Close Reading Analysis

"**Close reading**" is the careful, detailed analysis of a passage from a text. A close reading should be the building block for any interpretive claim that you may want to make about a text's meaning. When we examine creative works of art, like literary fiction, we use close readings of key passages to ground us in a deeper understanding of the ways in which *what* the text says (its content) is intrinsically related to *how* it says it (its form).

Performing a Close Reading

There isn't just one way to do a close reading. The following questions are not a formula, but a starting point to help you develop your reading. The first step is to select a passage that stands out to you as significant. Read the passage carefully and annotate it. Consider the following questions:

As You Read:

- Focus on particulars and specifics: who is speaking? where is the scene located? at what time of day? what kind of language is being used? what allusions are made? what kind of punctuation is employed?
- Any word you are unsure of, or which looks strange in the context given, look up in the *Oxford English Dictionary* or *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.
- How does this passage fit in with the larger themes of the text?
- Ask questions about what the passage means—what is the author trying to communicate?
- Don't just point out the obvious: anyone can spot that one word rhymes with another; close reading requires that you account for why that word rhymes with that word, this word with this word and what it means for the passage
- Consider why the author made the choices they made
- Work towards finding meaningful links between the moments that you draw out for comment and use them to come up with a perspective that can see the text's discrete elements in dialogue with each other.

First Impressions:

- What is the first thing you notice about the passage?
- What is the second thing?
- Do the two things you noticed complement each other? Or contradict each other?
- What mood does the passage create in you as a reader? Why? How?
- Who speaks in the passage? To whom do they speak? Does the narrator have a partial or omniscient viewpoint? How does that viewpoint help or hinder the reader's comprehension?
- Is the diction (word choice) unexpected? How? Why?
- Is the syntax (the order of words) unexpected or unfamiliar?
- What types of sentences are used (simple, complex, short, long)?
- Do any details seem odd or irrelevant?
- If you're reading poetry, do any of the line breaks seem abrupt or odd?

Form and Diction:

- Which words do you notice first? Why did they stand out from the others?

- How do the important words relate to one another? Does a phrase here appear elsewhere in the story or poem?
- Do any words seem oddly used to you? Why? Is that a result of archaic language? Or deliberate weirdness?
- Do any words have double meanings? Triple meanings? What are all the possible ways to read it?
- Look up any unfamiliar words. For a pre-20th century text, look in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for possible outdated meanings. Look up very common words as well, since they often have several possible meanings.
- What is the sentence rhythm like? Short and choppy? Long and flowing? Does it build on itself or stay at an even pace? How does that structure relate to the content?
- Look at the punctuation. Is there anything unusual about it? What about capitalization?
- Is there any repetition within the passage? What words are repeated? Why are they repeated?
- Do you notice any patterns in the text, using any of the elements above?

Going Deeper—The Figurative Level:

- What figurative language (metaphor, allusion, personification, etc.) is used? How and to what end do you think?
- What imagery do you notice? How is that imagery constructed (diction, syntax, etc.)?
- Does an image here remind you of an image elsewhere in the text? Does the image seem to invert or recontextualize previous imagery?
- Do you notice any patterns? How does a pattern fit into the larger pattern of the text as a whole? Do you notice a disruption or an inversion of a previous pattern?
- How does the passage make us react or think about any characters or events within the narrative/poem?
- Are there colors, sounds, physical descriptions that appeals to the senses? Does this imagery form a pattern? Why might the author have chosen that color, sound or physical description? Is it symbolic? Foreshadowing?
- Are there metaphors, similes, figures of speech? What kinds? Why might the author have chosen them?
- Is there one controlling metaphor? If not, how many different metaphors are there, and in what order do they occur?
- Does this passage symbolize something in the entire work? Could this passage serve as a microcosm, a little picture, of what's taking place in the whole narrative or poem? How?
- What is left out or silenced? What would you expect the author to say that the author seems to have avoided or ignored? What could the author have done differently—and what's the effect of the current choice?

Discerning Meaning:

- How do your observations to the questions above affect (i.e., inform, deepen, raise questions about, confuse) your understanding of the passage and/or text?
- What function do the elements you observed and analyzed serve in the passage/text?
- What themes emerge in the passage? How do these themes connect to broader themes in the text?

- Do multiple meanings become possible when you analyze the passage? Which interpretation(s) do you find most plausible?
- Do any contradictory meanings arise (allowing one to begin reading against the overt meaning of the passage)? Do you think the contradictory nature of the possible meanings is itself worthwhile?
- Why is it important for the reader to know what you have just analyzed and explained?
- Consider why the author made the choices they made
- Work towards finding meaningful links between the moments that you draw out for comment and use them to come up with a perspective that can see the text's discrete elements in dialogue with each other.

Make a Claim

As you move to make a claim about your passage (a claim derived from your close reading and analysis), you are explaining what the passage means or communicates. Don't just point out the obvious: anyone can spot that one word rhymes with another; close reading analysis requires that *you* account for why that word rhymes with that word, this word with this word and what it *means* for the passage.

Here are some suggested steps for developing your claim:

1. As you develop a claim about the passage, consider:
    a. When you have thought about the text's form, diction, meaning and so on, you need to think about what *effect* this creates and what the author is saying by doing this.
    b. There is no 'right' argument to be gained through completing this process as each interpretation will focus on a different aspect of the text.
    c. An argument looks to persuade, not insist; it engages the reader as a thoughtful listener, who could be imagined as responding to, or questioning, your claims.
    d. An argument also takes its observations to the 'next level' by using its initial answers as the stuff for questions. What are the implications of these representations; what are the stakes in presenting matters in this way?
    e. An argument also depends on the analysis you have already done in the annotating process: you should then relate all of the relevant details to that thesis.
2. Write down a claim arguing for a certain interpretation of this passage
    a. EX: The author uses imagery of bondage in this passage to draw attention to the ways in which the character feels trapped and constrained by her marriage.
3. Provide textual evidence and support for your claim
    a. 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.
    b. Point to specific moments in the passage and quote it
    c. Use the *OED* to look up words, and look at all the definitions—consider the dates of usage to make sure the definition(s) apply