



Close Reading

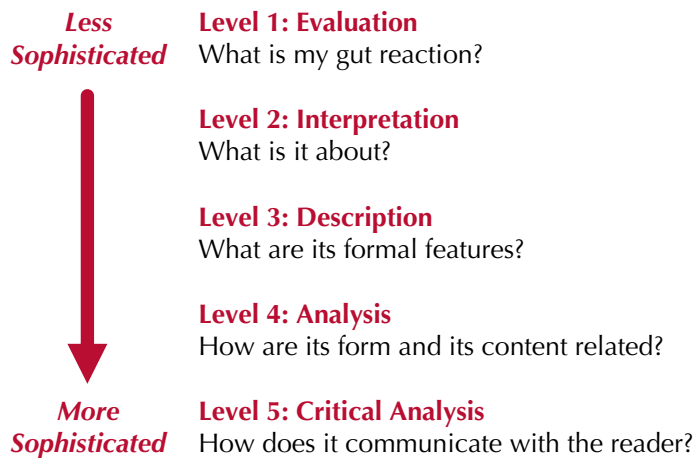
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In *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Chris Baldick defines **close reading** as “the detailed analysis of a literary text” that “attempts to account for and justify the presence of all the text’s features ... into a formal unity” (64). In other words, a close reading of a literary work helps define and clarify that work’s central **theme**. There are many different ways to subject a work to a close reading. This document summarizes four close-reading methods: “**The Broadview Method**” (from *The Broadview Introduction to Literature*), “**The Headrick Method**” (from Paul Headrick’s *A Method for Writing Essays About Literature*), “**The Elements Method**” (based on the *Elements of Literature*), and “**The Mackie Method**” (from Clare Mackie, a UK-based literature and writing teacher).

The Broadview Method

According to the editors of *The Broadview Introduction to Literature*, a *close reading* involves a systematic examination of “the working parts of a literary text” to arrive at conclusions about that text’s larger meaning, or theme.

They suggest this examination “might be broken down into five stages,” progressing from a relatively superficial “evaluation” of one’s “gut reaction” to a text (“Level 1”) to a more sophisticated “critical analysis” of the relationship between the text’s form and content, and of the various ways in which the text communicates meaning (“Level 5”):



Most casual or non-academic readers tend to respond to texts with a “Level 1” or “Level 2” analysis. After reading a text, they think about how it made them feel and try to summarize the narrative line or “story” in their own words.

Literary critics and academic readers should endeavour to move past these surface-level responses and analyze texts with the more sophisticated “Level 3” and above. They should first look for the specific strategies and techniques deployed in the work (“Level 3”), and then interrogate how those strategies and techniques create meaning and convey theme (“Levels 4-5”) (xviii-xxi).

The Headrick Method

In *A Method for Writing Essays About Literature*, Paul Headrick defines *close reading* as “an approach to literary analysis that pays careful attention to the language” in a text. He suggests a five-step process for subjecting a work (or a short passage in a longer work) to a close reading:

Step 1: Paraphrase the literal content

Come to a basic comprehension of the text in question. Identify the narrator(s) or speaker(s), and situate the passage in relation to the rest of the work.

Step 2: Identify significant words, phrases, and formal features

Look at figurative language, sense imagery, literary or historical allusions, repetition of words or phrases, unusual words or phrases, symbols, puns, rhyme, alliteration, and metre.

Step 3: Describe the sentences and sentence structures

Look at short vs long sentences; simple, compound, or complex sentences; questions vs statements; fragments or run-on sentences; and unusual syntax.

Step 4: Identify significant patterns in the manner of expression, along with exceptions to those patterns

After isolating individual characteristics of language in Steps 2-3, take a step back from the passage to see it as a whole. Try to find patterns of language use, and exceptions to those patterns.

Step 5: Make observations about the significance of the details and patterns you have identified

This final step is crucial because it emphasizes the importance of extending a set of disparate observations about a text into a coherent argument: Steps 1-4 might form the basis of *evidence* in an analytical paragraph, and Step 5 might form the basis of *analysis*. In other words, it’s crucial to connect the observations in Steps 1-4 to the work’s larger theme in Step 5.

Close reading, Headrick writes, “is often a preliminary step towards an essay,” part of the overall writing process from brainstorming, to composition, to revision (56-59).

The Elements Method

Genre is the French word for “kind” or “type.” The four main literary genres are *fiction*, *drama*, *literary non-fiction*, and *poetry*. Each genre can be defined by certain characteristics or *Elements*, which literary critics analyze to arrive at determinations of theme. “The Elements Method” deploys the specialized language of literary criticism to help lend persuasiveness, credibility, and authority to a close reading. Refer to *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (or a similar dictionary or glossary) for definitions of the Elements and their associated vocabulary:

The Elements of Fiction

plot	viewpoint
conflict	language
character	tone
setting	

The Elements of Drama

plot	viewpoint
conflict	language
character	tone
setting	mode

The Elements of Literary Non-Fiction

truthfulness	scenes
mode	information
sources	narration
viewpoint	structure
audience	

The Elements of Poetry

mode	language
form	rhetoric
voice	sound
diction	rhythm
articulation	

The Elements are not mutually exclusive: they often work together to convey theme. For example, in a narrative work such as a short story or play, various *conflicts* between *characters* come together to create *plot*. In a work of literary non-fiction, alternating sections of *scenes* and *information* coalesce to create *structure*. In poetry, *sound* and *rhythm* are often inseparable aspects of *language* and *voice*. Be sure to consider these intersections and overlaps when subjecting a work to a close reading using “The Elements Method.”

The Mackie Method

Clare Mackie is a writer and teacher based in the UK. She recommends approaching close reading as a series of reading “tasks.” Some of the tasks involve identifying formal features of the work in question (Tasks 1-3), while others involve making personal connections with the work (Tasks 4-7). The final task brings these two strands together into a determination of theme (Task 8):

Task 1: Vocabulary

Circle any vocabulary you are unfamiliar with and look up the definition. Double check that the definition makes sense in the context of the passage. Why would the author use this vocabulary instead of some other vocabulary?

Task 2: Diction

Underline any language that attracts your attention for any reason. Why do you find it interesting or compelling?

Task 3: Parts of Speech

Highlight in different colours the parts of speech in the passage: verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. Do you notice any patterns?

Task 4: Predictions

What do you think might happen next in the text? What, specifically, in the passage makes you think this?

Task 5: Personal Reflections

What do you think of the story, narrators, and/or characters? What is your opinion of what they do, think, or say? What, specifically, in the passage affects your opinion?

Task 6: Personal Connections

Does the passage remind you about any of your own experiences, or about other books or films you have read or seen? What are the similarities and differences?

Task 7: Questions

Does the passage prompt any questions in your mind? List both *open questions* (i.e., questions that do not have straightforward or easy answers) than *closed questions* (i.e., questions that have immediate or obvious answers).

Task 8: Theme

What key themes from the work as a whole do you think are reflected in the passage? What, specifically, in the passage is advancing these themes?

Works Cited

Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. 4th ed., Oxford UP, 2015.
Chalykoff, Lisa, et al., eds. *The Broadview Introduction to Literature*. 2nd ed., 2018.
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Mackie, Clare. “How to Do a Close Reading.” *Snappguide*, accessed 26 February 2021.