# Some versions of close reading

Close reading is one of the major techniques of literary criticism and should be at the heart of your argument in all your essays. There are some assignments you will be set which will be fully centred on close reading. The document is designed to set out some of the expectations for such assignments and to provide advice on how to approach them. They are not exhaustive. You should also seek advice from your course tutor or seminar leader to see if there are specific instructions for a particular assignment. In general, you are expected to generate an interpretation and form an argument about the work, rather than just enumerate its features. As with a researched essay, you need to supply an introduction and conclusion to shape and frame your argument.

1. **Practical Criticism.**

**What is it?**

The term was first used by the poet and critic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and developed as a method in Cambridge in the early twentieth century by I. A. Richards. You will be given an ‘unseen’ poem or extract and are expected to analyse ‘the words on the page’ without consulting secondary sources or resorting to historical generalisations or *a priori* knowledge about the writer. When Richards first introduced the method, he did not reveal the name of the author.

**How to do it well:**

Concentrate on what the work says and how it says it, or rather, think about the relation between the form and the meaning of the work. The form or style of the work might enact or instantiate its meaning. For example, a rigid rhyme scheme might embody an argument about the necessity for order; a preponderance of striking metaphors might foreground the working of the writer’s unique vision.

You could also think of different ways in which the text might have been written, other tones that might have been used, other arguments applied, other orderings of the material or different words which could have been chosen. Some things have been included; some excluded. Try paraphrasing the passage to see what it means and what you might lose or gain by using different words. There was a time when the passage was still to be written; the final form represents a series of choices, conscious and unconscious on the part of the writer. Remembering this helps open up the text for critical appreciation.

If you are not immediately inspired by a passage, it is helpful to have a set of questions you can ask or set of things to look at to prompt your thoughts. This does not mean that in your essay you will simply tick off the items on your check list. Don’t forget that your essay should present your interpretation of the work(s) not an enumeration of stylistic devices. Here are some things to look out for:

**a. Argument:**

Is the passage mounting an argument? If so, what evidence does it use? How does it present its case? How does it reach out to the audience? Does the logic work? If not, this may not be a bad thing – the logic of a lyric poem, for example, is a special kind of thing.

**b. Syntax:**

This overlaps with argument. Some things to think about are: the dramatic possibilities of word order; the way in which grammatical expectations govern our perception of relations: subjects and objects, actives and passives, transitive and intransitive verbs, singulars and plurals, tenses and moods, reflexives and their implications. Think also about the effects of patterning devices such as antithesis or chiasmus. Attend to the making of statements, use of questions and hypotheses, interruptions and parentheses and ambiguity. (If you don’t know the meaning of any of these terms, look them up!)

**c. Punctuation:**

This overlaps with syntax. There may be a lot or a little; it will affect our sense of the movement of the writing. Lineation in poetry can be seen as a form of punctuation. It can impose pauses that you would not expect, has an interesting relation to the rhythms of speech. Try stripping a passage of the author’s punctuation and see how you might do it differently.

**d. Address, persons and tenses:**

Is the work addressed to a specific person or group on a specific occasion? Is it intended or imagined to be spoken? If so, who is speaking? Who is explicitly or implicitly addressed? What is the relation between the ‘speaker’ and the addressee? (e.g. lover, citizen, monarch, person on a Clapham Omnibus). Think about the time scheme involved – attend to the tenses and any changes of tenses to detect whether it is invoking the past, present or future.

**e. Diction:**

Meaning word choice, ‘diction’ is a preferable term to ‘lexis’. Some poets have striven for what the poet and critic Donald Davie calls dictional ‘purity’ which, he says, involves a sense of other expressions being fended off (‘sheep’ by ‘fleecy tribe’, or whatever): this business concentrates feeling about class, decency, decorum, and so on. There may be a dignity to a pure diction, or it may be evasive – or both. Be aware that writers choose their words from a range of sources and registers; they might combine levels of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’; they might wish to draw on other occasions on which particular words have been used.

**f. Repetition:**

Repeated words and phrases often form useful patterns, draw attention to movements in feeling or argument. Refrains are worth thinking about: do they alter at all in their wording? Do they come to mean something different as the poem goes on? Repetition may involve intensification or emptying of significance (or both: thus Lear’s five ‘never’s are somewhere between heartbrokenness and blankness).

**g. Fiction:**

Prose is just as accessible to close reading as poetry. Syntax, diction and punctuation, for example, are crucial. Have some ideas about why people write and read fiction and how they do so. There are a lot of things to think about here. The psychological framework (ideas of motivation, extent of insight into characters’ mental processes, fragmentation or coherence of consciousness …) will have an historical bearing. Look at the handling of point of view, the idea of experience which is being operated, the relation of a narration to a character’s consciousness at the time (hindsight, overview …). What sorts of causes are stated or implied for the physical events in a scene? How are dialogue, description, bodily actions, social conventions, handled? Think about the indirect free style and the way it paraphrases, turns to indirect speech and comments on a character’s thought. What does the narrator know, and how much authority does s/he claim? Is the reader directly or indirectly involved?

**h. Poetry:**

There is perhaps even more to consider here. Work out the issues connected with genres and forms. The appendices in the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* on Versification and Poetic Syntax are very useful. Lineation is the basic important fact. Consider how a poet uses the blank space on the page. If rhyme is chosen, what work does it do in the poem? Words that are rhymed gain a metaphorical connection – jokily or shockingly contrasted, easily or surprisingly harmonized. Rhyme is an accidental or incidental link between words and has an oblique relation to reason; rhyming in poetry brings up ideas of naturalness and force. Arthur Hallam, the subject of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, said that rhyme contains in itself ‘a constant appeal to memory and hope’. The rhyme scheme of a stanza (the ballad’s *abab* or *In Memoriam*’s *abba*) has a kind of plot that you can follow. Complex rhyme schemes, where you have to hold a rhyme sound in your head for many lines before it returns, or where the rhyme is never satisfied, will have implications about order, memory, hope, despair. Rhymes create structural divisions within stanzas (another form of punctuation). You should also consider whether the poet is working with a known form which might have particular associations (e.g. ballad, *terza rima*, Spenserian, couplet) or is inventing a new form for the material. Sonnets have a number of regular and irregular forms; familiarize yourself with the known patterns and their principal exponents. Blank verse raises the issue of end-stopping and enjambement; the function of the line as a unit of punctuation offers what Davie called ‘a flicker of hesitation’ before the start of a new line and this can mime a fall, a slide, an arrival, a turn (the literal sense of ‘verse’) or something else. And I haven’t even said anything about metre … read the *Norton Anthology* appendix; Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (1988) or John Lennard,*Poetry Handbook* (2005).

**i. Drama:**

Imagine how you would stage a passage of drama. What action is transacted? To whom would each line be delivered and in what tone? What is the relation of the spoken to the physical? What is the status of the characters’ utterances? What sort of stage directions are there? If it is a poetic drama, could it be staged?

**Concluding remarks:**

In a practical criticism, you should feel that the resources of your literary sensibility and critical intelligence are being put to a valuable test. Try to regard it as an opportunity to extend your range and to consolidate your perceptions. Enjoy the feeling of clarifying something complex. While you might be called upon to undertake a designated ‘prat crit’ essay, all of your readings of literature should be informed by close reading so these techniques should support all of your essay-writing.

1. **Critical comparison.**

**What is it?**

Basically, it is a practical criticism of two works or extracts.

**How to do it well:**

The same advice applies: concentrate on what the works say and how they say it. Compare and contrast them. Draw conclusions about how they differ and the significance of those differences. Try to avoid the obvious formula: Para 1: A & B are similar in some respects but different in others; para 2: lengthy line-by-line run through of text A; para 3: shorter lengthy line-by-line run through of text B; para 4: as we have seen, A & B are similar in some respects but different in others. It is far better to construct an argument, selecting relevant examples from the works to support your reading. It is a good idea to identify any words that occur in both works and to discuss whether or not they have the same resonance. Try to come up with a genuine question about the texts – one which admits of evidence and reasoned consideration – and make your essay follow through the question in relation to the passages. Occasional critical asides in the course of a plot summary or extended paraphrase are not really enough.

**3. Commentary or Critical Commentary.**

**What is it?**

A commentary – sometimes called a ‘gobbet’ exercise – usually comprises a close critical analysis of a short passage taken from a work you have already studied. You might be asked to present a close reading of the extract and to comment on how it relates to the rest of the work – or how it exemplifies the themes of the course. You should pay special attention to the **language and poetic form** of the passage. For example, you might choose to comment on imagery, metre, rhyme, figures of speech, narrative, irony, or the use of direct speech. You might also consider the text’s genre.

**How to do it well:**

A good commentary will think about the effects of textual features. It is not enough simply to state that ‘There is a lot of alliteration in this passage’ or ‘There is imagery in this passage’. Rather, you should identify particular alliterative patterns and specific images, and explain how they contribute to what the passage means. (Remember that you do not have to comment on every word or idea in the passage, only the ones about which you have something to say.) The best commentaries will draw their detailed observations together to make a larger point about the passage as a whole.

Your commentary should have a proper introduction and conclusion, but these should be appropriate to the scale of the task (you may only need two or three sentences in each case). It is often a good idea to begin by putting the passage in **context**, perhaps by identifying its genre or its place in the larger narrative, and you might conclude by drawing out those elements of your reading that seem most important. However, it is unlikely that you would want to begin with, say, a survey of Chaucer’s life and works, or an overview of the rise of the novel.

Follow any special instructions the examiners have set. They might stress that you must focus on the passage itself. In that case, everything in your commentary should be relevant to the passage.Where you introduce contextual material, you should always explain to your reader precisely how it relates to and illuminates specific features of the passage. Or they might direct you to consider the significance of this extract in the context of the work as a whole.

Here are a few suggestions for general questions that you might ask yourself when writing a commentary:

* What is the passage trying to convey? *How* is it conveying it?
* Is its viewpoint consistent?
* Is it a first-person account? a reported account? a dialogue?
* Is it primarily descriptive or discursive?
* Is the language elaborate? simple? ambiguous? difficult? abstract? concrete? ironic?
* Does the extract develop a particular tone? Can you separate the events depicted from the tone in which they are depicted?
* Does the imagery, theme or argument remind you of, or contrast with, other parts of the text?
* Does the passage mark a turning point in the text?
* What issues does it raise?

Remember to provide line references for anything you quote.

J. Hawley March 2016