



Close Reading and You

What is a close reading? How is it different from any other paper I've written?

Close reading is a type of literary critique that focuses not on the *plot* of a story, but rather the way in which the author has used various techniques to *present* the plot. It is a way of looking at the *words* and determining how well the author presented his or her story. Unlike *textual analysis* (what you're likely used to if this is your first look at close reading), *close reading* isn't concerned with author intent in terms of how something connects to the plot of a story, nor is it concerned with answering any questions that the reader might have about the story/plot. *Textual analysis* requires a comprehensive look at *multiple elements* of the story; *close reading* can be done on a much smaller scale. You can do a close reading on a paragraph (or a few sentences) if the section is strong enough.

How do I start?

Step 1: READ (with a plan)

It can't be stressed enough: close reading requires you to read the piece (or portion of it) you're looking to write about, often **more than once**. Sorry! It is the unavoidable truth that you'll need to read the piece yourself. **Don't** attempt to write a close reading based on Cliff's Notes, Spark Notes, or Wikipedia; your work won't be nearly detailed enough and your professor will see right through it (*you'll likely end up with a failing grade—or worse!*).

While you're reading, make **note** of passages or paragraphs that stand out to you, even if you don't know why they stand out. There is nothing wrong with admitting that you might not be able to articulate why something works, but there is a good chance that even if you don't have formal training in close reading, you are able to pick up on passages that just feel "better" than others.

Also, try to **identify** places where the author uses metaphors, sensory imagery (relating to the senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, smell), or where the author uses language that seems out of place—that is, out of place in the story.

***Side Note:** If you don't know what a word means, **LOOK IT UP**. There is no excuse for ignoring something just because you don't know what it means, especially with the Internet available to you. It might be really important!

Step 2: Ask questions

Once you've read the piece and have made notations where you feel the writing is strong, ask yourself **why**. Ask yourself questions like: Why did the author use this particular image? How was the metaphor used here? Did the author do something out of place to grab my attention? Did he or she use foreign words or phrases, nonsense language, or code in order to make me take notice? Was a metaphor or image used to lead the reader to think a particular way about an event or character in the piece?

Step 3: Look for patterns

Does the author use a particular image or metaphor **multiple** times throughout the story, especially in relation to one element of the story (event, character, etc.)? If so, he or she is likely doing so intentionally. Make **note** of this! Question why the author would use the patterns he or she used. Was a particular image foreshadowing an event later in the book? (This is an example of why reading multiple times is important; you wouldn't know if a particular word or phrase was foreshadowing if you didn't know what came next.)

Step 4: Identify what feels strongest to you

Once you've compiled a list of **questions** (or answers) and **patterns**, it is time to **narrow** them down. Remember, close reading is supposed to be a look at **one** particular element. Don't try to use *everything* you identified! Narrow your focus down to one particular device or paragraph, using other examples only if they strengthen the argument you're making.

Step 5: Write it down! (Then, revise it!)

Try to articulate, in the best way that you can, **why** you believe that something has a particular **significance**. If you feel like your words are insufficient, fear not. Try to use the vocabulary that you have at your disposal (whether through previous readings or classroom discussion) to the best of your ability. If something isn't exactly the right word, it can be changed in revision. It is better to be a little too general but have meaning that is a close approximation of what you're trying to say rather than using a technical term incorrectly and saying something contrary to what you actually mean.

If you find yourself stuck at any point, don't hesitate to bring it to the Writing Center!

References / Great Sites to Visit:

Kain, Patricia. "How to Do a Close Reading ." *Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences*. Harvard University, 1998. Web. 24 Jan 2012. <<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CloseReading.html>>

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Wheeler, L. Kip. "Close Reading of a Literary Passage." *Dr. Wheeler's Website*. Carson-Newman College, 12 Jan 2012. Web. 22 Jan 2012. <http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/reading_lit.html>

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