CLOSE READING

WHAT, WHY, HOW, & SO WHAT?

WHAT IS CLOSE READING?

Close reading is exactly what it sounds like it is: analyzing a text closely. Close reading is also called textual explication or an explication of the text ("explication" means "a commentary revealing the meaning or meanings of the work"). Close reading is the best way to go about reading in order to understand a text, write about a text, critique a text, or, most crucially, **form a nuanced, thoughtful relationship to a text**. Close reading is the best way to "get," or at least partially master, a text as you begin to think about it in a broader sense, which is fundamental to the process of writing about texts of all kinds. Here is a simplified description of close reading:

- **the process by which a strong reader processes a small part of a text in order to convert that example into evidence that supports an interpretation of the larger text**

WHERE SHOULD YOU START?

Before you begin the process of close reading a selected passage of a text, you must select the excerpt you are going to read closely. Knowing how to select a potentially rewarding, idea-rich passage or lines(s) requires some pre-close reading, some intuition, and a lot of practice. A good first step is to return to a moment of the text that jumped out at you in some way during your initial reading: a passage that surprised, intrigued, troubled, confused, or otherwise provoked you. Selecting a passage that will reward close-reading is often a process of trial and error: you may start a close reading of a passage and then realize it's not going to provide you with as much to think about as a different passage may. Then you try another passage. When close reading a text, it is important to bear in mind the following two ideas:

- **Close reading is primarily a thinking PROCESS, not a product.** Take extensive notes while you move through the steps; these notes, and your observations and ideas, are going to change as you move along through this process.
- **Close reading is a process of DISCOVERY and LEARNING.** Start this process with a clear and very open mind. True, not to mention ethical, inquiry starts by acknowledging that you don't already know what you might learn. Let the text teach you.

POTENTIAL CONCEPTS TO ADDRESS

The concepts detailed on the following pages describe many of the concepts you might address when performing a close reading. Note that it is not necessary to analyze *all* of these concepts, nor do you need to take them on in the order I've listed here. (Although you almost always want to start with an understanding of the passage's literal content, which I've listed first for this reason.) See which of the concepts, some of which might overlap, are most relevant and productive for the passage you're analyzing, and make sure to take notes on your ideas in this pre-writing stage!

1. LITERAL CONTENT

The word "literal" means "without interpretation or embellishment; limited to the explicit meaning of a word or text." This word is sometimes used incorrectly when what a speaker intends to express is not "literal" but "symbolic" or "figurative." For example, "What you just said is literally making my head explode!" is incorrect unless the speaker's head is, in fact, in the process of exploding. Using the word "literally" in this way was once meant to express an ironic sense of hyperbole; however, its ongoing once ironic usage has resulted in many people having a mistaken idea of the literal meaning of "literal."

Briefly describe the skeletal, basic contents of the passage. Answer the standard journalist's questions (Who? What? When? Where? Why?) in order to establish situation, topic, idea's role in argument, etc. as it relates to this passage. What is the context for this passage? This initial step helps makes sure you know the most basic, literal meaning of the text.

2. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

The word "figurative" means "consisting of or forming figures; evoking mental images and impressions."

Examine the text carefully for images and imagery. Do you find similes, metaphors, or other forms of imagistic comparison? Symbols? Analogies? Do any of these imagistic words phrases complement or complicate one another? Can you group them, or see patterns emerging? You may find no figurative language or you may find overlapping or multiple forms of figurative language. Are any of the words pointing to or suggesting an abstraction that may comprise a figure or image?

3. DICTION

The word "diction" means "words; the choice of words, phrases, sentence structures, and figurative language in a text; the manner or mode of verbal expression, particularly with regard to clarity and accuracy."

Diction, with its emphasis on words, provides a crucial part of the work of explication. Do not assume you know the depth or full complexity of meaning at first glance. Mark all verbs in the passage, mark or list all nouns, all adjectives, all adverbs, etc. Examine each of these groupings. When you look up words, the dictionary will illuminate new **CONNOTATIONS** (i.e. associative or implied meanings) and new **DENOTATIONS** (i.e. basic, literal meanings) of a word.

Look at all the meanings of the words that you think are important, or key, words. After a while, the words you examine will begin to take on multiple and dynamic meanings. Be careful to always check back to the original text, keeping meaning based in its context. Can you establish a "word web" of contrasting and parallel words? Do close-reading based meanings establish any new dynamic associations with other words? Develop and question the metaphoric sense of the words. Can you see what the metaphoric words are suggesting?

4. STRUCTURE

The word "structure" means "a thing constructed; a complex entity constructed of many parts."

Divide the passage into the more obvious sections (stages of argument, discussion, or action). What is the interrelation of these units? How do they change or develop? What can you see in terms of a controlling design for the work at this point? What kind of genre or form is this written text? What is the significance of such a form? Does the form contribute to the meaning? How?

5. STYLE

The word "style" means "manner: how something is done or how it happens."

Look for any significant aspects of style. Periodic sentences, clause structures, excessive commas, lack of punctuation? Weird language? Repetition? Dialect or slang? Does this passage have "favorite" words or types of words or phrases?

6. TONE

The word "tone" means "the quality of a voice."

What is the tone of the passage? What can you hear? Is the tone ironic? Sentimental? Serious? Humorous? Angry, ashamed, elitist, pedantic, depressive, resigned? Something else? What words specifically clue you in to the tone or tones of this passage? Think of the best most specific ways you can imagine to richly describe the tone of the text. Maybe the tone changes at some point or there may be multiple tones? How does this tone elucidate the entire passage?

7. THEME

The word "theme" means "overall subject matter, or unifying topic(s) or concern(s)."

A theme is not to be confused with a thesis (or guiding argument); the theme or themes of a passage are its broadest, most pervasive concern(s), and themes are contained in a complex combination of elements. Usually, a theme is not a direct statement; rather, it often is expressed in a single word or a phrase, such as "love," "illusion versus reality," or "the tyranny of circumstance." As with many things, however, a theme can be profound or trivial, coherent or giddy. Do you see a theme or important themes emerging through your close reading of the text?

8. CONTEXT

The word "context" means "circumstances that surround an event or moment."

When close reading, it's a good idea to move between the specificity of the passage you're reading and its relation to the rest of the text. Doing so will help ensure that you're not missing the forest for the trees (to use a figurative expression). Close reading is a dialogic process, meaning a process that produces an ongoing conversation between your thinking and the passage. Keep going back and forth between the small excerpt you're analyzing and the text as a whole.

SYNTHETIC ASSESSMENT: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Given all these steps you've gone through, has your understanding of the passage gotten bigger, deeper, more complicated, fuller? Ideally, you're seeing and thinking more about the passage now than you were addressing some of these concepts. Go back through your notes and ideas and try to see patterns or important concepts developing there. Now is probably a good time to ask if any of the ideas you've noted relate to themes, ideas, and larger concepts in other parts of the whole work. How has your careful scrutiny of the passage helped to give you a new way of thinking about the text?

At this point, you've got a lot of potential ideas. You should take a break, and let your mind mull over what this process has been and all of the ideas and problems you have discovered in what is really a small amount of text. If your findings exceed the size of the passage itself then you are doing a great job. Texts tend to compress **A LOT** into a much smaller number of words because words are so incredibly, weirdly, and surprisingly dynamic.

You are now ready to begin to compose your overall ideas about this text. You must pick and choose

what you think are the most important, useful findings in your notes. You've probably generated too many potential ideas for you to focus on every single thing you have discovered, and some of your notes will no longer helpful to you because your ideas have developed and changed. That's perfectly fine! Close reading is a means for you to see the complexities and ambiguities in a given work of literature, which often entails revising out previous interpretations and understandings.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES THAT MAY PROVE USEFUL

- http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/strategies-essay-writing

These resources, provided by Harvard, nicely break down the components of writing an interpretive essay and the role of close reading in that process. It's worth browsing through all of the Writing Center's links, as a number of them are relevant for our class.

- http://www.reed.edu/writing/paper_help/close-reading.html

This is a brief, distilled description of what a close reading-based paper entails.