

Tips for Close Reading

(adapted from Cecilia Mancuso)

Close reading is the practice of paying careful attention to a specific passage in a text in order to relate it to the text's larger themes and concerns. You close read by:

1. **Choosing a passage that stands out in the text** – one that you like, one that confuses you, or one that surprises you in some way.
2. **Carefully annotating the passage** – you annotate by paying close attention to how words are working in the passage you have chosen. A good way to handle this is through **patterns** (things that repeat in the text) and **norms** (features in the text that often don't change, but sometimes do). *See below for some common patterns and norms.*
3. **Asking yourself why this passage is important in the larger framework of the text** – Your annotations should lead you to think about what is thematically significant in *both* the specific passage and the larger text. Ultimately, the passage you have picked should help you pose and answer a fruitful question about the text. A question is fruitful if:
 - a. It is specific and avoids summary, description, and generalizations
 - b. It is debatable – there is no clear yes or no, right or wrong answer

Patterns

- **Words or phrases that repeat.** Pay particular attention to words and phrases that repeat in certain contexts (e.g. Sozaboy's repetition of the phrase "war is war").
- **Imagery.** Pay particular attention to specific sensory details (colors, sounds, smells) and figurative language (similes, metaphors, personification).
- **Objects.** Is the text constantly mentioning a certain object or category of objects (paintings, books, clothing, buildings/architecture)? Do these objects recur in certain contexts – for example, is there an orange in every scene in which a character dies?
- **Sentence structures.** Are they all short and simple? Long and complex, with many clauses? Run-on?
- **Plot points.** Does the same plot point repeat more than once? Does anything change about how these plot points unfold in later repetitions?
- **Settings.** Which settings show up more than once? Does anything change about how these settings are described in later repetitions?
- **Binaries.** Binaries are pairs of apparent opposites that often show up one right after the other to emphasize the differences between them. Often, these pairs initially seem to be opposites, but the text deals with them in ways that suggests they might not be as opposite as they first appear. Broad binaries include light/dark, male/female, movement/stillness, natural/unnatural, growth/decay, etc.

Norms

Norm	Examples of the Norm Being Broken
Narration. Which POV is the text told from (first, second, third, limited, omniscient)? Is the narrator a character in the story? Is the narrator	The POV switches from first person to third person omniscient; you didn't think the narrator was a character, but they are; you

reliable? What's the narrator's tone / how does the narrator feel about the story they're telling? Is the story told mostly through exposition or dialogue?	thought the narrator was reliable, but they later prove unreliable; the narrator's tone is initially genuine, but becomes cynical and ironic; text mostly told through narration includes a long section of only dialogue.
Structure. Is the text broken up into smaller sections? How long are these typically? Does each section have a parallel purpose? Does the text tell its story in unbroken chronological order, or does it jump around in time?	A text with short sections suddenly includes a very long section, or vice versa; each section was focused on telling a particular character's perspective on the same events, but a section starts describing a new event; a text that was narrating someone's daily life suddenly jumps far into the future or flashes back to the past.
Form. What kind of writing does the text present itself as – a novel, a poem, a diary or journal, a series of letters, a collection of newspaper clippings, an interview, etc.	The text presents itself as a novel, but at times it includes verbatim reproductions of correspondence between characters (letters, emails, texts); the text presents itself as a diary, but a disembodied narrator suddenly interrupts an entry to acknowledge a plot hole.
Characters. Who seems to be the main character of the text? Which characters are the most developed? Which characters are sympathetic and which aren't?	The text presents one character as the main character, but another character "takes over" this role partway through; the text spends a lot of time developing the same few characters, but suddenly devotes a section to developing a previously minor character; an initially unsympathetic character becomes sympathetic when more information about them is revealed.
Expectations. What expectations does the text set up for you, the reader? How do you expect the text to resolve its conflict? Do you expect characters in the text to fail in their goals and suffer serious consequences, or do you expect them to succeed without incident?	You thought the text would have a happy ending, but it ends on a very dark note; you didn't think this was the kind of text where people might die, but a character dies; you thought the text would end with a wedding, but the main character decides to become a nun instead.