

Close Reading of a Literary Passage

Adapted from https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/reading_lit.html

To do a close reading, you choose a specific passage and analyze it in fine detail, as if with a magnifying glass. You then comment on points of style and on your reactions as a reader. Close reading is important because it is the building block for larger analysis. Your thoughts evolve not from someone else's truth about the reading, but from your own observations. The more closely you can observe the more original and exact your ideas will be. To begin your close reading, ask yourself several specific questions about the passage. The following questions are not a formula, but a starting point for your own thoughts. When you arrive at some answers, you are ready to organize and write. You should organize your close reading like any other kind of essay, paragraph by paragraph, but you can arrange it any way you like.

I. First Impressions:

- What is the first thing you notice about the passage?
- What is the second thing?
- Do the two things you noticed complement each other? Or contradict each other?
- What mood does the passage create in you? Why?

II. Vocabulary and Diction:

- Which words do you notice first? Why? What is noteworthy about this diction?
- How do the important words relate to one another?
- Do any words seem oddly used to you? Why?
- Do any words have double meanings? Do they have extra connotations?
- Look up any unfamiliar words. For a pre-20th century text, look in the Oxford English Dictionary for possible outdated meanings. (The OED can only be accessed by students with a subscription or from a library computer that has a subscription. Otherwise, you should find a copy in the local library.)

III. Discerning Patterns:

- Does an image here remind you of an image elsewhere in the book? Where? What's the connection?
- How might this image fit into the pattern of the book as a whole?
- Could this passage symbolize the entire work? Could this passage serve as a microcosm--a little picture--of what's taking place in the whole work?
- What is the sentence rhythm like? Short and choppy? Long and flowing? Does it build on itself or stay at an even pace? What is the style like?
- Look at the punctuation. Is there anything unusual about it?
- Is there any repetition within the passage? What is the effect of that repetition?
- How many types of writing are in the passage? (For example, narration, description, argument, dialogue, rhymed or alliterative poetry, etc.)

- Can you identify paradoxes in the author's thought or subject?
- What is left out or kept silent? What would you expect the author to talk about that the author avoided?

IV. Point of View and Characterization:

- How does the passage make us react or think about any characters or events within the narrative?
- Are there colors, sounds, physical description that appeals to the senses? Does this imagery form a pattern? Why might the author have chosen that color, sound or physical description?
- Who speaks in the passage? To whom does he or she speak? Does the narrator have a limited or partial point of view? Or does the narrator appear to be omniscient, and he knows things the characters couldn't possibly know? (For example, omniscient narrators might mention future historical events, events taking place "off stage," the thoughts and feelings of multiple characters, and so on).

V. Symbolism:

- Are there metaphors? What kinds?
- Is there one controlling metaphor? If not, how many different metaphors are there, and in what order do they occur? How might that be significant?
- How might objects represent something else?
- Do any of the objects, colors, animals, or plants appearing in the passage have traditional connotations or meaning? What about religious or biblical significance?
- If there are multiple symbols in the work, could we read the entire passage as having allegorical meaning beyond the literal level?