

A Guide to Writing Argumentative Close-Reading Papers

Brief Definition of Close-Reading

The process of writing an essay in literature courses almost always begins with close-reading a text such as a novel, poem, or essay (though one could certainly close-read a painting, movie, or event). At its core, close-reading is the practice of thoughtful, critical analysis of a text that focuses on the interpretation of particular patterns or significant details. Essentially, you will be searching for ways to interpret a particular passage or passages to illuminate a critical idea about the text overall. When close-reading, you should pay attention to the specifics of the text, including word choice, thematic or linguistic patterns, and adherence to genre tropes. You may want to consider the narrative construction of the text and, thus, the perspective of the *narrator* alongside your analysis of word choice and syntax.

Your argumentative close-reading essay is a means to walk others through your interpretation of the passage: by pointing readers towards the places in the text where they should focus on the details and patterns that are most significant in their interpretation of the passage, you use your argumentative close-reading to make an argument for how readers should approach interpreting the text's overall meaning.

Note: For short 2-3 page close-reading papers like ours, you do not need to read secondary materials such as biographical/historical context or literary criticism.

Steps to Writing Argumentative Close-Reading

I. Pick a Rich Passage

In order to produce an interesting and rich close-reading, you need to pick an interesting and rich passage on which to found an argument. That is why I suggest you pick something which you have strong feelings about: something that really confuses you, angers you, or that you find interesting and can't *quite* explain to yourself why. The pleasure of reading lies in attempting to articulate for yourself why the text catches your attention beyond evaluative or editorial statements (i.e. don't write something like "I like how nicely the story ended, it reminds me of when I was a kid..."). You should pick a passage anywhere in length from a few sentences to a page, but no more than 2 pages. Do NOT pick a passage that is straightforward to interpret or merely a plot point.

II. Define a research question about the text

After you have picked your rich and interesting passage. You want to choose a subject within the passage to focus on in order to make an argument. You want to start with a question that you have about the author's choices in this passage. This question should be specific to the text (illuminating the significance of this work over any other) and supportable by evidence from the textual evidence, which is literally the text itself. A specific, significant question may ask "In this passage, Nelly suggests that Heathcliff could be the son of an Indian Queen or the Emperor of China. What is the significance of Heathcliff's ambiguous national and racial identity to a character like Nelly at this point in the story?" An unspecific question that lacks significant thought about the text may be something much more generic like "In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens depicts the French as weak. Are all French people weak?" One way you could make

such a research question stronger would be to be more specific about which French people one is speaking about in the text (the Defarges, the aristocrats in prison, etc.) and what point in the novel you want to focus on (the end of the novel, the beginning of the novel), which should incite you to question if perspectives change, if ideas are complicated when we look at different sets of characters or if we re-examine your argument in a different moment and place in the text.

III. *Find evidence that will help you answer the question*

Find evidence *within the passage's text* or *elsewhere in the text of the literary work* that helps you make an argument to answer your question. Evidence should be in the form of short quotes from the passage's text—a phrase, or a couple of words—that you can use to guide your reader through interpreting this passage. Remember: when you start to write your paper, you should be (1) incorporating many short quotations as part of your analysis; (2) introducing the quoted passages by providing context before you insert the quote into the body of your paper; and (3) providing as much analysis after you've inserted the quote as lines of the quote. In order to get to that point, you need to take significant notes on the passages that you choose to use for your paper. Hopefully you did so as part of your regular class notes and you already have a lot of analysis on the word choice, thematic or linguistic patterns, adherence to genre tropes, and narratorial tone. Do not expect that you can just insert a lengthy block quote into your paper and allow the reader to parse the meaning—you need to be the one doing critical thinking for the reader, pointing to specific terms or elements in the text that need to be reevaluated.

IV. *Make an argument*

After locating an interesting question and some short quotations from the passage that help you answer your question, make sure to form a critical argument about how the passage helps us understand an aspect of the text as a whole. Again, a close-reading is the practice of paying attention to word choice, thematic or linguistic patterns, adherence to genre tropes, and narratorial tone.

Make sure to...

I. Be aware of your audience

Assume whoever is reading this is a literary critic who has already read the text you are writing on and get to your original argument quickly. You should avoid wasting space or padding your paper with useless generic claims (“Since the dawn of time...”) or extended summarization (“*Middlemarch* by George Eliot follows the main character Dorothea Brooke alongside other secondary characters such as...”), especially at the critical beginning of your paper when you are trying to hook a reader into liking and thus finishing your paper. You will need to provide some brief contextualization, but it must be specific and significant to your particular arguments in this paper.

Pragmatically, you should use your first sentence to explain what passage you'll be reading and the topic of your argumentative close-reading. For example, for my own close-reading, I might want to begin with the following sentences: “Dorothea Brooke's visit to Rome in Chapter XX of Book II of George Eliot's 1871 novel *Middlemarch* is defined by her 'jarring' encounter with the city's artworks that drastically change her perspective of her place in the world” (182). This kind

of opening statement will help you move quickly towards stating your argument about, for example, *why* an author like Eliot is so interested in discussing how Dorothea experiences art.

II. Cite appropriately using MLA

You can find basic information about citing in-text through the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL): <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/2/>. You should be using short quotations from the text as evidence. When you put a quotation into your paper as evidence for a claim you want to make, you want to ensure that you provide an introduction to the quote and analysis after a quote. When you use a quotation, or even a summarization of a part of the text, make sure to cite the page number, chapter/book, or line number in a parenthetical citation at the end of the sentence where you quote the text. Given the limitations of space in this short form writing, avoid copying long block quotes in your paper. When you do use a lot of space quoting or summarizing the text, make sure you use as many words analyzing the quotation as you do for the quotation itself; do not assume that your quotations are fully self-evident.

III. Focus on analysis and interpretation

This is an argumentative close-reading paper where you are offering a way to interpret a text. This would NOT be an appropriate time to use *evaluative or editorial statements* regarding:

1. your feelings about the work, that is, whether you like or do not like the text
2. your personal memories or past experiences
3. how successful the author is at doing or evoking something
 - a. absolutely avoid arguing points such as “the author makes the experience of _____ realistic” or “the author successfully makes the audience feel sympathy for X or Y character/idea”

IV. Be specific and precise with your terms

Focus on interpreting the elements that are specific to the text itself (the word choice, the narrative perspectives, etc.) by being specific in your own language. For example, if you want to talk about violence in *Frankenstein*, avoid making generalizations about violence or using the term “violence” without thinking through what you mean. You should consider the many different kinds of violence: specifying emotional cruelty, physical abuse, and other kinds of interpersonal violence versus economic violence, social violence, and other forms of structural violence. If you use a term that has been defined by another scholar or your primary writer, make sure to signpost that you are taking up this other writer’s term and cite where they define this concept.

V. Offer more sophisticated readings

Make space to account for ambiguity and contradiction. Try to recognize and reflect on complications in the texts. The *least* interesting and *least* accurate close-readings are often those that: make simple one-to-one connections; use terms without defining them; recycle preconceptions or generalizations without reflecting on them; and/or accept statements at face value. Most things in life are full of complexity and subtle distinctions of meaning, so there is significance in locating the nuances behind ideas.

VI. Articulate an answer to the questions: ‘so what?’ and ‘when did we ever think otherwise?’

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The hardest part of interpreting literature is offering an answer to the question “so what?” or “why should I care about what you just said?” For example, it is not enough to say *Middlemarch* is a historical novel—indeed, this is just a fact about the novel that does not need much interpretation (unless you are going to radically challenge this basic assumption about the novel!). You need to get specific and explain where, how, and why it’s important that *Middlemarch* is so interested in the subject of English history (what moments from history? what subjects? why these historical moments or subjects in particular?). You absolutely must attempt to address the “so what?” question in your close-reading papers.