

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 the first paragraph of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Chapter 2.

In addition to what has already been said of Catherine Morland's personal and mental endowments, when about to be launched into all the difficulties and dangers of a six weeks' residence in Bath, it may be stated, for the reader's more certain information, lest the following pages should otherwise fail of giving any idea of what her character is meant to be; that her heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or affectation of any kind—her manners just removed from the awkwardness and shyness of a girl; her person pleasing, and when in good looks, pretty—and her mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is.

This single sentence will give us plenty to work with.

2. Look at diction. What kinds of words does Austen use? Does she 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.
3. Next, look at sentence structure. Can you map the sentence (find the subject and verb, locate phrases and clauses)? Is it a simple, compound, or complex sentence? How does the structure of the sentence relate to its content? Does the author 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. 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 narrator being straightforward, factual, open? Or is she taking a less direct route toward her 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?
5. At this point, you may discover some difference between what the author appears to be doing (giving you a complete, unbiased picture of her character) and what she also accomplishes (raising doubts about whether these qualities are worth having, whether her character is a heroine after all, whether women have minds at all, therefore whether this narrator can be trusted at all, etc.). You can now begin to talk about the ways Austen's language, which *seems* to invite our confidence, is also complicating its message by raising these doubts.
6. At this point, you can propose a generic hypothesis, something like, "In this passage, Austen raises doubts about Catherine Morland's character through her use of deliberately banal diction, her strained sentence structure, and her ironic use of the terms of character description for heroines."
7. 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 point.
8. 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: Austen creates this irony early in the novel to alert the reader to the ways she's subverting narrative conventions. Or: The effect of this description of Catherine is to undermine any notion of her powers as a heroine and to introduce Austen's theme that true character emerges from weakness rather than strength. Or: Austen's cavalier treatment of her heroine suggests that she has little respect for the typical education of young women.
9. 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 huge generalizations and abstractions that tend to turn a reader off; 2) you have moved from exposition (explaining what's there—and really, shouldn't a reader be able to figure these things out for him or herself?) to arguing a point, which will involve your reader in a more interactive and risky encounter; 3) you have carved out your *own* reading of the text rather than taking the more well-worn path; 4) you have identified something about Austen's method that may well open up other areas of the text for study and debate. Bravo!
10. 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 project 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!