

Content:

1. Don't use criticism, biography, history, except at the edges. Focus on your reading of the text(s).
2. Minimize or eliminate paraphrase and summary. Presume that the audience (me) knows the text(s) relatively well. A summary shows only that you've read the texts; an argument shows that you've thought about them.
3. Control your essay; don't let the text(s) control it. Take an analytic position about the text; then support it, while exploring its ramifications. A simple test: after your first draft, look at the first sentence of each paragraph. Does it repeat the text, or make an analytic assertion about the text?
4. Focus on one language or thematic issue. Focus, dev., have been my most frequent marginal comments. Make one argument, or at most two, not six. Support that argument or exploration with copious details and complex analysis of several passages.
5. Avoid broad, sweeping introductions and conclusions -- no "keyhole introductions." Start with a specific focus, and end with assertions applying to this topic/text, not to 100 other topics/texts as well. A simple suggestion: take the last paragraph of the first draft, and make it the first paragraph of the second draft.

Mechanics (marginal comments will use these numbers, esp. #7.)

6. Number each page, and keep paragraphs under 2/3 of a page.
7. Grammar -- a) check to/too, b) possessives and "it's." Check commas: c) can both sides of the sentence stand alone? If so, it's a comma splice. Either change the comma to a semicolon or period or add a connecting word (and, but, yet, or). Adding "however" won't work! d) Words/phrases that modify ("however," "nevertheless") need commas at both ends; don't put a comma after "Although." e) don't put comma between subject and verb -- either two or none. f) don't put comma after "but" or "yet." g) Check for fragments: sentences can't start with "Since" or "While" or "Because" unless in a subordinate clause. h) Like/as -- "like" takes object, "as" takes clause. i) Subject-verb agreement: check for singular subject/plural verb and vice-versa.
8. My preferences: a) Minimize use of passive voice. Strong verbs assert; "is" verbs tend to summarize. b) Make sure each "this" has a noun after it, and each "which" refers to the noun before it, not to "everything I just said." c) Dashes should differ from hyphens; use two "--". d) Ellipses should have spaces (" . . ."). e) Finally, "interesting" is a singularly uninteresting word.
9. Quotations: a) put page number in parentheses after quotation marks. b) When quoting a single word already quoted, put that "word" in quotation marks. c) Cite your text in an end note only if the text differs from the one used in class. ("Different from . . .")
10. Verb consistency: use present tense verbs when analyzing texts; by convention, they exist in the continuous present.

Typos are your responsibility. Proofread!!

David Leverenz: "close reading"

Keep asking, How do style and voice express meanings?

Focus on style, tone, rhythms, images, paradoxes; list ten or so stylistic attributes. Don't push for unified, packaged theme, "the poem says X"; look for conflicts, bafflements, strange tensions and try to explain their effects.

Avoid paraphrasing content. Cherish the details. Write about how the poem speaks, not what it says.

Various tips from students, taken from various classes:

- read the passage aloud, slowly, at half speed, several times, like a pianist before recital. Think of an actor's motivation for each word.
- take a small focus. Look up words, find multiple meanings.
- look up words, pay attention to alliterations, assonances, oxymorons look for anything syntactically odd or unusual.
- close reading removes the pressure to find The Meaning. Freedom of many interpretations at once. Play with it, enjoy it, let contradictions happen.
- it's a game, gives interpretive freedom. The only rule is to back up what you say.
- be specific; be focused on a small focus.
- we're not taught to be able to question written words in High School
- keep asking yourself, not "What's it about," but "What's it like?" Close reading goes away from text as the author's self-expression. You become the text as process. You have to abandon pre-conceived notions, opinions, and look at alternative definitions, tangents.
- don't quote more than one sentence or line at a time. Give up comprehensive statements.
- look for a repeated word. Analyze how its meanings change, and how the alteration affects the piece.
- analyze the punctuation. Look up words in the O.E.D.
- don't wait until the last minute. Read the text at least three times
- always explain and develop your quotes. Use your favorite quote that you can't fit in your paper (admit it - you have several!) as the title.
- examine a small passage phrase by phrase and then even word by word. Think about the various meanings of each word. At times there is tension between what the author seems to want to say and what the words chosen actually do say. This too adds meaning to the text.
- see if seemingly unrelated themes or sets of imagery don't in fact relate (or can be made to). I found this useful in arriving at half-plausible but very exciting theses.
- note the feet and meter and any other techniques (e.g., alliteration, caesuras, etc.), to see how they add/take away/change the mood/theme.
- pick a topic and stay focused. Don't try to do too much. And don't paraphrase.
- circle anything that seems important or troubling even if you don't know why. Always have a dictionary; look up anything you don't know.
- don't do a broad introduction; start right in with your focus.
- don't be afraid of approaching certain topics, e.g., homosexuality, menstruation, sexual symbolism.
- play with the words. The silliest meanings may be the most insightful

More student advice about close reading
(from Fall 1994 American Romanticism class)

- 1) Take a small focus. Look up words. Find multiple meanings. Use the dictionary all the time - there might be definitions or variations on an important word which you don't know about.
- 2) Don't wait till the last minute (many said that!)
- 3) Pretend that writing a paper is fun, and start early. If you do, it will be fun. Another thing, let it be personal to thoughts you are having and need to hash out. Therefore it will be important to you for other reasons than getting a grade.
- 4) Stay focused - Dr. Leverenz uses the word "focus" 7 times in his close reading rules. Then play with the words.
- 5) Close reading involves putting yourself on the line and staying away from the safe things. Put those crazy, off-the-wall thoughts in the paper, as long as you have support for it, of course.
- 6) Never be afraid of your ideas; develop them as far as they will go.
- 7) I recommend isolating the passage to be read closely and blowing it up on a copier until it (and only it) fills an entire page. This making the text physically big makes it psychologically big too. Also it becomes easy to write notes upon. Make several copies and trace how the passage develops a single theme or device in each one. Having two big sheets of text that you can place next to each other helps also in comparing/contrasting passages.
- 8) a) Look up each word individually and try to use the 2nd or 3rd meanings. It had never really occurred to me that anything besides the obvious was what the author was intending to mean.
b) Don't let an author inhibit your interpretations. Write what you believe about a story/poem. If the Author is dead, who's to argue.
c) Looking up words is great, but also look at the overall sentence structure, esp. in prose. Analyze why the author's sentence styles help the text's meaning.
- 9) a) By far the most helpful suggestion: keep asking yourself 'What's it like?', not 'What's it about?'"
b) Make stylistic lists, as we do sometimes in class.
- 10) You must control your essay and not let the text control it by repeating and summarizing themes. Think for yourself. The fact that each reader brings as much to a work as its author did means that the reader can always find something new and original that is special enough to be focused upon.
- 11) Cherish the details. Stop trying to look at the really big picture of the whole thing. The trick is to think of writing a close reading as the same thing as participating in a class discussion -- the attention to detail, and the occasional daring interpretation.
- 12) a) Don't look for an ultimate meaning. (It took me awhile to get used to this!) This allowed me to focus on what the words said, and made me more aware of the meanings which lie beneath meanings.
b) Read everything as if it were a poem. Read slowly and aloud, look at the words and rhythms, pauses and silences. Don't be overly concerned with meaning, so much as what the passage makes you feel (pain, sadness, misery, happiness, confusion). Try to capture that feeling, and then see how the language creates that feeling in you.
- 13) The most meaning came out of the really wacky interpretations. Stretch the texts at every corner, because the further the texts are stretched, the more interesting and meaningful they become.
- 14) Be daring! Even if you feel that "all" you are writing is "nothing," that's okay -- just back it up in the work!

- 15) Look for puns. Find several different meanings. Forget about the big picture. They can figure it out after they get the details down.
- 16) There is NOTHING under the sun that you can't get from any passage. Pick your poison, and then find obscure definitions of words, make up odd phrasings, and take control.
- 17) Language in the work becomes your best friend.
- 18) Use short sentences because Professor Leverenz likes short sentences.
- 19) a) Look at not only what a word or phrase says, but also what it implies or does not say. This practice will help you to focus on specific passages and not generalize or summarize too much.
b) Forget about your notions of a traditional academic paper and be daring with your ideas.
- 20) Take a small focus. We have always been taught to summarize and generalize in papers. Be focused, yet relaxed. Read the passage several times, each time jotting down the first thing that comes to mind, no matter how bizarre. Quite often what seems like a crazy idea turns into a great paper. Just be sure to support your statements with quotes from the text.
- 21) Play up contradictions and oddities in the text.
- 22) a) Keep sentences short!
b) It's okay to have wild interpretations.
- 23) a) Imagine you and the author, perhaps over coffee, having a casual conversation. Doing this helps to break down the intimidation factor that comes with studying Great Literary Minds from the Past, makes clearer the relevance of the text as related to the present, and heightens the temptation to actively question the author. Talk out loud to the text, point at it, kiss it, throw it across the room.

b) The most valuable thing I learned about writing close readings is that it is possible to find volumes of meaning in a small droplet of narrative. Also, the tone of voice in a few sentences, or an unusual juxtaposition of just a few words, can either enforce or throw off the balance of the entire text. I learned to speculate more freely once I realized more clearly the nature of meaning . . . how it is often not there until created by the reader, how it hides, pulses, and changes, and how it can be coaxed to fit a certain purpose.
- 24) Recently I translated a novella into screenplay form. I found myself applying close-reading techniques to create the visual structure, mise en scene, action, characterizations, and all the other fun stuff that's a part of film building. It may help other students to know there are ways to use close-reading as a tool in their given fields (such as law) or in other areas of interest, for it really is very, very helpful.