

What does it mean to read a text closely and analyze it? Why do we do close reading in literary study?

The answers to these questions emerge more from the doing than the talking. Briefly, close reading is a basic tool for understanding, taking pleasure in, and communicating one's interpretation of a literary work. The skills employed in close reading lend themselves to all kinds of cultural interpretation and investigation.

Close reading takes language as its subject because language can operate in different ways to convey meaning. Reading sensitively allows one to remain open to the many ways language works on the mind and heart.

When an assignment calls for close reading, it's best to start by choosing a brief but promising passage and checking your assumptions about its content at the door. Close reading often reveals the fissures between what the speaker or narrator says and how she or he says it. You know from your own experience that life involves constant, often unconscious sifting of these nuances.

Here are some useful steps.

1. Choose a short passage that allows you to investigate the details closely. Here, for example, is a speech in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (V, i, 68-90).

ANTONIO Orsino, noble sir,
Be pleased that I shake off these names you give me.
Antonio never yet was thief or pirate,
Though, I confess, on base and ground enough,
Orsino's enemy. A witchcraft drew me hither.
That most ungrateful boy there by your side
From the rude sea's enraged and foamy mouth
Did I redeem; a wrack past hope he was.
His life I gave him and did thereto add
My love, without retention or restraint,
All his in dedication. For his sake
Did I expose myself, pure for his love,
Into the danger of this adverse town;
Drew to defend him when he was beset;
Where, being apprehended, his false cunning
(Not meaning to partake with me in danger)
Taught him to face me out of his acquaintance
And grew a twenty years' removed thing
While one would wink; denied me my own purse,
Which I had recommended to his use
Not half an hour before.

This single speech will give us plenty to work with.

2. Look at diction. What kinds of words does Shakespeare use? Does he aim for lofty diction (used for special occasions) or common diction? Are the words long or short, Latinate or Anglo-Saxon, specialized (i.e. legalistic, medical, jargon, elite) or ordinary? Remember that the rules for diction are different at different times in history; check all special definitions.
3. Next, look at sentence structure. Can you map the sentences (find the subject and verb, locate phrases and clauses)? Are there simple, compound, or complex sentences? How does the structure of the sentence relate to its content? Does Shakespeare use active or passive verbs? What rhythms does the sentence structure create—long flowing ones, short choppy ones—and how do these relate to the meaning?
4. You might also be interested in the meanings certain words take on in the speech because they appear elsewhere: references to drowning and the sea, piracy and theft (note Sir Toby "front her, board her"), madness (Malvolio, Sebastian, Olivia) in relation to the "witchcraft," "retention" (Orsino to Olivia, II, iv, 106), the purse, the "wrack." What themes or images in this speech resonate with others in the play?
5. After you have looked at language (and there are other technical issues one might pay attention to), you can begin to analyze tone. Is the speaker being straightforward, factual, open? Or is he taking a less direct route toward his meaning? Does the voice carry any emotion? Or is it detached from its subject? Do you hear irony? Where? If so, what complications does the irony produce?
6. At this point, you may discover multiple meanings and significations, even some difference between what the author appears to be doing (giving you a straightforward narrative of Antonio's actions) and what he also accomplishes (raising doubts about Antonio's point of view, whether he fully understands the implications of what he's seen, whether he knows what he is saying, therefore whether this character can be trusted, etc.). You can now begin to talk about the ways Shakespeare's language, which *seems* to invite our confidence, is also complicating its message by raising these doubts.
7. At this point, you can propose a descriptive hypothesis, perhaps something like, "In this speech, Shakespeare raises doubts about Antonio's character through the ironic contrast between his controlled language and violent feelings, and between the violence of his feelings and their seeming exaggeration or inappropriateness."
8. You can proceed to fill in the outlines of this point by explaining what you mean, using details and quotations from the passage to support your idea.
9. You still, however, need an argument and will need to go back to your opening to sharpen the thesis. The question is *Why?* Or *to what effect?* Your thesis might build on what you've already written by suggesting: Shakespeare creates this ironic contrast between Antonio's heightened emotion and the deflating truth to intensify the sense of madness in the play. Or: The effect of this speech is to raise questions about Antonio's love of Sebastian and to make possible the surprising developments later on (Sebastian marries a woman he doesn't know and Olivia chooses a man she previously wooed as a woman: both possibilities more likely than a man loving a

man). Or (alternatively) Shakespeare makes Antonio appear a plainspoken, honest man in order to expose the foolishness of the other lovers' statements; Antonio's openness does little to serve his interests but allows other characters to express their feelings more openly, even violently (Orsino, Viola). Your thesis might go many directions, once you've explored the language.

10. Even with these more developed statements, you will need to explain and support your point further. But you will have achieved some very important things, namely: 1) you have chosen a specific piece of the text to work with, hence avoiding generalizations and abstractions that tend to mystify a reader; 2) you have moved from exposition (explaining what's there) to arguing a point, which will involve your reader in a more interactive and risky encounter with the text; 3) you have carved out your *own* reading of the speech rather than taking the more well-worn path; 4) you have identified something about Shakespeare's method that may well open up other areas of the text for study and debate. Bravo!
11. With your more refined thesis in place, you can go back and make sure your supporting argument explains the questions you've raised, follows through on your argument, and comes to a provocative conclusion. By the end, you may be able to expand from your initial passage to a larger point, but use your organization to keep the reader focused all the way.

The most exciting thing for a reader, and the most useful for an essayist, is that close reading generally offers *surprises*. Your purpose is not so much about telling readers what they probably can see for themselves but what they might have missed that could delight them. It's helpful, then, to go into the paper with an open mind and be ready to adjust your thesis to the evidence you find in the text. Have a blast!