



Close Reading



Close reading is a method of literary analysis which focuses on the specific details of a passage or text in order to discern some deeper meaning present in it. The meaning derived from the close reading is the reader's interpretation of the passage or text.

Tip: There is no such thing as the one “true” meaning behind a text, so any interpretation which can be supported by the text's specific details is valid.

Don't worry about arguing for the “correct” interpretation of a text or passage and don't be afraid to be creative in your analysis.

Close reading tends to rely on the principle that no details are present in a text by “accident.” The author's conscious intentions in writing are often insignificant, as unconscious layers of meaning or even prejudices may be sublimated into literary works. Regardless of whether an author consciously or unconsciously constructs a particular meaning in a text, if details are present which support that interpretation, it is valid.

How to Begin a Close Reading

A close reading should never be your first reading of a text. Before focusing on the details of a text or passage, it is important to have an understanding of the text as a whole.

- **Read the text!**
Make sure that you understand its plot, who the characters are, etc. For more difficult texts, it may take more than one read to do this. That is normal. The better your overall understanding of the text, the easier it will be to focus on its details and/or the details of your chosen passage.
- **When you are ready to begin your close reading, take your time!**
Read the text actively. Take notes. You may write on a separate sheet of paper, directly in your book, or you may even choose to make a photocopy of the text or passage and take notes on that. Choose the method which works best for you.
- **Do not be afraid to pause to think over what you read as you read!**
Do not hesitate to read and re-read sentences or sections several times before moving on. Take note not only of the details in the text, but also of the impressions which those details create in you as a reader. The purpose of a close reading is to squeeze the details from your chosen text and use those details to formulate an interpretation of a deeper meaning or impression present in the text.

Some Details to Consider When Reading Closely

Titles Matter!

Always take a moment to consider the title of your chosen text and its relationship to the content. The author has chosen the title carefully to represent the text as a whole. Often, titles may point to important symbols or images which you might then focus on more closely in your reading.

Example: In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark" or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," the titles refer to prominent symbols in the texts. Paying close attention to these symbols, how they are described, and how they are treated in the texts would be fertile ground for a close reading.

Other titles may help to structure the reader's understanding of the text's content.

Example: Jamaica Kincaid's short story "Girl" is a list of commands and instructions. The text does not clearly state who these commands are directed towards, but the *title* hints that they are commands for a specific girl, or perhaps girls in general.

Audience and Purpose

Who is the intended audience of the text or passage? What is its purpose? Audience and purpose may help to contextualize some of the text's details.

Example: In Jonathan Swift's essay "A Modest Proposal," he proposes that impoverished Irish communities eat their children in order to limit their financial burdens and gain a source of food.

Understanding Swift's purpose, to use an absurd and morally reprehensible argument to draw attention to the plights of these communities as well as to criticize the faulty and rather callous logic employed by many English intellectuals in discussing these issues, helps readers to understand his methods and the significance of the way he lays out his hyper-rational and fairly horrifying argument.

Narrative Point of View

The narrator is the voice through which the reader experiences the text. That means that all of the information a reader receives is colored by the narrator's perspective. Dissecting this perspective may help to inform your understanding of how the text relates its information and how that dynamic influences or constructs meaning within the text.

Is the text or passage narrated in 1st, 2nd, or 3rd person? Is the narrator omniscient (does he or she know all of the characters' thoughts and actions)? Is the narrator's perspective limited to one character's experiences and thoughts? Is the narrator an impartial observer, a fly on the wall who simply relates the events of the text or passage without giving insight into characters' thoughts and feelings?

Does the narrator seem to make any judgments regarding the characters or events of the text? Is the narrator completely reliable? If the narrator may be biased, how does that influence the text? What biases might the narrator possess? Is he or she possibly insane, lying, or mistaken?

Example: Jamaica Kincaid's short story "Girl" is narrated in 2nd person. This means that the narrator seems to directly address the reader in his or her stream of commands and instructions.

The reader may feel overwhelmed, defensive, or resentful of the narrator as a result of the narrative point of view. Those feelings may mirror the feelings of a girl who is being lectured regarding "proper" or "acceptable" behavior. Therefore, the narration puts the reader in the position of the "Girl."

What is the relationship between the narrator and the "Girl"/reader? How might that be significant?

Imagery and Symbols

Often, a work of literature will emphasize a particular image. Images appeal to our senses, so a text may include visual images, auditory images, images which involve smell, images which involve taste, and images which involve touch.

What images do you find in the text or passage? Are there any images which appear to be emphasized more than others? Why? How does that affect the meaning of the text or passage?

Some images may function as symbols in the text: images which have metaphorical meanings beyond their literal meanings. Are there any symbols present in the text? What metaphorical meanings might those symbols carry? If we accept those meanings, how does that influence our reading of the text?

Example: In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark," Georgiana, the protagonist's wife, has a birthmark on her face in the shape of a small hand. Her husband sees this as an imperfection, which he then seeks to correct by removing it. Georgiana dies during this process.

One way to interpret Georgiana's birthmark is as a symbol of natural human imperfection. If we accept this symbolic meaning, then how do we read Georgiana's death? Does the text seem to be commenting on the whether or not human perfection is attainable?

Characterization

Who are the characters? Is there one protagonist (main character), in the text? Is there an antagonist (a character or force which opposes the protagonist)? If so, how does the conflict influence the text? Which characters are focused on and which characters are treated as secondary? How do we learn about the characters? Does the narrator tell us about them explicitly through description? This is called direct characterization. Do we learn about the characters through their actions and dialogue? This is called indirect characterization. How does the characterization influence the meaning of the text or passage?

Example: If you were to read a short story which characterized male characters primarily through their actions, but female characters through descriptions given by a male narrator, this might be evidence of gender bias in the text.

Chronology

How is time treated in the text? Is it linear, a-linear? What span of time does it cover? Does it focus on a period of minutes, hours, days, years? How do the choices about representing time influence or construct meaning in the text?

Example: Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" chooses to focus on short spans of time spread across several decades in the lives of its two main characters.

What might the significance be of choosing those particular moments in the characters' lives to show to the reader? What do those moments have in common? Why skip so much time in between passages? What effect does the chronology of the text have on the reader's experience of the narrative and the characters?

Form

The literal form of a text can influence the reader's experience of it. Some details related to form might include line and paragraph breaks, the physical position of the text on the page, the font style, or even something as simple as spacing.

Example: In concrete poetry, the words which make up the poem are manipulated to create visual images on the page. George Herbert's poem "Easter Wings" is physically shaped like a pair of wings.

The overall form of the text is important, but so are *breaks* in form.

Example: Certain portions of Jamaica Kincaid's short story "Girl" are italicized.

Why are these portions emphasized and separated from the rest of the text? How does that affect the passage?

Sentence Level: Diction (connotations), Syntax, and Punctuation

“Diction” refers to word choice. What types of words are used in the text or passage? Are the words formal or informal, simple or complex, monosyllabic (short) or polysyllabic (long)? What do the words physically sound like? Do the words carry any other connotations beyond their literal meanings which may be relevant to your reading of the text?

Tip: Dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) are useful resources in determining a particular word’s history and connotations.

What do the sentences themselves look like? Are they simple or complex, long or short? Hemingway is often praised for his simple, short sentences. How does the sentence structure influence your reading of the text? What kinds of punctuation does the writer use?

Example: “Girl” happens to be a single, long sentence with many independent clauses separated by semicolons.

What might the significance be of that choice? One interpretation is that reading the sentence becomes overwhelming, which may mimic the feelings of a girl being lectured about “proper” and “acceptable” behavior. Therefore, the sentence structure helps the reader to sympathize with the title “character” of the short story.

Patterns

What patterns are present in the text? Consider the significance of the pattern itself.

Example: In Theodore Roethke’s poem “My Papa’s Waltz,” the meter of the poem is trimeter. This means that there are three beats in each line.

How might that pattern be significant to the text? Interestingly, a waltz is a dance which follows a 1-2-3 pattern. Therefore, the pattern established by the meter seems to mimic the dance which is mentioned in the poem’s title. This has the effect of emphasizing the “waltzing” of the boy and his father in the poem. How is that important to the poem’s overall meaning?

Is the pattern established in the text ever interrupted? Interruptions or breaks in firmly established textual patterns are usually particularly significant. Remember that the author has gone to a lot of trouble to establish this pattern in the text. If he or she is choosing to disrupt it, there is probably a very good reason.

Example: In “My Papa’s Waltz,” there are occasional breaks in the meter.

Why is this significant? If the “waltz” of the poem is imperfect, does it suggest something about the boy, his father, and/or their relationship?

Contradictions/Inconsistencies

Like breaks in patterns, inconsistencies or contradictions in the text are also particularly worthy of attention. What inconsistencies or contradictions can you identify? What are the sources of these contradictions?

Is there an unreliable narrator? What is unreliable about this person? Are different characters' perspectives the source of the contradiction? What is the effect or utility of reinforcing the differing perspectives of these characters? Does the text seem to be purposely confusing or contradictory? What might the significance of that be?

Example: In "Recitatif," Twyla and Roberta, the short story's co-protagonists, remember some of the events of their shared childhood differently.

What is the overall significance of this inconsistency in their memories? Is Toni Morrison attempting to make a comment about memory itself? Is she trying to call attention to the differences in the characters' perspectives? Why might that be important?

Allusions

Allusions are references to knowledge or events outside of the text itself, often other literary works, but sometimes current events or politics. Are there any allusions present in the text or passage? To what do they refer?

If the text establishes a connection to another text through an allusion, then how does a reading of the second text influence your understanding of the first text? In western literature, direct allusions to biblical stories can be common. However, some allusions are very subtle and even unexpected.

Example: Disney's *The Lion King* features a young prince whose father is killed by his uncle, the king's own brother. When the prince grows up, he must then make a decision about whether or not to challenge his uncle for the throne.

The plot of *The Lion King* can be read as a subtle reference to Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, whose plot follows a similar pattern. In this particular example, examining the similarities between the two stories as well as the differences and deliberate changes which Disney has made to the *Hamlet* tale would be valuable to your critical understanding of the film.

It may also be helpful to consider the significance of a modern children's film borrowing plot from an early modern Shakespearean play, since the two do not appear to have similar audiences or contexts at first glance.

Research Anything Unfamiliar!

A quick online search (or inquiry to your tutor or professor!) for anything unfamiliar in the text or passage can point you to allusions or other connections which you would not have made.

Example: In reading the poem "My Papa's Waltz," you may not have known that a waltz is a three beat dance. However, by doing a small bit of research on "waltz," one of the key words in the poem's title, you might find this information. Then, you might realize the connection between the dance and the meter of the poem itself.

Some Tips for Writing Essays Using Close Reading

- Like all literary analysis, close reading should produce interpretations of the text which are debatable rather than factual. This is the difference between an interpretive claim and a claim which simply relates a detail of the text. For an essay which uses close reading, the interpretation of the text will usually be stated in the essay's thesis.

Example: Pointing out that Twyla and Roberta, the co-protagonists of Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" are described as being of different racial backgrounds, one African American and one Caucasian, but that the text never specifies which character is of which racial background, is an example of a *factual* claim pointing out certain specific details of the text.

An *interpretive* claim which would be supported by those details is that "Recitatif" challenges the racialized assumptions of its readers by tricking them into attempting to figure out which character is of which racial background and by giving them only stereotypes as evidence to support their deductions.

The latter claim, since it is *debatable* rather than *factual*, would be a stronger, *interpretive* thesis statement for an essay.

- Because close reading focuses on the details of the text or passage and how they work together to create meaning, it is especially important to support all claims about the text with specific examples from the text in the form of quotation or cited paraphrase. Quotations are preferable whenever possible because of their specificity. Close reading essays which are effective should contain a large proportion of quotations. However, it is also important to remember to connect all of those details to your central thesis.

Example: If you are writing an essay about "Recitatif" using the aforementioned thesis, you may choose to quote the blocks of text which describe the characters.

It is important not only to quote these passages, but also to explain how they fail to provide specific details regarding the characters' racial identities, how the text tempts readers to make certain assumptions about the characters' racial identities with some details, and how it tempts the reader to make opposite assumptions in other sections of the text. Then, you would tie this analysis back to your thesis statement by explaining how specifically tempting the reader with contradictory assumptions about the characters' racial identities might serve to challenge the reader's own racialized assumptions.

- In writing your essay, once you have formed a preliminary thesis statement, it is not necessary to dissect every single specific detail of your chosen text or passage in your writing. Focus only on those details whose analysis will best support your thesis. Some essays will include discussions of a variety of textual details, while others may focus on only a few. Some details may not be relevant to your argument. Those details are not necessary to include and may actually detract from your writing.

Example: In an analysis of Ernest Hemingway's short story "Hills Like White Elephants" which focuses on the symbolism of the hills themselves, the physical form of the text on the page is likely irrelevant.