

Close Reading for English Literature Assignments

What is a close reading?

A close reading is a very in-depth, careful analysis of a **short** text. This text can be a **passage selected from a novel, a poem, an image, a short story**, etc. The analysis looks carefully at what is happening in the short text, but isn't necessarily isolated from references outside the text. For example, a close reading of a passage of a novel can invoke or refer to the novel more broadly, but focuses its analysis and thesis on just a small section. Crucially, the thesis of a close reading must argue **why and how this reading is important** in a context beyond the text itself.

Here's how to get started:

I. Literal reading: First, read to understand on a literal level what is going on in your passage: who, what, when, where, why, how?

- List characters, setting attributes, motivations within the text. Create a simple plot summary for yourself to ensure you understand what is happening, what the setting is, who is involved, and especially *why* it's happening. What are the sources of conflict?

Then, start analyzing... Use a pencil to write and mark up the passage, if possible!

II. Figures of speech: Does the passage contain significant metaphors, similes, allegory, personification, ellipsis, alliteration, etc.?

- Depending on the length of the text you're looking at, these literary devices might be broad and stretch out an entire length of a book, or they may be tucked away in a single line of text. **For now, look at ones contained in the language of a single passage.**
- Consult the list at <https://literary.edublogs.org/>. It offers definitions and examples for many literary devices. Some of the most common to begin with are metaphor, simile, allegory, alliteration, repetition, allusion, archetype, and imagery.
- Make physical annotations on the text you are reading (if possible) to mark the literary devices in use. As you read closely, think about what the *effect* of each device is and *why* the author might have made the choice to use this device in this particular way and place.

III. Grammatical structure: Look at syntax or word arrangement, grammar, parallel structures/grammatical repetition, punctuation, length and structure of the sentence or line, ambiguous pronouns, word choice, the overabundance of nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.

- The exact way something is written out affects the way we interpret it even if we don't notice. Your job is to understand why and how this is happening. Some things to pay attention to are:

- What strikes you as strange or interesting about the way the passage is written? Is it different or similar to the structure and tone of other texts you've read? If it's located within a longer text, how does it compare to other portions of the text?
 - Are there words that have multiple meanings? Do these meanings, in the context of the passage, change the way you interpret the significance?
 - Is there an absence or overabundance of any particular grammatical structure? For instance, if there is no punctuation in a passage, you might be inclined to read it very rapidly without stopping or slowing down. If there are lots of adjectives, you might see something materialize visually more clearly than in other passages.
- How does this affect your experience of reading and what you take away?**

IV. Images and Themes: Words within a passage can evoke previous scenes, images or ideas that the text has already presented. You can often build a strong argument by analyzing a repeating image in a text.

- Think about what in the passage is **repeated**, or alludes to something that is built in other places of the text. Repetitive elements can be **words, storylines, images, ideas, forms, or structure** that shows up more than once.
 - What are “structure,” “form,” and “language” in literature? Good question. Check out this link for examples of how they operate in poetry:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zcrpycw/revision/4>
- What is the significance of these repetitions?
 - A **theme** in literature is an organizing principle that the text will explore in various ways. Some examples might be, “war,” “love and loss,” “masculinity,” “crossing borders,” “race,” “mortality,” “intergenerational wisdom,” etc. As you can see, themes might be either **broad categories** or specific concepts played out in your text. Regardless of the breadth of the theme, it is important to develop an understanding of how the theme operates in your specific passage/text, and how this theme relates to other literary devices you've analyzed.
 - How do the repetitive elements build a theme throughout the text that ties its various parts together?
- Start thinking about **context**: once you have developed some ideas about theme, contextualize them with the work. What is the text trying to say about the issues which it explores? How is this done? Why does the author make the choices that they make?

V. Context (IF ANALYZING A PASSAGE IN A BROADER TEXT)

When you analyze a passage you are temporarily taking it out of context. Make sure that you can put it back into context. That is, how does this passage connect with the rest of the work?

- How is this passage different from or characteristic of the rest of the text? Are the ideas you're extracting from it relevant and true more broadly across the rest of the text? When

constructing a thesis, make sure you locate your ideas as part of something larger than just your passage.

VI. Putting it all together: After you have some ideas about the literal meaning, form, figures of speech, themes, images and context, develop an idea of what your passage communicates.

- You do not (and should not) need to incorporate every single literary device that you've analysed into your thesis. Instead, focus on one or a few that communicate something you can organize around a single idea. Hold on to your other thoughts, because they might be useful to include later in your paper.
- Useful questions to think about are:
 - **Why** did the author choose to use literary devices the way they did?
 - What **effect** does reading the passage this way have?
 - What does the passage **communicate** about the broader world?
 - Why is this particular analysis of the passage **important**?

VII: What does a good thesis statement look like?

- A good close-reading thesis statement should be clear, concise, argumentative (but still provable) and specific.
- Make sure your thesis refers to the specific devices/themes/concepts in the text that you will be analyzing in your paper, but also expresses what your reading of them is and why it's important.
- Talk to your professor or make a WC appointment if you have trouble crafting your thesis statement, since this is the organizing principle for your entire paper.

Here is Prof. Asali Solomon's "Quick and dirty" thesis test to see if you have an argumentative thesis, taken from Suzanne Keen:

-**Will everyone agree with it?** Then it's too obvious or something we already figured out in class. Keep refining.

-**Will everybody say I'm crazy?** Then it's controversial, which is good, but unconvincing. Keep refining.

-**Can a reasonable person disagree with it?** This is what you want.

-**Does it explore complex relationships between aspects of the text or text(s)?** This is also what you want.

Pointers for writing your paper:

1. **Try writing your introduction last.** Begin with your thesis, write your paragraphs, and then your conclusion. By the time you get to the conclusion, you'll have a better idea of what you need to introduce. You may even realize that your thesis changed over the

course of writing your paper. Don't be afraid to change your thesis statement to reflect what you're actually arguing.

2. **Check your topic sentences.** Each paragraph should open with a “mini-thesis” about what you're going to argue in that paragraph. Often, what you initially write as the concluding sentence of the paragraph makes the strongest topic sentence since it is a culmination of all your thoughts from writing. If this is the case, use it as your topic sentence!
3. **Do a reverse outline.** Highlight just your thesis statement, topic sentences, and concluding sentences of every paragraph. Then read them in order. Does the argument make sense? Does it flow in a logical direction? Does it actually reflect what you're discussing in each paragraph?
4. **Stay grounded in the text.** In a literary essay specifically, you don't want to make any claims you can't back up with textual evidence. If you're arguing something that isn't already proven in earlier evidence or analysis, find a place in the text where you can support your claim.
5. **Be specific.** Try to avoid making generalizing statements in your writing. Literature is complex, nuanced, and thought provoking. Your writing should reflect this by making specific statements that state what you actually mean to say about the text. For example, instead of saying, “Everyone spends the summer on vacation,” you might write: “Because most of Amanda's peers had extravagant vacations planned for the summer, she felt particularly unexcited about getting a job at the new pizzeria.”

Compiled by Diana Varenik '22 in consultation with Prof. Asali Solomon of the Haverford English Department, who in turn has drawn on materials created by Prof. Suzanne Keen (Hamilton College) and Prof. Elizabeth Abel (UC Berkeley)