

STRATEGIES FOR CLOSE READING

1. **Getting Started:** Treat the passage as if it were complete in itself. Read it a few times, at least once aloud. Concentrate on all its details and assume that everything is significant. Determine what the passage is about and try to paraphrase it. Make sure that you begin with a general sense of the passage's meaning.
2. **Meter and Rhythm:** Scan a poem for meter or get a feel for the rhythm of a prose passage. Is the meter regular or not? Does the meter gallop particularly in places, or slow down in others? Determine whether the lines breaks compliment or complicate the meanings of the sentences. Does the poetry have lines that exist largely independent of one another, or does it use enjambment? Even punctuation may be significant, though remember, in medieval and early modern texts most punctuation is editorial.
3. **Sound:** Acquaint yourself with the sound of the passage, and note any aural clues that may affect the meaning. Be alert to devices such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, euphony, cacophony, onomatopoeia.
4. **Rhyme Scheme:** If you are looking at a poem, analyze its rhyme scheme. What is the rhyme scheme? Does it match a determinate kind of rhyme (rhymed couplets, ABAB, sonnet, Shakespearean sonnet, rhyme royal, etc.)? Are the rhymes formally structured, or more haphazard? A rhyme establishes a connection between two words based on their sound; pay attention to which words are rhymed and whether a poem is attempting to link two words that otherwise dwell in different realms. Rhymes may or may not be significant. It is not worth noting that a passage of *The Canterbury Tales* is in rhymed couplets, but it is worth paying attention when one of Chaucer's pilgrims writes in a different meter (see the "Tale of Sir Topas"). Renaissance poets, on the other hands, will often switch from blank verse to rhymed couplets to call attention to the language, break a scene, get the audience or reader's attention, or render a proverb into a coherent and removable statement, and the structured rhymes of sonnets often determine the placement of their climax.
5. **Word Meaning and Word Choice (Diction):** Determine the meanings of words and references. Also, note (and verify) interesting connotations of words. Look up any words you do not know or which are used in unfamiliar ways. Look up words you think you know. Consider the diction of the passage. What is the source of the language, i.e., out of what kind of discourse does the language seem to come? (For instance, the discourse could be hunting, as in "Whoso list to hunt," or sailing, as in "My galley." There are many possibilities.) Did the author coin any words? Are there any slang words, innuendoes, puns, ambiguities? Do the words have interesting etymologies? What do the words sound like or remind you of? (This will be more subjective, but it can lead to interesting ideas that might help you grasp new meanings.)
6. **Syntax:** Examine the syntax and the arrangement of words in the sentences. Does the syntax call attention to itself? Are the sentences simple or complex? What is the rhythm of the sentences? How do subordinate clauses work in the passage? Are there interesting suspensions, inversions, parallels, oppositions, repetitions? Does the syntax allow for ambiguity or double meanings?

7. **Imagery:** What sort of imagery is invoked? How do the images relate to those in the rest of the text? How do the images work in the particular passage and throughout the text? What happens to the imagery over the course of the passage? Does the passage noticeably lack imagery? If so, why?
8. **Rhetorical Devices:** Note particularly interesting metaphors, similes, images, or symbols especially ones that recur in the passage or that were important for the entire text. How do they work with respect to the themes of the passage and the text as a whole? Are there any other notable rhetorical devices? Are there any classical, biblical or historical allusions? How do they work?
9. **Irony and Humor:** How do these operate in the passage, if at all?
10. **Tone and Narrative Voice:** What is the speaker's (as distinct from the narrator's and author's) attitude towards his or her subject and hearers? How is this reflected in the tone? What does the passage reveal about the speaker? Who is the narrator? What is the relationship between the narrator and the speaker? Is there more than one speaker?
11. **Structure:** Examine the structure of the passage. How does it develop its themes and ideas? How is the passage organized? Are there climaxes and turning points?
12. **Textual Context:** In what specific and general dramatic and/or narrative contexts does the passage appear? How do these contexts modify the meaning of the passage? What role does the passage play in the overall movement/moment of the text?
13. **Themes:** Relate all of these details to possible themes that are both explicitly and implicitly evoked by the passage. If the passage comes from a larger work or sequence, attempt to relate these themes to others appearing outside the immediate passage. Also consider the relationship of the passage and the work it came from to other works by the same author that you may know.
14. **Construct a Thesis:** Based on all of this information and observation, construct a thesis that ties the details together. Determine how the passage illuminates the concerns, themes, and issues of the entire text it is a part of. Ask yourself how the passage provides insight into the text. Try to determine how the passage provides us with a key to understanding the work as whole.

Some tips:

Remember to be **SELECTIVE** when deciding which of your observations you will use when you write up your close reading. A close reading is not an exhaustive, jumbled list of everything you have noticed about the text; it is a focused, specific argument about the meaning of the text, supported by carefully-selected, relevant evidence from the text. That is to say, a close reading is driven by a **THESIS** (see point 14 above). (In order to create a close reading at all, though, you must first go through the less focused process of examining every detail of the text.)

Note that this list moves from the smallest bits of information (words, sound, punctuation) to larger groupings (images, metaphors) to larger concepts (themes). Your thought processes may not follow such a rigid order, but make sure not to omit any of the steps in close-reading a passage.