



NO. 52 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

“Passionate Attention”: Close Readings Across the Disciplines

- **What is a close reading?**

In a 1986 interview, English poet, literary critic, and essayist Geoffrey Hill referred to reading a poem as an act of “passionate attention.” A close reading is one form of that passionate attention. It offers a detailed examination of the language of a passage that allows both the author and her audience to better understand subtle nuances and shifts in meaning. The passages examined in a close reading should be your key to unlocking meaning in the entire text.

- **When should I use close readings?**

Always! Examining an author’s words in detail adds subtlety to your work by making general arguments more precise and text-specific. A passage in the Constitution will benefit as much from a close reading as a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks.

- **How can I prepare for a close reading?**

Read with a pencil or pen in hand. Mark passages that seem particularly relevant to the argument of the work and quotations spark questions in your mind.

English: What does Jane Austen mean when she refers to someone as a “gentleman?”

History: Why is it significant that Machiavelli compares his role to that of an artist in the dedication to *The Prince*?

Political science: What are the implications of Rush Limbaugh’s comparison of detainee abuse in Iraq to a fraternity prank?

Psychology: Why is it important that Freud referred to woman as “the dark continent?”

Select quotations that will help you answer your question. Because you will be conducting a detailed analysis of the passages, you probably don’t need or want too many – you could spend paragraphs examining the possible implications of a single word!

- **How can I develop a close reading into an essay?**

1. Find a logical arrangement for the quotations. Which passages use similar language to talk about the same idea? Which use different language, and why? Is the answer to your question different at the beginning of the text than at the end? If so, what caused the change and why is it important? This arrangement of quotations will be your outline for the paper.

2. Develop a thesis that explains the patterns that you see. If there is a development, what is it? Why does it happen? What does it mean in the broader context of the work? You should use the idea or image that you are focusing on as a key to explain the rest of the text.

3. As you write, carefully analyze the language of each quotation, explaining how that language proves your thesis.

Example 1: English

Text: Emily Dickinson

My cocoon tightens, colors tease
I’m feeling for the air;
A dim capacity for wings
Degrades the dress I wear.

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Close Readings Across the Disciplines, continued

Thesis: The butterfly imagery in Emily Dickinson’s “My cocoon tightens” reflects the speaker’s complex belief that, although the transformation is inevitable - caterpillars must become butterflies – she herself has spun the strands that entrap her. While undeniably feminist, this perspective offers a subtle rebuke to women who complain of confinement without examining the causes.

Sample close reading: The first stanza of the poem establishes the speaker’s agency. Though the cocoon “tightens,” there is no agent behind the tightening – it is a natural indication that the butterfly is nearly ready to emerge. The possessive pronoun in front of “cocoon” reinforces the woman’s power – she herself has woven the cocoon that tightens around her. The word “degrades” in the fourth line of the stanza contrasts the woman’s present state with her potential: the poem condemns women’s adherence to traditional roles, symbolized by the constrictive clothing. The woman herself, however, has chosen the binding cocoon and must free herself.

Example 2: Political Science

Text: The Declaration of Independence

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Thesis: The authors of the “Declaration of Independence” wished to make the separation of the colonies from the mother country seem as logical and unrevolutionary as possible. The language of the document supports this claim, using natural and scientific imagery to describe the separation between the two political entities.

Sample close reading: The introduction to the Declaration makes multiple references to nature and natural processes, indicating that nature, not incendiary men, is responsible for the division. The word “dissolve” in the first line establishes this tone, evoking the image of the ocean’s water slowly and inevitably wearing away the bond. Building upon this imagery, it is “Nature” and “Nature’s God,” not the men themselves, who demand equality. By establishing their lack of culpability at the beginning of the document, the writers create the possibility for bolder claims later in the Declaration.

- **How should I revise a close reading?**

In a close reading, the greatest danger lies in becoming so immersed in the details of a specific passage that you forget to discuss the relationship of the details to the big picture, the text as a whole. As you revise, make sure that your analyses of individual passages relates back to a thesis that discusses not only the presence of an idea, link, or image, but also why the presence of those elements is important to the entire text.

For more information on close readings, see:

<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CloseReading.html>

<http://theliterarylink.com/closereading.html>

<http://www.personal.psu.edu/users/s/a/sam50/closeread.htm>