

CLOSE READING

Close reading or textual analysis has become the central method for a literary critic to discuss a text. It involves detailed exploration of the language, images, words and organization that a writer will use in his or her text; and that text can be anything from a poem to a novel, speech, letter, essay, etc. Close reading allows us to draw attention to the individual parts of a passage in order to clarify that passage's meaning and to understand the relationship between the **form** of the passage and its **content**.

Close reading also acts as the **evidence** that supports the argument that you are making about a text. When you develop a thesis for your paper, your close readings of specific passages or quotations from the text act as the **proof** for the points that you are making.

When preparing a close reading, consider the following elements:

- a. **Context:** How is the passage situated in the work? What comes before or after it?
- b. **Speaker:** Who is doing the talking and why? What is the general character of the speaker (rambler, hypocrite, innocent)? Does the speaker's voice change at all in this passage?
- c. **Chronology:** What gets said first, second, etc.? Is the order of presentation important? Is the chronology other than the one you had expected? Why are certain ideas juxtaposed? Is there something that may be left out?
- d. **Concepts:** Is the author/speaker developing or defining some term, concept, or idea? What is the relationship between ideas developed in the passage (e.g. causal, mutually defining, opposing, metaphorical)? Has the author diverged from a general denotation or connotation of the concept?
- e. **Imagery:** What sorts of images, similes, or metaphors are used? What is their effect?
- f. **Language:** Are repetition, formal or informal language, conventional or unconventional sentences, important to the way **meaning is produced** in the passage? What **kinds of languages** does the speaker draw upon (legal, moral, Calvinist, scientific...)? Does the author use different dialects or different languages that are or are not translated? How does the kind of language fit with the subject of the passage? Look up the meaning of words that seem significant; often the author is using a particular word because of its various connotations and denotations.
- g. **Overview:** Trace the surface meanings and the "deeper" meanings of the passage: what shape does the passage have? Does the speaker begin with a discussion of the price of ham and end up mourning her mother's death? How can you describe that movement? From the mundane to the momentous, from dead animals to dead people...

Parts of this worksheet have been developed from a worksheet by Andrea Zemgulys, Department of English, University of Michigan Ann Arbor.