ENGL 253: Region and the Real South
Close reading assignment

In our class discussions throughout the semester, we will focus on developing close reading skills to help you write and talk about literature. To practice these skills, you will write two short close reading papers that each focus on a single passage from a story, or on a single poem.

What is close reading?

“Close reading” is an important skill for reading, discussing and writing about literature. It might be unfamiliar at first, and it will require practice, but it essentially means nothing more mysterious than reading slowly and paying careful attention to the details of a text. Close reading is the basis of all literary analysis: arguments about poems, plays, novels, etc., must account for cultural and historical contexts, but they are ultimately grounded in what is on the page.

How should you start your close reading?

Your close reading should begin with a provocation question. It could be a question you turned in on your assigned day, but it could also be a question that occurred to you during your reading, or in the course of class discussion. In this case, you should draft a new provocation question, following the guidelines provided by the assignment. A good provocation question for a close reading will ask a clear, focused question that can be addressed by exploring a single passage, section, or short poem.

Whether you use a provocation question you already turned in or draft a new one, I strongly recommend that you make an appointment to discuss your provocation question during my office hours. In addition to your chosen provocation question, you should also have a provisional thesis statement when you come in to meet with me.

What should your close reading look like?

- The goal of this assignment is to look in depth at a small part of the text, rather than reflecting generally on the whole thing. You should be able to identify a few paragraphs—a page at most—that you will draw your evidence from and will focus your analysis on.
- Your reading should take the form of a mini-essay that poses a question or problem that can be reasonably explored in 500-750 words.
- You should avoid a long general introduction, but you must have a thesis stating what insight your reading will provide into the work as a whole.
- The bulk of your assignment should consist of a close examination of the text. It is not enough to merely note interesting syntax, images, tone, etc. You must connect these details back to your thesis for your reader, and show how they expand, contradict, or otherwise complicate your initial insight. In a paper this short there is no need for a summary at the end. However, you should try to say what the implications of your reading are in a manner that is more complex (because your reader knows more now) than your original thesis. You may want to suggest other passages in the text that would be useful complements, or make a larger claim about the author’s argument.
What are the parts of a good close reading?

A good close reading moves from specific textual details through a somewhat larger strategy for reading the text and towards a better understanding of the text as a whole.

For example...

- the description of Babbitt’s house doesn’t make it sound very home-like
- the description of the house emphasizes its commercial and social functions
- the impersonal and commercial description of Babbitt’s house connects the home to the larger city of Zenith and emphasizes Babbit’s role as a representative citizen of Zenith

What kind of evidence should you use to support your close reading?

Your close reading should provide evidence in the form of short quotations from the text, but it should also provide analysis of those quotations to explain the significance of the quotation and show how it fits into your argument. Your paper should not contain any quotations that are not accompanied by analysis. Your paper also should not cite outside sources, secondary research, or any evidence not drawn from the text itself—this is not a research paper. For more help with planning and writing your close reading, consult the resources posted on Sakai, visit the Writing Center, and come by my office hours.

Who is the audience for your close reading?

Your audience for this paper should be a hypothetical classmate who has attended class and done the reading, but has not been overly studious or attentive. This classmate will definitely notice if you make an obvious claim, but there is also room to teach her something new about the readings and concepts from class. Your classmate does not need full, detailed summaries of the readings, because she has already read them, but she does need concise reminders to help locate herself in the text and to remind her of what the important points were.

Submission instructions

The due date for close reading one is Monday, Oct. 19; the due date for close reading two is Monday, Nov. 2. To be eligible for revision, you must turn a paper in by the due date. It is always better to turn an imperfect paper in on time and then revise it than to worry about perfecting your paper, missing the deadline, and being unable to revise further.

Revision instructions

The last day to turn in a revised paper for comments is Friday, Nov. 20, and the last day to turn in a revised paper for a final grade is Friday, Dec. 11. You should allow for at least a week between submitting a revised paper and receiving it back with comments. This means that to take full advantage of the revision policy, you should plan carefully to meet course deadlines and submit revisions well in advance of the final deadline.