Some Tips About Close Reading

Close reading is a process through which you find meaning in a text. It is not about making things up or speculating about things the text does not tell you about. It's not about abstract theorizing either. Rather, <u>it is a process of finding meaning in the details of texts</u> – in large items like overall themes or character development, but also in small items like changes in tense, punctuation, or description. It requires careful attention to detail, because even the smallest details can make a huge difference. There are many different meanings you can find in texts, or many different readings you can do of texts. However, <u>the fact that there is *no one right* meaning does not mean that you can say whatever you want about a text, nor should you think about close reading as your opinion.</u> Your reading may be different from someone else's but this is not because you are asking what the text means to you, personally; rather, because you are an individual you will notice different details and features about texts, and therefore want to make different claims about its significance.

In other words, you use the process of close reading to analyze the text. Close reading is the process of moving from things you find striking or interesting about the text, to explaining *why* these things are significant or meaningful.

observing -> explaining significance or analyzing } close reading

Close reading can be thought of as a number of interlinked steps. The following is not the only way to think about close reading but I have broken it down schematically here to try to make the process as clear as possible.

0. Understanding the text's basic surface meaning

The act of understanding a text's surface meaning is "step zero" because it is a thing you must be able to do before you can close read. It means that summarizing, paraphrasing, or reporting about what happens in a text is not close reading. You must, however, be able to summarize or paraphrase a text's surface meaning accurately before you can go on to the more penetrating conceptual work of close reading and analysis.

1. Observing interesting textual details

Do not only focus exclusively on the large-scale feature of texts – character development or plot. No detail is too small to be meaningful! Often individual word choices, punctuation, and tense can carry a lot of meaning. Remember, we want to avoid just paraphrasing things; you can paraphrase a plot but you can't paraphrase the way a text slows down when you add a bunch of commas.

Example: He knew, suddenly, as he had never before been aware, that all the drudgery was over forever, and a new life was beginning.
vs. He knew suddenly as he had never before been aware, that all the drudgery was over forever and a new life was beginning.

Question: What are some effects of the extra commas in the first sentence? Why might they be significant?

Who cares about tiny details?

All writers make choices, and good writers make especially good and careful choices, so we should pay attention to them. However, we should not try to discover an author's personal intention; remember that all we have access to is the implied author, and that even if we knew what the author really meant, his or her meaning is not definitive. "<u>What the author really meant" is not a question we can usually answer nor is it helpful for our own understanding of texts.</u>

Also remember that questions and problems can be good places to start a textual analysis. These places are often textually dense – it may be confusing because there's a lot going on! And so, good close readings can emerge from attempts to understand a troubling or confusing portion of the text.

2. Explaining a text's significance or analyzing a text

The final close reading step is to explain the significance or meaning of the textual details that you have noticed. Explaining is about moving beyond what is *interesting* and on to what is *significant*. Significance encompasses what is said, how it is said, and the interpretation you derive from these textual features. The goal here is to construct a claim about how particular textual features affect the text locally and as a whole.

An exercise: when you read, rather than saying something is "interesting," substitute the word "significant." You might be able to mentally say, "This passage is interesting" and stop there. But if you say "This passage is significant," you then must start thinking about *how and why* it is significant. Or, you may want to ask yourself, "So what?" after you note something interesting. These are all ways of prompting yourself to move beyond observation toward analysis.

As mentioned, THERE IS NO ONE RIGHT WAY TO READ A TEXT. However, this does not mean you can say whatever you want. You must always be able to back up your analysis or explanation of the text with evidence from the text – a specific passage, word, etc. And you must be able to *explain how* this evidence *supports* your claim in a way that is logical and that other people can understand. Your purpose in writing is to present an argument that other readers can understand, even if they might not agree with you because they have a different reading of the text.