion:** Are there any references, explicit or indirect, to a well-known person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage? If so, does the allusion serve to illustrate or enhance the subject of the poem or passage or does it work to undercut the subject ironically by the discrepancy between the subject and the allusion?
- 4) **Speaker(s):** Who is doing the talking and why? Is the speaker talking to someone else? If so, what is the relationship between the speaker and the person addressed? Is the speaker objective or biased? Is the speaker using first or third person? What is the speaker’s tone (attitude)?
- 5) **Arrangement:** What gets said first, second, etc? Is the order of presentation important? If there is a pattern of images, what is significant about the order of their arrangement?
- 6) **Key Moment:** What are the key moments of the scene (there may be one or more than one). Why are these moments significant?
- 7) **Concepts/Theme:** How does the scene, line, speech, or dialogue function? What does it do for the plot? For character development? What themes does it establish or explore?
- 8) **Narrative/Structure:** What happens and why? How are parts of each scene related to one another—how do they work together to create an overall effect? How does each scene connect to or differ from the preceding and following scenes? How do acts progress (for example, order, disorder, reorder; exposition, conflict, climax, resolution)?