CLOSE READING

WHAT IS IT?

A close reading isolates a passage (a specific piece of the text—perhaps even just a word or two) in order to focus attention on the passage's language and meaning—it magnifies an aspect of the passage that probably would not be noticed on a typical first read in order to explicate it as richly as possible. A significant close reading offers something that can affect how we view or understand a text. Typically, we choose a brief excerpt both for its immediate impact (its vividness; its emotional or intellectual charge that you haven't fully sorted out; or its odd/distinctive use of language) and for its role in the text.

This means that the selection of a passage isn't arbitrary: close reading implies a strategic way of approaching inquiry. There should be value in the close reading that you make apparent to your reader (what I call the "pay off"). For essay writing, this means that each time you draw your reader's attention to a specific part of the text, you should not only interpret what the quotation means, but also provide *insight* into how it makes meaning and its significance in the text as a whole. In sum, close readings should consistently pair specific observations with your own interpretive insights.

HOW LANGUAGE GIVES RISE TO MEANING

A close reading by definition looks at the language of a passage—at how the words chosen express certain thoughts, emotion, and narrative vantage points. Pick out vivid words and think of their references, connotative and denotative. Grammar reveals logic and emphasis, so look at syntax, too. Since you and your audience share knowledge of the English language, the goal is to situate the audience behind your lens so they can see what you see out of the words you both know. That means you have to call attention to salient elements and *show how* they give rise to a certain meaning: this is your interpretation. You're not revealing anything that wasn't already there; you're simply calling attention to certain features over others and stating their effects.

So this means you're thinking, too, about how meaning is made in the text—that is, how meaning comes into view through relationships between features. Meaning can't be there, fully formed, all at once, so just listing observations about the language of a passage doesn't necessarily say anything about its meaning. You need to show how your observations are not discrete but actually play off each other in an emergent meaning. Keep in mind that close reading is expressly interested in interpretation, not evaluation. In explaining how a passage makes meaning, you're not determining its effectiveness/genius/banality/wrong-headedness.

WHY CLOSE READ?

Close reading gives an account of the features that carry the social and aesthetic meanings of the text, an account that grows in nuance and credibility as you engage the layers of multiple readings. In the discipline of English, close reading is a basic operation of analysis. Critical appreciation and interpretation is based on just this elaboration of additional meanings that are easily glossed over. Each of the major assignments we complete in 197 and most of the work you do in the discipline of English will be grounded in nuanced close readings that you will put in service of critical argument.

AUDIENCE

A close reading requires you to think about what an average reader would likely see in a passage in order to differentiate observations that warrant development (i.e., ones based on your own inferences that are not available to all readers) from those that can be simply referred to in passing (i.e., observations of what the text explicitly states). This judgment requires you to size up your audience. For our purposes, assume your reader has read the text and taken note of its obvious (or explicit) surface meaning. This frees you from having to explain plot or describe characters, leaving you to focus on the passage's language and whatever it is that compels your interest. If you can assume your reader has a rough idea of characters and events, you can avoid paraphrasing the text, which will only take up space and dilute your critical insights.

SIGNIFICANCE

Your reading is significant if it goes beyond mere paraphrase to provide new insight on your particular passage, but, further, it should make a statement about the understanding of the text conceived more broadly. For example, if we come to see one passage in a certain light, how do we now regard the chapter, section, or entire work in relation to that passage? Or, how does a reading of your passage shed light on a larger issue or question raised by the text? The connection between passage and text can run both ways. Sometimes looking closely at a certain passage brings into view a way to understand the whole text. Conversely, sometimes you form an understanding of the larger text and then need to go back and find evidence to close read and recreate what led you to that understanding.

SCOPE

Choose a limited amount text to work with. Seek a fine balance: if you limit yourself too narrowly, you cut down the range of details available to your reading. Simply listing observations does not make a close reading; the interplay of details does. You need enough material to work with to find the patterns among and relationships between textual features. On the other hand, if the passage is too large to fully unpack, you may give short shrift to the interplay by disregarding much of what's happening in the passage. Ideally you should be able to scrutinize the entirety of the passage you select.

MORE THAN ONE BUT NOT UNLIMITED

Is there only one close reading for a given text? Absolutely not. However, all close readings of the same passage need to start from its given language and literal surface meaning, available to all readers. Because there's more than one way to read a passage, it would be impossible to prove that your reading is the only correct one. Concern yourself with showing that your reading is valid; that is, your audience should be able to understand your reading and see what you see in the passage from the vantage point you occupy, no matter what other reading the audience prefers. There are not unlimited ways of reading a passage, either, as the language comprising it can only be made to mean certain things.

COMBINING CLOSE READINGS

Your 197 papers will combine close readings of different passages to make an argument. Each close reading should provide specific insight to understanding the text. While it's possible that close readings of two (or more) passages could offer evidence of the same way of understanding the larger text, they shouldn't repeat each other: they shouldn't be treated as two instances of exactly the same case. Since a close reading by nature emphasizes what is unique about the language of a passage, the only way to have identical close readings is to have identical passages. Treating multiple passages as multiple examples of a general instance fails to look closely enough to see why the passages are unique. This amounts to a survey of a trend rather than a close reading. While there may be times when you'll want more than one example to make your interpretation more convincing, you will also want to affirm the way in which each passage exceeds the other(s), making meaning in its own way.

CONTEXT

A close reading positions the passage in the wider networks of meanings of the larger work. Indeed, the context you deem relevant to describe will frame your interpretation of the passage, and will also help your reader to get his/her bearings. Pay special attention to who is speaking (narrator, character, etc.)—and to whom and for what purpose—and what the narrative situation is at that point in the text.

AVOIDING BLOCK QUOTATIONS

Quotations should be interspersed with analysis. Giving your reader a large chunk of text is almost always ineffective because it spatially separates the quotation from your interpretation, and leaves the reader unsure of what to do with the largely unframed citation. You should guide your reader through your interpretation by providing brief, specific quotations when and where they're needed in your train of thought.