



Close Reading

What is 'close reading'?

Close reading, in general, means the act of careful and intelligent reading and interpreting of a text. When one performs close reading of a text, it implies an interaction with it that is discerning and perceptive. Academically, close reading is conducted on complex and challenging literary and nonliterary texts that are rich in interpretive value, and texts which may not be fully understood in a single reading. Hence, multiple readings are an essential and preliminary step in reading text closely.

Why conduct 'close reading'?

The aim of close reading is to determine what the given text says, and to make logical inferences from it. Close reading is important because it lets the reader think thoroughly about the text, both, by insisting upon more deliberation about what is written, as well as integrating the reader's background knowledge. In contrast with superficial reading in which the reader only understands the gist of the text, close reading is done when the reader is mindful of language techniques and meaning, and talks about why these things are important, and how they add substance to the argument. This is important for comprehension skills, critical thinking ability, and response writing.

When to do 'close reading'?

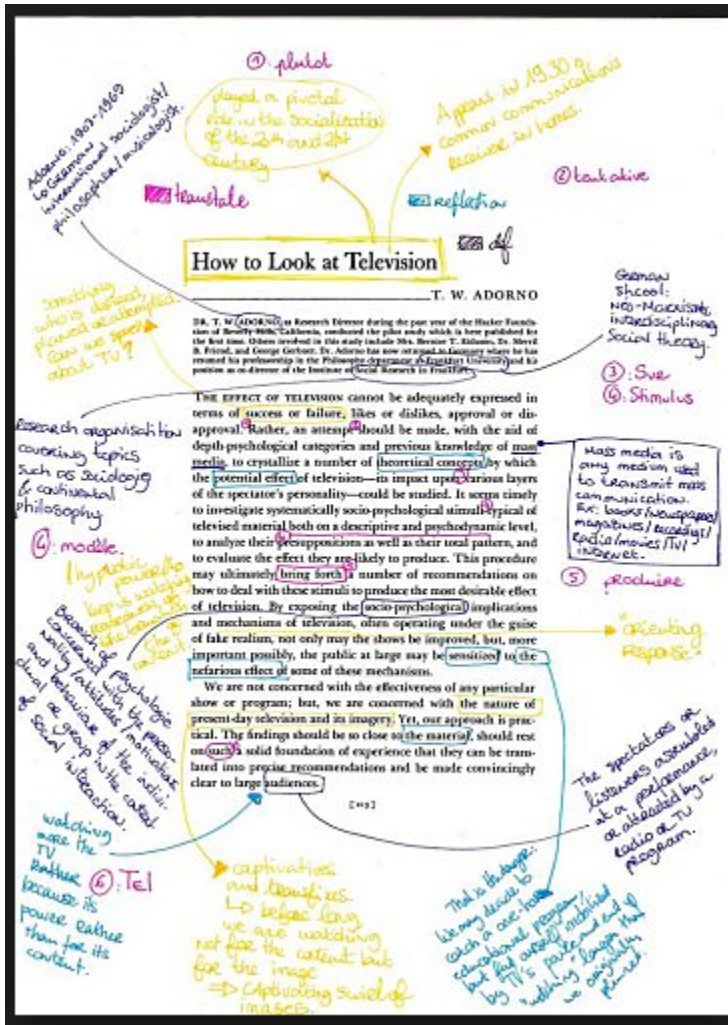
Some assignments explicitly ask you to "conduct a close reading". However, that is not the only time you will require this skill. When you are supposed to write an analysis or a critical response to a text, it is highly likely that your professor wants you to closely read the work, resulting in your answer containing direct quotes, inferences and perceptive commentary on the text.

How to do a 'close reading':

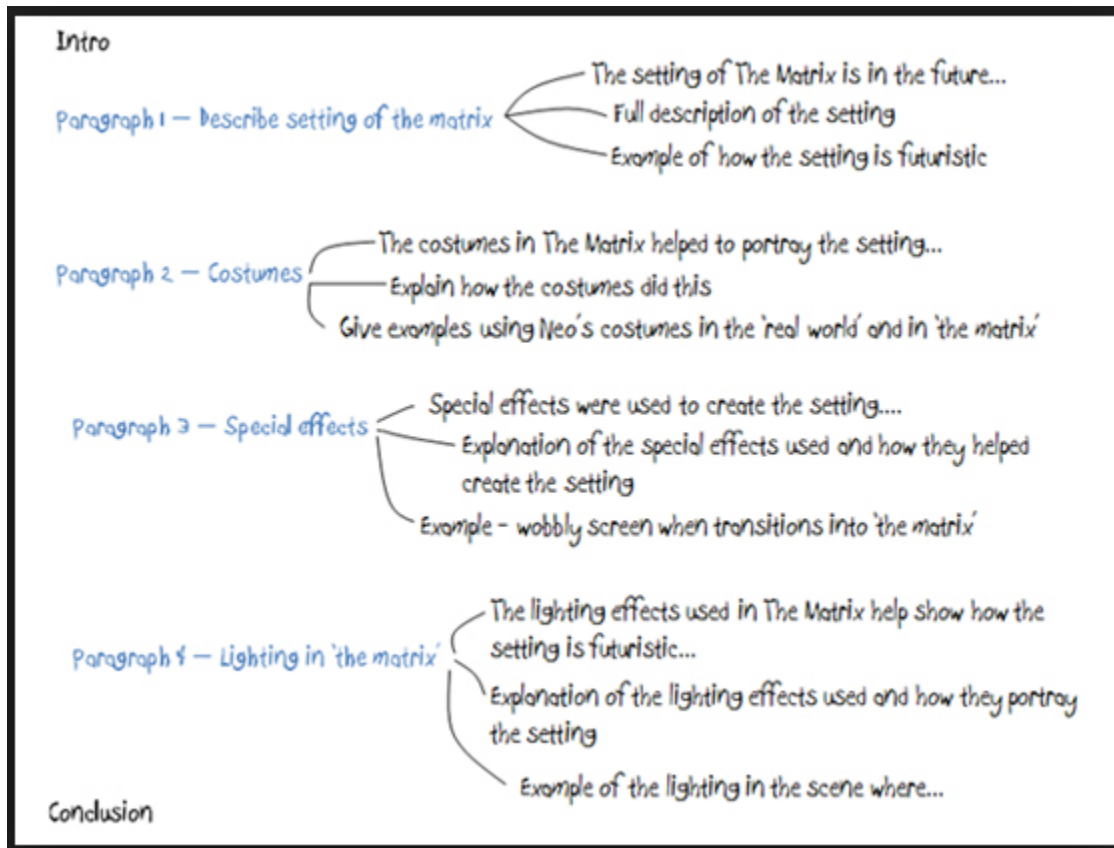
1. Conduct initial readings of the text. Remember, do not expect to understand every single thing in the text in the first reading. The objective of the first few readings should only be to become familiar with the language and focus of the text. Once you adjust to that, identify the key ideas and arguments of the text. A good way to do that is by locating the thesis statement, which is most likely going to be in the first paragraph of the essay. You

can also go ahead and try to identify the topic sentences (a statement that captures the idea of the entire paragraph) for each paragraph, which will help you understand the main points of each paragraph, and note the progression of ideas in the whole piece.

- By your third or fourth readings, you should be acquainted well enough with the text that you are able to start critiquing it. Annotate the text using a pencil and highlighters. Pay attention to key claims, important dates and names, and so on, in accordance to the demands of the assignment. Develop a key, and underline key words and phrases using different colors. It is also helpful to utilize margins to write any thoughts and ideas that may come up as you read, such as, “this idea connects to the first essay we read in this course”. Interacting with the text using color-keys not only helps in drawing attention to important parts, but also helps you improve the organization of your response once you get down to writing. By the time you are done annotating, your essay should look like this:



- Once you have annotated the text, you can start asking yourself questions about the text that are relevant to the concern of your assignment, such as, "What are the loopholes in the author's argument?" For such a question, you may want to think about the text broadly and see if you can come up with some angles which could argue the thesis of the text. As you think over the questions you need answered, skim the text repeatedly for relevant passages or excerpts you could integrate in your answer as quotes. If there is no specific area of the text that the question wants you to focus on, think about the assumptions and ideas of the text, deciding whether they are logical, contradictory, well supported and so on.
- Now that you have a firm grasp on the contents of the text and have a somewhat strong grasp on what the text is saying, it is time to synthesize and analyze your response. At this stage, you are ready to outline, plan, and then draft your writing. At this stage, your essay should look something like this:



While writing, remember that everything you include in your paper should relate directly to the task of explaining what the author means according to what you determined from performing a close reading.

How do I know if I have been successful at close reading?

A successful close reading response will not be a summary or a paraphrasing of the text. Rather, it will be an analysis drawn from the text. You are likely to have been successful in close reading if:

1. You were able to identify and highlight the thesis statement of the whole essay and topic statements of each paragraph;
2. Your response contains quotes from the original text;
3. Your writing refers to the text, both, at large (by referring to the overarching argument or the essay as a whole), as well as specifically (by referring to parts of it);
4. Your commentary or response writing has a close relevance to the primary theme or idea of the original text.

Example of a Close Reading Process

As an example, look at the poem below by William Blake, called The Sick Rose:

O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

To do a close reading of this poem, you will:

1. Read the poem multiple times.
2. Underline and look up meanings of difficult words, for example “thou” meaning “you” in Old English.
3. Read the poem once more.
4. Make annotations regarding visual aspects of the poem. For instance, write down that it has an “abcb” rhyme scheme, and 2 short stanzas
5. Then, underline the sentences which may have deeper connotations, for example, the first line, which is strange in how it is saying that a flower is sick. This, you understand, must be a symbol for something. Underline words like “bed” and think over what they are metaphors for. Use a different color for this underlining than you did for difficult words.

6. Ask yourself questions such as “Is the rose a symbol for something? If yes, what?”
7. Think about broader questions, now that you are familiar with the words on the page. For example, “What is the tone of the poet?” and “What are the themes of the poem?”
8. Jot down the answers to these questions on the paper you have the text on
9. On a new sheet of paper, write your annotations again, but in an orderly manner, such as by making headings like “Themes” and “Symbols” and then creating lists underneath
10. Now plan and outline your response essay, until you are ready to move to your first draft.