

Close Reading/Reading to Write

Definition of genre

Close reading—usually of a written text, but quite possibly of a film, a painting, or another work of art—is the first stage in writing an essay that responds to or builds upon the ideas in the original text. That is why a close reading is sometimes called “reading to write” or “reader response.” Rather than merely extracting facts from the text, a close reading prepares you to analyze it critically through your own writing.

Process / questions to ask

The close reading process involves the following steps:

- *Pre-reading/Previewing/Mark-up:* With a pencil in hand, read through the text, highlighting key words, phrases, and ideas. Note in the margin anything that elicits questions or strikes you as unusual, unexpected, or important. As you read, look for patterns, contradictions, repetitions, and inconsistencies, as well as any details that the writer uses to convey significant ideas. If analyzing a work of visual art, keep notes of your initial impressions of the piece. Pay particular attention to the artist’s technique and presentation of the subject.
- *Interpretation:* After reading or viewing the text, consider the author’s or artist’s main points. What were the author’s conclusions? What were the steps in the argument or narrative necessary to arrive at those conclusions? To complete this step effectively, you will likely need to review portions of the text carefully, retracing the progression of the argument to ensure that you are correctly interpreting what the author is communicating.
- *Critical Reading/Viewing:* Having deciphered the author’s or artist’s meaning, do you agree or disagree with it? What questions do you have? What are the flaws or gaps in the argument? What about it is convincing or unconvincing? At this stage, you begin to engage the text, formulating your own extensions, criticisms, and questions.
- *Writing:* Now that you have examined and wrestled with the text, you are ready to organize and present your evaluation of it. Drawing upon your notes, outline your response to the specific questions or details of the text you find most interesting or important. If you agree with the author’s argument, brainstorm about how you are going to extend that argument and place it in a broader context. As in the previous steps, you will probably find it necessary to revisit the text numerous times to be sure that you are not misconstruing or misrepresenting the author’s intended meaning.

Additional actions to take

- Less is usually more: instead of providing cursory analysis of a greater amount of material, focus on smaller portions or specific aspects of a text (e.g. a single paragraph or short scene, a specific theme or pattern, or how the author uses particular terms or techniques).
- Avoid summarizing the original text at length. Although you should be precise and should certainly refer to relevant sections of the text, you do not need to provide a detailed restatement of the entire argument or narrative.
- Be sure to define the terms you use. You do not want to create ambiguity in your writing that would make it difficult for the reader to know exactly what you intend to say. Be particularly clear when you use a term in a different manner than the original text does.

Helpful links

[Reading to Write](#)

A tutorial by the Duke University Writing Studio.

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

Close-reading strategies from the Harvard University Writing Center.

http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/reading_basic.html

Five steps toward critical reading, from Prof. L. Kip Wheeler of Carson-Newman College.

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~hbarbacc/teaching/closereading.html>

This U Penn English Department site offers a brief close reading and shows why the process is worthwhile.