

Close Reading

Writing Resources



Elaine Showalter describes close reading as:

...slow reading, a deliberate attempt to detach ourselves from the magical power of story-telling and pay attention to language, imagery, allusion, intertextuality, syntax and form.

It is, in her words, 'a form of defamiliarization we use in order to break through our habitual and casual reading practices' (Teaching Literature, 98).

As readers, we are accustomed to reading for plot, or allowing the joy of the reading experience to take over and carry us along, without stopping to ask how and why a particular passage, sentence, or word achieves its effects.

Close reading, then, is about pausing, and looking at the precise techniques, dynamics, and content of the text. It's not reading between the lines, but reading further and further into the lines and seeing the multiple meanings a turn of phrase, a description, or a word can unlock.

It is possible to close read an extended passage, but for essays it is often a good technique to do the close reading first and then to use very short extracts or even

single words to demonstrate your insights. So instead of doing a close reading of twenty lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* *in* your essay, you would do it independently, and then cite and explain three key phrases, relating them clearly to your developing argument.

Close reading is also sometimes known as **Practical Criticism**, rooted in the techniques espoused by the Cambridge critic I. A. Richards.

He felt it was essential that students put aside their preconceptions and learn to appreciate the liveliness and multiplicity of language.

With that in mind, he gave students poems without any information about who wrote them or why they were written.

In the hands of subsequent critics, like William Empson, the technique became a way to offer virtuoso accounts of particular poems and literary works, with an emphasis on ambiguity and the multiplication of possible meanings.

In essence, close reading means taking a step back from the larger narrative and examining the constituent

Close Reading

Writing Resources

parts of a text.

Think of close reading as something that you do with a pencil and book in your hand. Mark up the pages; fill the margins.

“Annotate to appreciate; annotate to understand... It builds reading confidence; it helps us understand how literature is made—because it puts us there among the phrases.” from *Sometimes the Best Way to Read is to Mark up the Book - on the revelatory power of annotations* on the Literary Hub website

And then transcribe the poem, the passage, the quotation.

Accurate transcription of quotations is, for some, the first and last rule of close reading. If your passage isn't transcribed meticulously, down to the last comma and (with poetry) spacing on the page, you can't read it closely.

Careful transcription will also help you get inside a passage: you'll get a feel for its rhythms, its twists and turns, its breathing. Look at the words.

Don't take your eyes off the words. Work from the actual text in front of you, not from a sort of mental paraphrase of what the text says. As you do so, remember to think carefully about sound, not only when reading poetry but also when analysing prose.

Read the passage aloud, paying close attention to the rhythms of sentences. You might be surprised by what you hear: the eye can often glide over aspects of a text that the ear is keen to pick up. Remember, too, that it's important not only to detect certain features but also to consider their effects. If you need to pause to catch your breath in the middle of a sentence, ask yourself why. How are form and content working together?

Close, not closed readings

Close reading has been criticised for being divorced from context and for pulling away from the historical and political engagements of the literary text.

Partly for that reason, it is important to think about the purpose behind your close reading – we are looking for close readings, not closed readings. Essentially, the close reading is the starting point for your essay, letting you find what is interesting, intricate, and unexpected about a literary text.

In the essay itself, you need to stitch that revelation about the complexities and ambiguities of particular terms, phrases and passages into a larger argument or context – don't simply list everything you have found; craft it into an argument, and be prepared to downplay or leave out some of the elements you have spotted if they don't relate to the larger picture.

For this reason, you might want to follow the “Rule of 2”. Your analysis of your quotation should be twice as long as the quotation itself. It's a nice reminder that we always need to go back and explain the textual evidence that's being cited.

Each piece of textual evidence needs and deserves detailed analysis if it's being used to support the argument's claims. It also helps to remind us to vary the lengths of quoted textual evidence so that an essay doesn't end up with only very brief quotations or long block quotations, but includes a mixture of different lengths that will best suit the claim being developed at any given point in the argument.

Some questions you may like to ask

Who is speaking? Who is being spoken to? What is the reader assumed to know/not know? (University essays aren't written for an interested aunt or friend on a different course, but for an audience familiar with the themes and readings under discussion. Students are writing for an audience of engaged and interested peers. This means that the writer can assume that their reader knows the text and doesn't need extensive plot summary in the introduction or start of the essay. This frees up space for analysis and the laying out of each section's claims. It also helps to develop an authoritative voice: you are an expert speaking to other experts.)

What is the point of the details included in the passage

Close Reading

Writing Resources

(e.g. if mundane things are mentioned, why is that; if there are elements of description that don't seem to contribute to the plot what do they do instead)?

What generic clues are here (what kinds of writing are hinted at)?

Are there words or phrases which are ambiguous (could mean more than one thing)? If so, are we directed to privilege one reading over the other or do we keep both in play? Does one meaning open up an alternative story/history/narrative? What are the connotations of the words that are chosen? Do any of them open up new or different contexts?

Are there patterns which emerge in the language (the repetition of words or of certain kinds of words? Repeated phrases? Rhymes or half-rhymes? Metrical patterns?). What effects do they create?

Is there any movement in the passage you are reading? Are there any shapes or dominant metaphors?

What kind of rhythm does the passage have? What is its cadence?

Is there anything that troubles you about the passage or that you're not sure you fully understand?

Have you been to the dictionary (remember the full Oxford English Dictionary is available online through the library)?

For more specific advice, you might want to read our Ways of Reading series

- Ways of Reading a Novel
- Ways of Reading a Poem
- Ways of Reading a Film
- Ways of Reading a Play
- Ways of Reading a Translation

Extra Reading (and remember you can close read secondary as well as primary texts)

Thomas A. Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: a Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines* (Harper, 2003).

Elizabeth A. Howe, *Close Reading: an Introduction to Literature* (Prentice Hall, 2009).

George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: a Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago, 1989).

Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois (eds), *Close Reading: the Reader* (Duke, 2002).

Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford, 1995).
Elaine Showalter, *Teaching Literature* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

For more on Practical Criticism, with some useful online exercises, try the Virtual Classroom on Practical Criticism

There's a neat example by Patricia Kain at Harvard College's Writing Center.