

# WHAT IS CLOSE READING?

ENGL 108 / SEC. H & I / SUMMER LEAP 2009 / OLDHAM & RUBASKY / CHANG & LEE

WEEK

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Close reading is a necessary skill that will be very useful to you no matter your discipline or your eventual profession. Your classes, your work, your government, and even your pastimes will require you to read or evaluate something difficult, to find hand- and footholds in the material, and make sense of it. In general, “close reading” simply means analyzing a text—be it a photograph, a short story, a poem, a scholarly essay, an operation manual, a tax form, a television commercial—very carefully, crystallizing main ideas, and then drawing conclusions or making decisions based on your analysis. In this class, close reading and the skill to read for the sake of writing will be employed primarily for written texts. The following are key ways to help you close read:

- 1) Read a difficult passage **several** times. Read **out loud**, slowly, deliberately. Difficult parts will be easier the second or third time through.
- 2) **Annotate the text.** This is sometimes called “active reading.” Annotating involves underlining important words, writing notes or questions in the margins, highlighting, bracketing important passages, taking reading notes, and so on. Write down key ideas, pages to return to, terms, and quotes that may be helpful in your own understanding and argument.
- 3) Have a notebook/notepad in hand. Write down any words, places, names, terms, concepts that you are unfamiliar with and look them up, either at once or after you are done reading. Also try to discover the meaning of key words and concepts from the reading. **Keep a running list of these words/terms/phrases** inside the front cover of your book or in your notebook. Some terms have specialized definitions that you will learn only from context. Two good places to look for general definitions online are: <<http://www.dictionary.com>> and <<http://www.wikipedia.com>>. Try to incorporate some of these words into your next writing assignment as a means of familiarizing yourself with them.
- 4) Pay close attention to the **rhetorical features** or rhetorical “moves” of the text, the figures of speech, repetitions, imagery, and word choices. How does the language itself work in the text?
- 5) Ask yourself what sorts of **evidence** the author is providing. Does he or she back their argument up with **specific details**? If yes, what sorts of details? If no, how does this impact you as a reader?
- 6) Before beginning your reading, do some **preliminary research**. Biographies, bibliographies, journal articles, anthologies, can all give you greater insight into the work and can provide you with some helpful **historical context**. For whom was it written? By whom? Why? Has it been well received?
- 7) Jot down any **questions you have about the reading** as you go. This will do two things: first, it will help focus your reading; second, it will help you to generate material for class discussion and response papers/writing assignments.
- 8) Remember specific passages that you found difficult. **Ask yourself why you found them difficult.** Is it an issue of vocabulary? Is there a concept in there that you did not understand? Sometimes the key to understanding a difficult passage can be as simple as re-reading it after you have finished the text.
- 9) Decide how a difficult passage **fits** into the larger text. What theme(s) does the passage develop? A great technique to help focus your reading is to identify a pair of concepts that plays a specific role in structuring the text. (Example: nature/culture, power/weakness, dark/light.) These can also be useful things to explore in papers and can help you to more fully understand how an author is making meaning in the text.
- 10) Remember the **big picture**. Why is the text or passage or statement important? What are its overall claims?
- 11) When you have finished the assigned reading, **skim over your notes and the text** to make sure you feel comfortable with everything you have read.
- 12) Bring a list to class of any issues/questions/talking points that crossed your mind as you did the reading.