Close Reading How-To:

I’ve created this handout in response to the mistakes I found most commonly occurred in past close readings. Please hold onto this and pay careful attention as you have one more close reading due. As well, you should incorporate close reading techniques into your longer papers.

Successful close readings accomplished the following:

1. Grammatically correct: This includes all text titles in italics or underlined, correct use of punctuation, no incomplete or run-on sentences, correct word choice, and correct sentence structure. In many cases incorrect grammar makes it nearly impossible for your reader to understand your meaning, thus grammatically correct work is essential. You must run spell check. You should have someone else read your work before submitting it. A paper filled with grammatical errors will receive a low grade.
2. Followed the assignment: This is easier said than done. The assignment asks that you closely read a passage for its language and meaning. While you must make some kind of reference to the text as a whole, your primary focus is the meaning of a particular passage.
3. Correctly used the terms of “figurative language.” It is possible to successfully write a close reading without using terms like “diction,” “syntax,” “personification,” etc. The most important thing is that you do not use these terms if you do not know what they mean—always look them up.

Diction, prononced (dic-shun) (Latin: dictionem (nom. dictio) "a saying, expression, word"),[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diction#cite_note-0) in its original, primary meaning, refers to the writer's or the speaker's distinctive [vocabulary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vocabulary) choices and style of expression in a poem or story.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diction#cite_note-1)[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diction#cite_note-Crannell97p406-2) A secondary, common meaning of "diction" means the distinctiveness of [speech](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speech),[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diction#cite_note-Crannell97p406-2) the art of speaking clearly so that each word is clearly heard and understood to its fullest complexity and extremity, and concerns[pronunciation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pronunciation) and tone, rather than word choice and style. This secondary sense is more precisely and commonly expressed with the term [enunciation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enunciation), or with its synonym [articulation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manner_of_articulation).[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diction#cite_note-Crannell97p84-3)

Syntax: In [linguistics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistics), syntax (from [Ancient Greek](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Greek) [σύνταξις](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%CF%83%CF%8D%CE%BD%CF%84%CE%B1%CE%BE%CE%B9%CF%82) "arrangement" from σύν syn, "together", and τάξιςtáxis, "an ordering") is "the study of the principles and processes by which [sentences](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentence_%28linguistics%29) are constructed in particular [languages](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_language)."[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syntax#cite_note-Chomsky_def-0)

In addition to referring to the overarching discipline, the term syntax is also used to refer directly to the rules and principles that govern the sentence structure of any individual language, as in "the [syntax of Modern Irish](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_syntax)."[[citation needed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed)] Modern research in syntax attempts to [describe languages](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistic_description) in terms of such rules

This is not to say that you cannot use these terms—in fact, you should be doing so but only if you understand how to use them and precisely what they mean. So, for instance, saying something like “the author then uses very interesting imagery” without explaining that imagery or why it is “interesting” results in a vague and ineffective analysis. Always be specific: What imagery? Why is it interesting?

1. Specificity: You must be specific and clear in your analysis. As stated above, make sure it is always clear what image, metaphor, etc you are looking at. Often students will quote a fairly long passage and then say something like “this metaphor is interesting,” “the imagery connotes sadness,” etc. If you’ve just quoted a long passage, how is your reader to know what precisely you are talking about? Here is a technique that I encourage you all to use. It is what I’m calling the “repetition technique”:

\*\*\* Quotes do not stand on their own, and they must be introduced. You can either do this by making a statement about the quote and then following it with a colon, or by doing what I do below:

First, I lay out my quote: Augustine explains, “In this way I communicated the signs of my wishes to those around me, and entered more deeply into the stormy society of human life” (11). ***His use of the term “stormy society”*** indicates his resistance to community, ironically as his conversion will ultimately take place as a communal experience.

\*\*\*By repeating and re-writing the specific word or words you’re referring to, you direct your reader to precisely what interests you in the quote, and demonstrate your understanding of where precisely the “irony” is located. Compare to this vague statement, and the incorrect “listing technique”:

Augustine explains, “In this way I communicated the signs of my wishes to those around me, and entered more deeply into the stormy society of human life” (11). Augustine is being ironic here. The imagery is also interesting.

\*\*\*\*There is a difference between pointing out techniques such as irony and imagery, and explaining / discussing these techniques. You must aim to explain and discuss.

Here is the example of the “colon introduction technique” (another correct way of introducing your quote):

Augustine considers his relationship to society: “In this way I communicated the signs of my wishes to those around me, and entered more deeply into the stormy society of human life” (11).

\*\*”Augustine considers his relationship to society” also functions to introduce and contextualize the quote. If I’ve written on your paper, regarding a quote, “what is the context?” or “quotes don’t stand on their own” then you should consciously work to provide this kind of context above.

1. You do not need a works cited page for your close reading, however quotes must be cited. We will be reviewing how to do this next class.
2. Your passage transcribed onto the paper does not count as part of your page. Therefore, if you transcribed your quote for half of the page and then provided a paragraph of analysis, you are under the 2-page length requirement.
3. Be focused and precise in your analysis, and don’t meander away from the passage. You should be going in-depth into the passage and not using it as a means to talk primarily about the rest of the text. You should make some reference to the rest of the text, but these references, while important, should not be central. And, when you do make these references, be as specific as possible. For instance try to find another moment in the text that echoes with your passage and quote it (make it a brief quote). So, for example, I might analyze part of Job’s passage and then say something like: the imagery of Job’s deteriorating body is important throughout the text, as for instance he later describes his bones “cling[ing]” to his skin (19.20).

Manipulating Quotes:

Throughout your writing in this course the effective use of quotes is very important. In your close reading you should be re-quoting parts of your passage and then discussion those parts. However, you must make quotes work for you (and not the other way around)—you do not want to be ‘suffocated’ by your quotes. As I’ve demonstrated above, you can manipulate quotes by changing their tense, the object of the quote, etc – you just simply have to bracket off your changes. Remember, quotes need to fit grammatically into a sentence and bracketing is a way to make the changes necessary to achieve correct grammatical form.

Examples:

Original Quote: “My bones cling to my skin and to my/flesh”

New sentence: the imagery of Job’s deteriorating body is important throughout the text, as for instance he later describes his bones “cling[ing]” to his skin.

Or perhaps I need it to say “his bones” rather than “my bones”: Job finds himself alone and “[his] bones cling to [his] skin.” --Note here that saying “my bones cling to my skin” would not make much sense.

If you add a word or words in a quotation, you should put brackets around the words to indicate that they are not part of the original text:

Jan Harold Brunvand, in an essay on urban legends, states, "some individuals [who retell urban legends] make a point of learning every rumor or tale" (78).

If you omit a word or words from a quotation, you should indicate the deleted word or words by using ellipsis marks, which are three periods ( . . . ) preceded and followed by a space. For example:

In an essay on urban legends, Jan Harold Brunvand notes that "some individuals make a point of learning every recent rumor or tale . . . and in a short time a lively exchange of details occurs" (78).