

Overview of Close Reading

We close-read situations and people every moment of our lives; we have become so adept at observing tone of voice, word choice, body language, sentence structure, metaphor, etc. and coming to a reasoned interpretation of a situation or event that close-reading of this kind is primarily a subconscious activity. In interpreting academic and literary texts, close-reading often must become a conscious activity. We need to close-read passages to mine them for cues and clues that can lead to reasoned and well-supported analysis of particular passages either on their own or in order to explicate the relationship between one or more passages to more comprehensive observations of the work.

The reason for doing close reading is to provide your readers with **evidence from the text** to support your analyses. In order to be persuasive and respectful of your readers, you'll want to point to particular details to support your explanation of the text. **A close-reading is NEITHER PLOT SUMMARY NOR PARAPHRASE.** Simply repeating, rephrasing, summarizing, or vaguely generalizing about a passage does not constitute analysis. Instead look at how the language used to describe the concept, example, claim, character, scene, etc. creates and directs a reader's understanding. One of the ways to begin a close-reading is to ask questions of the text that relate the specific to the more general. For example, why is this passage included in this novel/essay/poem? How do the diction, sentence structure, tone, imagery, and metaphors used in this particular passage shape your reading and contribute to your interpretation of the text as a whole?

Another approach to close-reading is to look not only at what is there but also at what is left out of the passage. Since, as we know, the gaps can be just as significant as the passage itself, it is crucial that you "read" these gaps and not just cover them over with common assumptions and narratives.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR DOING CLOSE-READINGS

1. Briefly identify the major issues, conflicts, and ideas reflected in the passage.
2. Identify the context in which the passage appears and analyze its significance. In other words, where exactly does the passage appear in the piece (in the beginning, after an important scene, at the end, etc.) and why is its placement important? Also, who is doing the speaking in the passage (or about whom is the passage) and why is that significant?
3. Analyze the implications of the language in the passage. Without worrying about authorial intention, consider the effects on you as a reader of the writer's rhetorical choices, those particular words, that chance procedure, those genre conventions, or that style in that particular passage. Explore the subtler connotations of the words, allusions, expressions used. What kinds of metaphors and other figures of speech does the passage employ? Is that passage similar to or different from others, if so, how? How does the style and words choice tie into larger issues in the novel, story, or essay? This is a very key step in close-reading.
4. Draw some comparisons and conclusions about the passage in terms of its relevance to the rest of the piece: how is it specifically related to other parts? What does it reveal about a character or an issue that you see earlier or later in the piece? Offer a brief example. Why is that particular passage (as compared to others) important?
5. Finally, link you reading of this passage in the context of the complete text to its significance to the larger argument you are building.

Tools for Close Reading

Close reading, as the term implies, is a more focused way of reading a text. In close reading you not only read what a text means, but also apply critical scrutiny to how it communicates that meaning. Often we form ideas or get a certain gut feeling right after we read something. We always react to the texts we read. Close reading gives you the tools that enable you to articulate and express these ideas and feelings in order to share them with others. Your initial reaction, idea, gut feeling is often the seed of a potential claim responding to the text (in that it might have potential to be developed into a significant, arguable, and specific idea that you form based on your reading of a certain text). Your evidence for this claim/reaction can be obtained by doing a close reading of that text. In other words, you look at the text to find out: "what makes me feel this way?"

What does one look for when doing a close reading? Below is a list adapted from an essay on discourse analysis:

Huckin, Thomas. "Critical Discourse Analysis and the Discourse of Condescension." *Discourse Studies in Composition*. Eds. Ellen Barton and Gail Stygall. Cresskill, New Jersey: , Hampton Press Inc., 2002. 155-176.

You do not have to/need to use the following set of tools one by one. These tools rarely generate your claim, but they will help you to better understand your reactions to a text and to support your claim in an essay you write in response.

WORD/PHRASE LEVEL

- **Classification** refers to how one chooses to name and label things.
for example → Pro-abortion vs. Pro-choice

- **Connotation** refers to the associations and nuances of meaning that go beyond a word's definition in a dictionary.
for example → an alcoholic vs. a drunk

- **Code words** have a special type of connotation. They are words whose nuances of meaning are meant to be understood by a particular subset of the general population.
for example → family values → social conservatism

- **Metaphor** is a way of casting ideas in a certain light.
for example → the U.S. as "melting pot" or a "mixed salad"

- **Presuppositions** are words or phrases that assume the truth of the statements in which they are found.
for example → In the sentence

"Bill Clinton's liberal views were not popular with many Congressional Republicans."

It's presupposed that Clinton had "liberal" views.

- **Modality** is the use of modal verbs and phrases like *might, should, will, we think,* and commands to project certain authorial "voice" or attitude.
for example → "Smoking Kills" vs. "Smoking may cause cancer"

- **Register** refers to the linguistic style of a discourse that connects it to a particular discursive activity or group.

SENTENCE/UTTERANCE LEVEL

- **Transitivity** refers to the agent-patient (subject-object) relations in a sentence, or how the main action of a sentence is encoded. It answers the question, *who is doing what to whom?* In most cases, the semantic agent (actor) in a sentence is depicted as having more power than the patient. If a text consistently has the same agent from sentence to sentence, it may reflect a perspective favoring that agent's status.
- **Deletion** refers to the deliberate omission of information in a sentence. When a writer chooses, for one reason or another, to omit mentioning the agent of an action.
 - for example* → Through the use of passive voice:
 - "Many women are subjected to domestic violence."
 - "Sorry you got yelled at."
 - Through the use of heavily normalized sentences, as in:
 - "Many women are victims of domestic violence."
- **Topicalization** is the positioning of a sentence element at the beginning of the sentence as to give it prominence (or foregrounding).
- **Register** is determined not only by word and phrase usage, but also by sentence structure.
 - for example* → The differences between how you talk to your friends and how you would speak at a job interview
- **Politeness** refers to the interpersonal stance effected in the discourse by cues such as pronoun usage, terms of address, and register.
 - "Positive" politeness seeks to establish solidarity with the reader or listener, whereas "negative" politeness seeks to maintain independence and privacy.
 - Today we will discuss close reading.
 - Be sure to apply what we have learned in your response to your assignments.
- **Presupposition** can be enacted through sentence structure as well.
 - for example* → In the sentence
 - "The FBI kept tabs on King, Carmichael, and other trouble makers."
 - it is presupposed that King and Carmichael were troublemakers.
- **Insinuation** is another sentence-level device. Whereas all that is needed to identify a presupposition is a knowledge of the language, insinuation requires some additional level of background knowledge.
 - for example* → If the sentence above about the FBI were followed by this one:
 - "Director Hoover wanted to preserve American traditions."
 - it would insinuate, at least for some readers, that Hoover was opposed to full-scale racial integration.
- **Intertextuality** is the recognizable "borrowing" of words or phrases from another source, sometimes occurs with entire sentences. Sayings, aphorisms, and quoted passages are examples of this.

TEXT-LEVEL

- **Genre** refers to the recognizable type of text that a piece of discourse embodies. A genre is a patterned response to a type of rhetorical situations.
for example → Lab report vs. newspaper editorial
- **Heteroglossia** is the inclusion of discursive differences, register shifts, or multiple “voices” in a text.
for example → academic articles that incorporate African American Vernacular English
- **Coherence** refers to the ability of a text to “hang together.” Although textual coherence requires certain textual cues including consistent use of verb tense, sentence topics, pronoun reference, and so on, it also requires active interpretation on the part of the reader, drawing on his/her background knowledge. Looking carefully how statements are linked together, you can see what kind of background knowledge the text is evoking.
- **Framing** is the slant or “spin” an author gives to a text. The ability to cast a story in a certain light is one of the most powerful weapons at an author’s disposal.
for example → the use of language to explain a mistake in most positive way
- **Extended Metaphors** are those that continue beyond a single sentence. They contribute to textual cohesion and can serve as framing devices.
- **Foregrounding/backgrounding**: Foregrounding means the prominence given to parts of a text, either by their physical placement or size or by the emphasis given them through word choice, or syntactic structure. Backgrounding is the opposite of foregrounding. The ultimate form of backgrounding is omission, or leaving relevant information out of a text.
- **Auxiliary Embellishments** are the nonlinguistic aspects of a text: graphics, sound effects, and so on. They draw attention and can make a quick and powerful impression.
for example → Lippi-Green's inclusion of charts and pictures in her article