On Close Reading [1]

What is close reading?

Close reading is a critical mode that pays attention to the details of a text, noticing how those details shape the text's "message." Indeed, it relies on the assumption that the way in which an idea is presented (its form) is inseparable from the idea itself (its content). It requires you to be open to changing your mind about a text, revising your initial idea about it, but also to be willing to form an opinion, or interpretation, about it. It also requires you to forget, at least initially, all speculations about the author's "intent."

At its best, close reading unites a sympathetic evaluation of the text with reading against the text's grain to produce a complicated and nuanced understanding of what the text does and how it does it.

What is reading against the grain?

Reading against the grain is a critical mode that recognizes the dominant or primary message of a text while also looking for ways the text itself complicates or even subverts that message. It is a mode that reveals how a text subtly reinforces the rules it apparently critiques, or implicitly criticizes the ideals it seems to praise. Reading against the grain can mean that you look for how a text that at first seems simply entertaining actually teaches didactic lessons; or that you look for how an apparently didactic text undermines the lessons it sets out to teach. John Milton, a devout Christian, wrote *Paradise Lost* in large part to celebrate the glory of the God in which he believed — and *Paradise Lost* does indeed tell us that Christ is far better and more glorious than Satan. Satan, however, gets all the good lines and Christ seems rather pompous and boring. So *Paradise Lost* clearly does something that undercuts its explicit purpose. (William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley argue that Satan is the true hero of *Paradise Lost*.) It's almost impossible to read against the grain if you approach a text certain that you already know what it says (it's almost impossible to interpret a text well in that case, period), so reading against the grain requires close attention to the text and a willingness to generate ideas from it.

Why is reading against the grain important?

Because texts are often smarter than they know. Most texts — and especially literary texts, we could argue — contain more possibilities than those which appear at first reading, or first glance. This is why you can read and reread literary texts, discovering something new each time. This is why multiple interpretations of a poem can all be valid, why plays can be performed in such radically different ways, why smart people can have passionately different understandings of the characters in a novel, and why a scene that terrifies one reader provides another with a key to understanding that vampire story's failure to frighten. Failing to read against the grain flattens the text and simplifies it — and it leaves you likely to find yourself caught in a misinterpretation because you have failed to look at all the details.

Because otherwise you sell yourself short. Reading against the grain — like swimming upstream or sailing against the wind — is a good bit harder than reading with the grain. But it's also one of the best ways to say something new about a text. Texts won't always contradict

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themselves, but they often reveal characters, circumstances, issues, and ideas to be far more complicated and interesting than they at first appear. Advertisements are something that sophisticated consumers automatically read against the grain, in part for our own safety: Will having an iPod *really* make you cool, connected to current music trends, and a good dancer? Will drinking fitness water make you exercise more, or better? If you don't read against the grain, you are taking things at face value — always a dangerously naive thing to do.

How do you generate ideas from the text?

By reading, and rereading, and rereading some more. Unfortunately, there's no way around that basic problem. If you are going to find all the interesting and complicating aspects of a passage, you are going to have to read it (and its surroundings) many, many times. You can never be certain that you're finished and you can never be certain that your ideas won't change; it's exhausting but also deeply fun — there's always something else to discover.

By reading actively. Which means that you have to ask the text questions, genuine questions, even when you think it seems fairly straightforward. There are always other ways a description could have been phrased, a conversation could have been presented, or a character could have been developed. Why do it this way? Why emphasize *that* aspect of the landscape? Why include *this* element at all? Why represent this comment in dialogue rather than indirectly, and that one indirectly rather than in dialogue? You have to notice where the text directs your attention (What images do you land on? Which are emphasized so that they linger in your mind?) and where it does not.

By identifying what assumptions you bring to the text. We all carry a lot of intellectual baggage—ways we've been trained to think of which we are and are not aware, personal histories that make certain ideas resonate with us more than others, and so on. We all notice different aspects of a text, or make different assumptions about them and therefore have different interpretations of them, based on that baggage. That's fine—and good—but in making an interpretation convincing we have to know (to the best of our abilities) where our assumptions come from.

By writing and talking and arguing and writing and writing and writing. The things you notice, the questions you generate — these form your data for an interpretation but they don't simply add up to an interpretation without your analysis. But often you'll feel as though a detail of a text is important without being able to figure out why…and you really must figure out *why*. So write about it. Write casually, knowing that you're the only person who will read it. *Throw words at the problem*, trying out different interpretations until you find one that you like. Talk to yourself, to a friend who has (or who hasn't) also read the text, or to your computer. Think about the problem while taking a walk, while working out, while folding your laundry. Keep going until you come up with something that seems as though it has energy, movement, as though it requires active verbs, as though someone would disagree, as though it's going out on a limb—but one that you think you might, just might, be able to support. Find someone who has read the text and have an argument with him or her about it. And then write some more: Where might you go with this idea? How does it connect to the others you've already found? What does it complicate in your other ideas about the text? It's only after you've done all of this predrafting that you can really generate an outline or begin a true draft.