

## Close Reading Literature

Close reading may seem like a foreign and unfamiliar approach to analyzing a piece of text. However, it can often yield insights that will help you to create a unique paper developed from your own interpretation of the text. To analyze the work effectively, it is useful to concentrate on specific components of literature used to build and reveal the themes in the work. This process will help you explain how a passage relates to central themes in the text allowing you to reach an intelligent and creative thesis for a literary analysis.

First, choose a passage (or a series of passages) that intrigues you. Read the passage several times; underline words and phrases that grab your attention. Then think about why you are drawn to the passage. Here are some central elements in literature that will help you think about the text critically. What does the passage say about:

**Characters & Point of View:** Who is speaking in the passage? The narrator, the protagonist, the antagonist, or a new or minor character? Is the passage written in first or third (omniscient) narrative? Does the passage reveal something new about the motivations of a character? What is the character's tone in the text? How is the tone developed? Why do they assume that tone? Does the selected text mark a departure from a particular character's usual attitudes and actions about something?

**Language & Style:** Analyzing the literal and figurative meaning of the character's (or author's) choice of words can help you determine the tone and underlying theme the passage addresses. Look up the definitions of words that stand out to you. Does the word have multiple meanings? If so how does it enrich or expand your understanding of the themes and characters of the work? What is the effect of the connotative meanings on the tone? **Note:** Make sure to use a dictionary relatively consistent with the time the work was written. The connotative and denotative meanings of words change over the years. *The Oxford English Dictionary* is a great resource that provides etymological definitions (origins and historical developments) of words. You can find it at WSU Libraries.

**Metaphors & Symbols:** Does the scene grab your attention because of the reappearance or repetition of a specific word, object, or action? Does it symbolize a character, a theme, or an idea? Why would the author choose to repeat that particular word or object? Is the symbolism used to build an allegory?

**Conflict:** What is the point of tension in the passage? Does the conflict in your particular passage relate directly or indirectly to a larger conflict in the text? Is the conflict internal in which a character struggles with a psychological, philosophical, or moral issues within the psyche? Or is it an external conflict in which a character battles against nature, society, or another character outside the psyche? How does the conflict reinforce and build themes in the novel as a whole?

### Creating Your Argument:

At this point, the larger argument of your reading of the passage should begin to emerge. You want your thesis to grow out of an observation that you have made about the text. Your thesis should explain how the components of your passage relate to the novel as a whole. Here are some helpful tips to remember when composing your thesis:

Your thesis must make an arguable statement about the novel. In other words, make sure your thesis does not just summarize or paraphrase your observations about the passage, but instead makes a statement that can be challenged by another person's analysis.

Use your text as evidence to back up your claim. The good news is that in most cases you will not need a secondary resource for your analysis. You will find that a single sentence can have multiple layers that will take you toward the core themes of the work.

Focus on details. This will not only help you narrow the scope of your argument but will also create a thesis that is unique to your reading of the work.

Question everything. After each observation, ask yourself why and how it reveals the larger meaning of the novel. Your observations should lead you to a conclusion about the meaning and value of the novel.