

What is Close Reading?

In a Nutshell

A close reading is a detailed analysis or interpretation of a short piece of writing (a paragraph, a page, a short poem, lines from a poem). Close reading challenges you to connect the major, overarching themes or issues in the work as a whole to the individual piece you've selected.

What do effective close readings do?

You need to dive into the details to write an effective close reading. Specifically, consider the following questions:

1. **How do the linguistic elements of this paragraph set a particular tone?** That is, what do the paragraph's grammar and syntax (short, concise sentences? long, complicated ones? passive voice? active voice?) do to contribute to the feeling, or tone, of the paragraph?
2. **How do the descriptive elements of this paragraph contribute to this tone?** That is, what or who is this paragraph's major concern/focus? How does this paragraph's description/word choice of the person(s) or event indicate how the author wants his/her readers to feel or think about them? Are there other associations the author seems to be gesturing to through his/her word choice? (Don't forget about figurative language here!)
3. **How does this paragraph's location in the story affect its contribution to the story as a whole?** That is, why might the author have chosen to place this paragraph where s/he did? Does this paragraph begin to form our impression of a particular situation or character, or does it conclude that impression? Why is that important for our overall understanding of the story?
4. **What is the relationship between your answers to #1, #2, and #3?**

Methodology

1. **Pick a short selection of text that is representative of a larger issue or theme in the book or short story.**
2. **Spend some time just noticing different features in the text.** Make a big list. Don't jump to conclusions or pass judgments yet—instead, try to be objective and descriptive. Mark up the text. Take lots of notes. Draw arrows and circles and whatever else helps you to diagram the selection. Perhaps imagine that you are in medical school; you're looking at a picture of a person's organs and bones, and your job is to label everything you notice.
3. **Select the most interesting, compelling, aesthetic, innovative, problematic, disturbing, or unusual features.** Given the issue or theme you're focusing on, which of the features that you noticed are most compelling? Pick a few to focus on.
4. **Unpack the connotations and implications of the features you've noticed.** Think "cause and effect" here: whether you're looking at a word choice, a metaphor choice, or a sentence structure, every feature you've identified has effects on the reader and on the representation within the novel. Use your imagination, logic, and knowledge of cultural contexts to explain, as fully as possible, the implications of the features you picked in step 3.
5. **Synthesize and make a claim.** Ask yourself what all of these connotations and implications add up to. How are they related? When you present your close reading to a reader, present it as an argument: your interpretation of the text is your claim or thesis, and the features from the text are your evidence. State your claim, present evidence to support it, and show your reader how the evidence supports the claim.