

How to Read Closely and Write a “Close Reading”

A close reading involves a careful balance of argument and evidence, all centered rigorously on the text at hand. Like biblical exegesis, a close reading begins with a careful study of what the text actually says, word by word and line by line. But just as concordance work lies behind a good sermon, you cannot lump all your research together and call it an essay. A thesis and a clearly progressing argument must organize your final “reading”. You will not only tell your reader what the text does and does not say, you will comment on how the text makes its points – the key words, metaphors, rhetorical strategies, recurrent themes, and turns of argument that make this particular passage significant. Finally, you should tell the reader why your observations are important. What will we gain by granting you our attention? How will we better understand the text and what difference does that understanding make?

Before you begin writing, you will select an appropriate passage. It can be a particularly potent sentence, if you can find enough in it to sustain your paper, but a paragraph or short scene is a more likely choice. You might pick a passage that you found particularly confusing or intriguing during your first reading of the text.

Once you’ve selected your passage, there are some questions that can help you start your analysis. Begin answering these questions before you decide what angle to take on the passage you have chosen.

Big Questions:

What is the occasion for this piece of writing?

Who is the audience?

Who is the writer?

How does this passage fit into the book or essay as a whole?

What seems to be the main problem or issue in the passage?

If this passage were omitted, what would be lost from the text?

Smaller Questions:

What are the boundaries of the passage? What makes it a discrete unit? What made you select it to write about?

What are the key terms in the passage? Where else are they used in this text? What do they mean? Are these meanings unique to the author of this text (as far as you know)?

How does the author set up reader expectations?

How does the author use sources? Which sources does the author most often use?

What can you say about the author’s prose? Is it terse or expansive, dry or flowery, simple or complex? What does the use of metaphors tell you?

Within a key sentence, write down the verbs. What does this tell you about the sentence?

These questions should help you to formulate an interpretation of the passage you have picked. The next step is to write up an outline, with key points and sections from the passage in each section. Then begin writing and revising your paper.

A good rule of thumb: for every line or sentence that you quote from the text, you should have a paragraph of your own to explain what it means, how it works, and how it fits into your argument.

Three things that you should not do:

1. Do not use a quote as the inspiration for an extended spiritual exploration. Stick closely to the text rather than rambling at length about how it makes you feel, what it reminds you of, or how it “proves” a big generalization.
2. Neither should you simply rehearse or summarize what the assigned text says without making any arguments about it.
3. Finally, do not merely insist that the author is wrong or that the passage should have taken a different position.