

## CLOSE READING

Doing a close reading involves a thought process that moves from small details to larger issues. Writing a close reading begins with these larger issues and uses the relevant details as evidence.

**I. Read and Think:** Treat the passage as if it were complete in itself. Read it a few times, at least once aloud. Concentrate on all its details and assume that everything is significant. Determine what the passage is about and try to paraphrase it. Make sure that you begin with a general sense of the passage's meaning. Some things to look for:

1. **Word meaning:** Determine the meanings of words and references. Also, note (and verify) interesting connotations of words. Look up any words you do not know or which are used in unfamiliar ways. Consider the diction of the passage. What is the source of the language, i.e., out of what kind of discourse does the language seem to come? Did the author coin any words? Are there any slang words, innuendoes, puns, or ambiguities? Do the words have interesting etymologies?
2. **Structure:** Examine the structure of the passage. How does it develop its themes and ideas? How is the passage organized? Are there climaxes and turning points?
3. **Sound and Rhythm:** Acquire a feel for the sound, meter, and rhythm; note any aural clues that may affect the meaning. Even punctuation may be significant. Be alert to devices such as alliteration, assonance, rhyme, consonance, euphony, cacophony, onomatopoeia. See a dictionary of poetics or rhetoric for precise definitions of these and other terms. Examine the meter of the passage in the same way. Is it regular or not? Determine whether the lines breaks compliment or complicate the meanings of the sentences.
4. **Syntax:** Examine the syntax and the arrangement of words in the sentences. Does the syntax call attention to itself? Are the sentences simple or complex? What is the rhythm of the sentences? How do subordinate clauses work in the passage? Are there interesting suspensions, inversions, parallels, oppositions, repetitions? Does the syntax allow for ambiguity or double meanings?
5. **Textual Context:** In what specific and general dramatic and/or narrative contexts does the passage appear? How do these contexts modify the meaning of the passage? What role does the passage play in the overall movement/moment of the text?
6. **Irony:** How does irony operate in the passage, if at all?
7. **Tone and Narrative Voice:** What is the speaker's (as distinct from the narrator's and author's) attitude towards his or her subject and hearers? How is this reflected in the tone? What does the passage reveal about the speaker? Who is the narrator? What is the relationship between the narrator and the speaker? Is there more than one speaker?
8. **Imagery:** What sort of imagery is invoked? How do the images relate to those in the rest of the text? How do the images work in the particular passage and throughout the text? What happens to the imagery over the course of the passage? Does the passage noticeably lack imagery? If so, why?
9. **Rhetorical Devices:** Note particularly interesting metaphors, similes, images, or symbols especially ones that recur in the passage or that were important for the entire text. How do they work with respect to the themes of the passage and the text as a whole? Are there any other notable rhetorical devices? Are there any classical, biblical, or historical allusions? How do they work?

10. **Themes:** Relate all of these details to possible themes that are both explicitly and implicitly evoked by the passage. Attempt to relate these themes to others appearing outside the immediate passage. These other themes may be from the larger story from which the passage is excerpted; or from other tales; or from knowledge about the narrator; or from the work as a whole.
11. **Point of View:** Narratives have to be told from some point of view: the narrator might be the central character in the work (as in *David Copperfield*, narrated by David himself); he or she might be a secondary character in the work (as in *The Great Gatsby*, narrated by Nick Carraway); or the narrator may be "omniscient" (as in *Pride and Prejudice*, narrated by someone not in the story and able to tell what happened to all the characters). Some works mix things up, telling different things from different points of view (as in *As I Lay Dying*, where different chapters are told from the point of view of different characters.) Narrators might also be reliable — readers are expected to take their word for everything — or unreliable — readers have reasons to doubt the narrator is telling the story "straight." Try to stay conscious of these things. Often there is nothing to say about them, but sometimes they really pay off. Look especially for changes in the point of view: if a narrative has been described from the point of view of one character all along, and it suddenly shifts to someone else, that is almost certainly worth thinking about.
12. **Gender:** How does the passage construct gender? What issues of gender identity does it evoke? How does it represent women's issues? Does it reveal something interesting about women's writing?
13. **History:** How does the passage narrate history? How does it present "facts" versus observations?

**II. Construct a Thesis:** Based on all of this information and observation, construct a thesis that ties the details together. Determine how the passage illuminates the concerns, themes, and issues of the entire text of which it is a part. Ask yourself how the passage provides insight into the text (and the context of the text). Try to determine how the passage provides us a key to understanding the work as whole.

Note that this process moves from the smallest bits of information (words, sound, punctuation) to larger groupings (images, metaphors) to larger concepts (themes). Also, the final argument is based on these smaller levels of the passage; this is why the exercise is called a close reading. Of course your thought processes may not follow such a rigid order (mine usually don't). Just don't omit any of the steps.

### III. Write It

1. The paper should begin with a closely argued thesis, which is the result of the last step above. Include a general orientation to the passage to be analyzed, explaining the text of origin and the author.
2. The thesis depends on the analysis already done, and the point is to relate all of the relevant details to that thesis. This means that some details may be omitted in the paper because they do not support or concern the thesis being argued. Too much detail about unimportant features will draw attention from your thesis. However, you must be careful that you do not ignore details that contradict your thesis; if you find these, this means that you need to reevaluate your thesis and make it more complex (in other words, you don't necessarily have to abandon it altogether).
3. Note that the order of the evidence presented should not follow the order of the passage being discussed. Rather, the order of the evidence depends on how it relates to your central argument. Don't let the passage walk you through your analysis; instead, re-organize the passage to suit your discussion of it.
4. The body of the paper presents relevant textual evidence in a meaningful order. Avoid being overly mechanical in the organization of your paper. That is, don't write one paragraph on diction, one on

sound, one on metaphor, etc. Instead try to bring these observations together on the same words or phrases together. Organize the paragraphs around issues of meaning rather than of technique.

5. Make sure you don't read so closely that you transform a clear though complex passage into a bundle of nonsense.
6. If you relate the passage to text outside it, make sure your emphasis remains on the passage itself; do not neglect it in favor of external textual evidence.

Adapted from Albert Sheen: <http://www.sit.wisc.edu/~aesheen/Eng208-2-1999/closerad1.htm>

### **ONE MORE THING: SUMMARY VS. ANALYSIS**

Avoid summarizing the plot (i.e., retelling the story literally). Instead analyze (form a thesis about and explain) the story in literary terms.

**PLOT SUMMARY:** In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," the mad narrator explains in detail how he kills the old man, who screams as he dies. After being alerted by a neighbor, the police arrive, and the madman gives them a tour through the house, finally halting in the old man's bedroom, where he has buried the man beneath the floor planks under the bed. As he is talking, the narrator hears what he thinks is the old man's heart beating loudly, and he is driven to confess the murder.

**ANALYSIS:** Though the narrator claims he is not mad, the reader realizes that the narrator in "The Telltale Heart" is unreliable and lies about his sanity. For example, the mad narrator says he can hear "all things in the heaven and in the earth." Sane people cannot. He also lies to the police when he tells them that the shriek they hear occurs in his dream. Though sane people do lie, most do not meticulously plan murders, lie to the police, and then confess without prompting. Finally, the madman is so plagued with guilt that he hears his own conscience in the form of the old man's heart beating loudly. Dead hearts do not beat, nor do sane people confuse their consciences with the sounds of external objects.

Cited from Sierra College: <http://lrc.sierra.cc.ca.us/writingcenter/litanalysis.htm>

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