Writing a Close Reading

What is it?

Close reading is the careful interrogation of a small amount of text. You will often hear the term in the English discipline, where is it a now fundamental tool in criticism; but the practice applies to any number of fields.

How do I do it?

There are various possible strategies for and focuses of close reading, some of which are outlined below. Before all else, though, you must select an appropriate text. One usually seeks something somewhat self-contained and smaller than 30 lines of poetry, five paragraphs of prose, or what you imagine to be equivalent.

Writing out your text

Making annotations right on the physical page is an important part of many processes. So, at the very least, you should print multiple copies of your text to hold all of your observations! You might also consider writing your text out by hand, paying heed to exact spelling, punctuation, and spatial organization of words. This will help anyone notice peculiarities they did not before, so it’s a great way to kick-start a close reading.

Define

If any particular word interests you, or if you are not sure of an exact meaning: look it up! Oftentimes, seeing how somebody else articulates meaning will help you understand how you form your own. The Oxford English Dictionary, which you get free access to on the Pomona network, will even give you historical definitions!

Syntax

Syntax is the order of words and larger units in your text. You might consider rhyme patterns, grammatical formations, line- and stanza-breaks.

Diction

Diction is choice of words and larger units in your text. Are words conspicuously long, or short? What do they connote? Do they sound good together? Bad?

Be sloppy!

Don’t be afraid to excessively underline, highlight and circle whatever catches your attention. Draw lines on the page when you find inter-textual connections. Use these things to help you notice patterns in the text and in your own interests. You can move onto another copy of your text once you narrow your focus.

Go away!

Nobody will ever be able to finish close reading a true text; there are infinite things to notice! So try giving yourself a few hours, or a few days, away from the text you are close reading. Then return to a clean copy and go at it. What sticks out now that you’ve seen it all before? Compare this annotation to previous ones.