

Reading to Write: Close Reading

What is “close reading”?

Close reading is an essential part of university study. The process of close reading can be exciting because it requires creativity, mental alertness, and an exercise of logical reasoning. It should lead you to analytical discoveries about the text and can provide points to include in an essay.

Before reading closely, preview and skim the text, and then read it fully. Close reading usually means returning to parts of a text you’ve already read once in its entirety. To begin your close reading, slow down and focus deeply and critically on a particular paragraph, passage, or section of the text. Close reading implies that you’ll analyze this section of the reading in multiple ways.

How can I do a close reading?

There are many possible approaches to close reading, some of which are particular to certain disciplinary areas. For example, close reading in political science may mean identifying an author’s theoretical bias, whereas close reading of a biology study may involve evaluating an author’s explanations of the limitations of an experiment. The goal of close reading may be to gain a deeper understanding of the author’s objectives and/or to critically evaluate these objectives. Both of these goals can be important stages in your own writing process.

Here are 12 aspects of written work to examine as part of reading a text closely:

1. **Organization of points:** What seems to be the author’s persuasive strategy? Is it convincing?
2. **Author’s theoretical tendency:** Is it stated or unstated? What are the author’s underlying assumptions? What evidence do you see for this?
3. **Quotations and references:** What is their purpose? Are these sources credible?
4. **Comparisons:** How is this idea treated in other texts on this subject?
5. **Diction (word choice):** Why has the author used one word rather than another? How would changing the diction of a sentence change its meaning?
6. **Terminology:** What disciplinary vocabulary is used here? How are these terms used differently in other texts?
7. **Details:** What is the significance of this detail? How does it relate to the larger purpose of the text?
8. **Numerical data:** Why is it here? Could it be interpreted differently? Is it believable?
9. **Transitions:** Where do you see transitional words or phrases? What logical connections do they suggest?
10. **Relationship of parts to whole:** How does this passage relate to the overarching ideas or argument in the text?
11. **Further implications:** When you reflect on a particular statement, how does its meaning change? What can you infer, even if it’s not directly stated?
12. **Remaining questions:** What questions are not answered by this passage or text? Did the author intend to answer them?