

A Guide to Close Reading: At the AP and college level

At the heart of the AP Literature course is the ability to read a text carefully and apply formalistic criticism to it. In order to analyze a text at the college level, you must master effective close reading skills. For our purposes, close reading:

- is the most important skill you need for any form of literary studies. It means paying especially close attention to what is printed on the page. It is a much more subtle and complex process than the term might suggest.
- means not only reading and understanding the meanings of the individual printed words; it also involves making yourself sensitive to all the nuances and connotations of language as it is used by skilled writers.
- This can mean anything from a work's particular vocabulary, sentence construction, and imagery, to the themes that are being dealt with, the way in which the story is being told, and the view of the world that it offers. It involves almost everything from the smallest linguistic items to the largest issues of literary understanding and judgment.

Close reading can be seen as four separate levels of attention which we can bring to the text.

The four levels or types of reading become progressively more complex:

1. **Linguistic:** You pay especially close attention to the surface linguistic elements of the text – that is, to aspects of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. You might also note such things as figures of speech or any other features which contribute to the writer's individual style.

At this level, reading is largely *descriptive*. We are noting what is in the text and naming its parts for possible use in the next stage of reading.

2. **Semantic:** You review specific words in a passage at a deeper level in order to discern what information they yield up, what meanings they denote and connote.

At this level, reading is *cognitive*. That is, we need to understand what the words are telling us – both at a surface and maybe at an implicit level.

3. **Structural:** You note the possible relationships between words within the text –this might include items from either the linguistic or semantic types of reading.

At this level, reading is *analytic*. We must assess, examine, sift, and judge a large number of items from within the text in their relationships to each other.

4. **Cultural:** You note the relationship of any elements of the text to things outside it. These might be other pieces of writing by the same author, or other writings of the same type by different writers. They might be items of social or cultural history, or even other academic disciplines which might seem relevant, such as philosophy or psychology.

At this level, reading is *interpretive*. We offer judgments on the work in its general relationship to a large body of cultural material outside it.

(Turn Over)

A Quick Close Reading Checklist:

1. **Grammar:** The relationships of the words in sentences
 2. **Vocabulary:** The author's choice of individual words
 3. **Figures of speech:** The rhetorical devices used to give embellishment and imaginative expression to literature, such as simile or metaphor
 4. **Literary devices:** The devices commonly used in literature to give added depth to the work, such as imagery or symbolism
 5. **Tone:** The author's attitude to the subject as revealed in the manner of the writing
 6. **Style:** The author's particular choice and combination of all these features of writing which creates a recognizable and distinctive manner of writing.
 7. **Purpose:** Evaluate the author's purpose in the written piece.
 8. **Theme:** Examine the themes within the text.
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In most forms of literary response, you should:

-Use the active voice. (Steinbeck elucidates **NOT** Steinbeck elucidated)

-Refer to "the narrator," "the author," "the character," or "the speaker," instead of using pronouns (e.g., *he*, *she*, *I*).

-Identify the author by last name (e.g. Orwell) after first using his/her full name (e.g., George Orwell)

-Avoid beginning sentences with "I think," "I believe," or "I feel." Such verbs undermine the effect of your argument; after all, we know already this is what you think, how you feel—otherwise, you wouldn't be writing it.

-Avoid speculation about scenarios or motivations; anchor your analysis in **what the text says**, what really happens, or what you know.

-Discuss literature using the present-tense verbs (e.g., "Cisneros uses Spanish words throughout her novel to add voice and style to her writing.>").

-Focus on the text you are trying to understand and preparing to discuss; do not write about the author's life unless asked to do so.

-Avoid praise and the other forms of compliment. Tell your reader what the text means and why certain details are important, not how great you think the author is. Consider the difference between these two brief examples:

-Seamus Heaney is a wonderful author who uses language in so many great ways to describe his family.

-Heaney uses precise terms familiar to any farmer to describe his father's expertise in the fields.

-Use appropriate verbs when writing a critical analysis of an author or a work of literature. Examples of these terms include:

Emphasizes
Elucidates
Compares
Suggests
Creates
Illustrates
Exemplifies
Parallels
Juxtaposes
Implies

Observes
Identifies
Organizes
Reinforces
Defines
Clarifies
Contrasts
Argues
Mirrors
Shows

Develops
Provides
Connotes
Focuses
Balances
Relates
Expresses
Insinuates
Demonstrates
Alludes to

