

A Guide to Close Reading

According to the Introduction of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature.

On the assessments by which students will earn the College and Career Readiness Score (the Performance-based Assessment plus the End-of-year Assessment) students can earn between 62 and 65 points in Reading. Though some of those questions will be vocabulary ones (at least 10 – 15 points), students must use Close Analytic Reading (CAR) on 80% of the non-vocabulary Reading questions.

What exactly is close reading?

Close reading means developing and understanding and a precise interpretation of a passage that is based first and foremost on the words themselves. Doing a close reading involves a thought process that moves from small details to larger issues. In close reading, a reader must read deliberately and thoroughly, taking time to understand a work's complexity, to absorb its richness of meaning, and to analyze how that meaning is embodied in the text. The reader needs to determine what the text says, what the text does, and what the text means.

Step One: Determine what the text says

Close reading means treating the passage as if it were complete in itself. The text becomes the teacher. The first read should be to determine what the passage is about and to try to summarize or paraphrase it. The reader needs to have a general sense of the meaning before moving into a close analysis. A good way to begin close reading is to annotate the passage. Annotating means highlighting or underlining key words and phrases (anything that strikes the reader as surprising or significant or that raises questions) as well as making notes in the margins. Annotating forces the reader to pay close attention.

Below are questions to aid the reader in summarizing or restating or retelling a passage followed by a reference to the appropriate Anchor Standard for Reading:

- ⇒ How would you summarize or determine a shortened version of the text containing only the main points? CCR1, CCR2
- ⇒ What is the gist/central idea? CCR2
- ⇒ What is the specific textual evidence used to support the central idea? CCR1
- ⇒ What are the ideas in order of importance or presentation? CCR1
- ⇒ What ideas might the author be suggesting rather than directly stating? What can you infer (obvious, logical inferences) from these hints or suggestions? CCR1

Step Two: Determine what the text does

The next step is to describe what a text does. This step entails discussing aspects of the presentation of the text, for example the choices of content, the language and the structure. Close reading involves

examining the passage starting at the word and phrase level.

Below are questions to determine the craft and structure of the text followed by a reference to the appropriate Anchor Standard for Reading:

- ⇒ What word choice does the author use? Determine the meanings of words and references. Also, note and verify connotations of words. Examine words that are unknown or are used in unfamiliar ways. Are there any slang words, innuendoes, puns, ambiguities, archaic words? What is the author's purpose in choosing particular words? What is the effect of certain words? CCR4
- ⇒ What language is used—technical, dialect, variant spellings, archaic words, etc.? What is the effect of the language choices? CCR4
- ⇒ What imagery and rhetorical devices (e.g. simile, metaphor, images, symbols) does the author use? Examine any sensory descriptions. What sort of imagery is invoked? How do the images relate to each other? What happens to the imagery over the course of the passage? How does the imagery relate to the passage as a whole? How do the rhetorical devices work with respect to the themes of the passage or text as a whole? Are there any classical, biblical or historical allusions? How do they impact the passage? CCR4
- ⇒ Does the syntax call attention to itself? Examine the syntax and the arrangement of words in the sentences. Are the sentences simple or complex? Is there a rhythm to the sentences? Are there parallels, repetitions, juxtaposition of ideas? How do the syntactical elements contribute to an interpretation of the passage? CCR4, CCL3
- ⇒ How is the information organized (e.g. time, topic, cause/effect, compare/contrast, persuasion)? Are there turning points or shifts? What is the impact of the organizational structure or turning points? CCR5
- ⇒ What genre does the selection represent? How do the parts (sentences, paragraphs, etc.) relate to each other and to the whole? How do the ideas and events develop and interact over the course of the text? CCR5, CCR3
- ⇒ How does the piece open—exposition, lead, etc.? How do the parts of the passage (sentences, paragraphs, etc.) relate to each other and to the text as a whole? CCR5
- ⇒ From what point of view/perspective was this written? Whose voice did the author choose as narrator? Examine the tone(s) present in a passage. What is the narrator's attitude toward the subject? Toward the reader? How is this reflected in the tone? What does the passage reveal about the narrator? What changes or shifts, if any, do you notice by the end? How do shifts affect meaning? CCR3, CCR6
- ⇒ What are the sources of information and fact? Is there more than one source of information? Examine how the passage narrates history. How does it present "facts" versus observations? CCR3, CCR6
- ⇒ Is there any dialogue in the passage? If so, what is its purpose? CCR3
- ⇒ Is there irony in the passage? Consider the types of irony: verbal, dramatic, and situational. What is the effect of irony in the piece of text? CCR3
- ⇒ Are the sound and rhythms an important part of the style of the piece? Acquire a feel for the sound, meter and rhythm; note any aural clues that may affect the meaning. Be alert to devices such as alliteration, assonance, rhythm, consonance, euphony, cacophony, and onomatopoeia. What is the effect of these devices? How do they contribute to the overall meaning? CCR4

Step Three: Determine what the text means

The final stage of close reading is to determine what the text means. That means the reader is able to present the theme of the text based on a synthesis of the author's choice of content, structure and craft to achieve the author's purpose.

Below are questions to aid the reader in determining what a passage means based on the evidence used to describe what the passage does followed by a reference to the appropriate Anchor Standard for Reading.

- ⇒ What is the central idea/thesis/theme of the text? CCR2
- ⇒ How does the author support the central idea, thesis, or theme with ideas and details? CCR2
- ⇒ What are the purposes, ends, and objectives? CCR2
- ⇒ What is the author's stance/perspective towards the topic? CCR6
- ⇒ How does the author use language: dialect, variant spellings, archaic words, formal or informal words, etc. to shape the tone (the author's attitude toward the subject) and the meaning of the piece? CCR6
- ⇒ How does the author use point of view, style, mood, tone, text features, imagery, figures of speech (e.g. simile, metaphor, alliteration, irony, repetition, onomatopoeia, personification, etc.), and the lead, etc. to achieve his/her purpose (author's intent)?
- ⇒ CCR6
- ⇒ Why does the author choose the method of presentation? CCR8
- ⇒ What are the concepts that make the reasoning possible, what assumptions underlie the concepts, and what implications follow from the concepts? CCR7, CCR8
- ⇒ What does the author want the reader to believe? CCR7, CCR8
- ⇒ What is the quality of information collected; are the sources sufficient, relevant, credible, and current? CCR7, CCR8
- ⇒ Who or what is not represented? Why? CCR7, CCR8

Sources

The information used in this guide is based on a synthesis of information from the following sources:

AchievetheCore – Steal These Tools - <http://www.achievethecore.org/steal-thesetools>

College Board’s English Literature Course Description -
<http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/Controller.jspf>

The Critical thinking Community -
<http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/criticalthinking-the-art-of-close-reading-part-one/509>

Harvard Writing Center, “How to Do a Close Reading” -
<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CloseReading.html>

The Literary Link - <http://theliterarylink.com/closereading.html>

Jack Lynch, Rutgers - <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/EngPaper/close.html>

Dr. McClennen’s Close Reading Guide - <http://www.personal.psu.edu/users/s/a/sam50/closeread.htm>

Macomb ISD – www.misd.net

Michigan’s Mission Possible - <http://www.missionliteracy.com/index.html>

“My Close Reading Tips” - http://mason.gmu.edu/~rmatz/close_reading.htm

Purdue Online Writing Lab - <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>