

How To Do A Close Reading

Close reading is fundamental to the analysis and interpretation of literature. It allows a reader to develop a deep understanding and a precise interpretation of a literary passage that is based upon formal elements as well as larger themes and ideas evoked and/or implied in the work. The following points guide readers through a thought process that moves from the smallest bits of information (words, sound, punctuation) to larger groupings (images, metaphors) to larger concepts (themes).

Select a Passage: Treat the passage as if it were complete in itself. Read it a few times, at least once aloud. Concentrate on all its details and assume that everything is significant. Determine what the passage is about and try to paraphrase it. Make sure that you begin with a general sense of the passage's meaning.

Word meaning: Determine the meanings of words and references. Also, note (and verify) interesting connotations of words. *Look up any words you do not know* or which are used in unfamiliar ways. Consider the diction of the passage. What is the source of the language, i.e., out of what kind of discourse does the language seem to come?

Structure: Examine the structure of the passage. How does it develop its themes and ideas? How is the passage organized? Are there climaxes and turning points?

Sound and Rhythm: Acquire a feel for the sound, meter, and rhythm; note any aural clues that may affect the meaning. Be alert to devices such as alliteration, assonance, rhyme, consonance, euphony, cacophony, onomatopoeia. Examine the meter of the passage in the same way. Do lines breaks compliment or complicate the meanings of the sentences?

Syntax: Examine the syntax and the arrangement of words in the sentences. Does the syntax call attention to itself? Are the sentences simple or complex? What is the rhythm of the sentences? How do subordinate clauses work in the passage? Are there interesting suspensions, inversions, parallels, oppositions, repetitions? Does the syntax allow for ambiguity or double meanings?

Textual Context: In what specific and general dramatic and/or narrative contexts does the passage appear? How do these contexts modify the meaning of the passage? What role does the passage play in the overall movement/moment of the text?

Tone and Narrative Voice: Who is the narrator? Who is the speaker? What is the relationship between the narrator and the speaker? What does the tone or attitude towards the subject and audience reveal about the speaker or narrator?

Imagery: What sort of imagery is invoked? How do the images relate to those in the rest of the text? What happens to the imagery over the course of the passage? Does the passage noticeably lack imagery? If so, why?

Rhetorical Devices: Note metaphors, similes, images, or symbols especially ones that recur in the passage or that were important for the entire text. How do they work with respect to the themes of the passage and the entire text? Are there any other notable rhetorical devices?

Themes: What themes are both explicitly and implicitly evoked by the passage? Attempt to relate these themes to others appearing outside the immediate passage. How do the smaller details of the passage build these themes?

History: How does the passage narrate history? How does it present "facts" versus observations?