

The Methodology of Close Reading: A Brief Overview for Students

The formalist idea of *close reading* has spread widely, and you're liable to encounter it in college. Sometimes called *text explication* (from the Latin *explicare*: to unfold or clarify the meaning), close reading is simply a process of careful, disciplined reading.

The goal of close reading is to engage in a detailed examination of a poem or a short passage from a prose work to find a focus, a design, or an idea that might help explain the whole work. The method is to pay close attention to all the patterns, correspondences and tensions in the diction, syntax, imagery, symbolism, tone, and literary devices the author has chosen to use. The premise is that the text will be more fully understood and appreciated to the extent that the interrelations of its crafted parts are perceived.

A close reading strategy can also be used to help you land on an idea or thesis to pursue in writing about a text. Here's a typical close reading procedure:

1. Read the text once to get an overall impression, keeping in mind any questions the reading activates in your mind. Try to formulate an initial literal sense of the situation, meaning, point, or function of the passage as a whole (if it's a complete text) or within the larger whole (if it's only one small part of a longer work). What's the big idea? What's the author mostly talking about? Could you express or paraphrase it in a sentence? Why do you think the author wrote this? Pay attention for key passages that might convey particularly important messages.
2. Read the text again, more carefully this time, and *annotate* the text. Annotating is the fancy term for underlining, highlighting, or taking notes in the margins (if the book belongs to you) or taking notes in a notebook and keeping thoughts on sticky slips (if the book doesn't belong to you)—in other words, noting in some way key words, phrases, or passages you locate that seem important, surprising, bewildering, compelling, significant, or question raising. What grabs you? Provokes thought? Confuses? This is reading with your pen, and it will help your understanding and recall of the text. (If you have the time and energy, consider coming back the next day and reading and annotating the text carefully yet another time. Further readings often unearth further nuggets of insight.)
3. Now examine the key passages, words, or phrases you have annotated. What do you notice? What patterns emerge? What ideas, words, or moves recur? Do you find significant connections, repetitions, contradictions, multiple meanings, designs, motifs, or consistent uses or rhythm of language?

Based on the literary moves we've been studying (see "A List of Literary Terms"), how does the author use these devices of the writer's craft? Why has the author made these choices?

4. Formulate a statement that attempts to answer a couple of your questions about what you've noticed. The statement should reflect your speculations about the meaning of the text.
5. Now you're ready to write an essay with this statement as a focus. Remember to keep all your conclusions firmly grounded in the text of the work, supporting all assertions with evidence from the passage.

As Patricia Kain at the Harvard University Writing Center says, "As we proceed in this way, paying close attention to the evidence, asking questions and formulating interpretations, we engage in a process that is central to essay writing and to the whole academic enterprise: in other words, we reason toward our own ideas" (1998).