

Study Skills Workshop: Active Reading and Close-reading

What is active reading? What is close-reading?

Consider what you do when you receive a text message from a friend whom you suspect to be upset with you. You likely read the message carefully, scrutinizing the words and punctuation, speculating about the tone or intention, and maybe looking for hidden implications or insinuations to make sure that you've understood not just the words but the *whole sense* of the message. In other words, you don't merely read and understand what is explicitly written, you also read between the lines in search of implicit and potentially meaningful subtext.

This way of reading is one way of analogizing “active reading” or “close reading.” When we read actively or closely, we pay special attention to *what* is written, *how* it is written, and what might be thereby *implied*. Whereas elementary reading – that is, our usual, relatively automatic way of reading – aims at *gathering information*, active or close-reading aims at *developing understanding*. It achieves this through careful attention and consideration of the text.

*Note that these practices apply to artistic pieces (paintings, sculptures, choreographed dances, architecture theatrical productions, etc.) as much as to written works like poems, novels, historical documents, and philosophical treatises! “Text” refers to any object that can be read.

The Importance of Pre-reading – Fact-finding and Collecting Contextual Clues

As another analogy for active or close-reading, consider watching a film in which you notice subtle artistic choices or “easter eggs” – allusions to other movies, symbolic props that suggest ties to literary figures, ways that the musical score heightens the tension, etc. Notice that it’s easier to spot subtler features like those on a subsequent viewing than during the first time you see the movie. During your first watch, you are focused on grasping the plot, the characters’ relations, etc., and the need to hold and synthesize those big-picture elements make it difficult to see the nuances, too.

The same is true when you read. In order to close-read effectively, it is important that you already have a preliminary sense of the text and its major elements. Efficient readers do this by *pre-reading*. Pre-reading consist of scanning a text to gather clues and to develop an initial impression *before* reading it. This initial glance provides the big-picture context that will enable you to discern subtler features and to hypothesize about their significance.

Your pre-read should be relatively quick and superficial. The aim is not yet to read the text itself, but only to form an overview by appraising it at a glance. Try to establish general points like:

- *What kind of text is it?*
E.g., a poem, play, narrative, philosophical text, historical document, political treatise, scientific study, how-to guide, selection from a longer work, ...
- *Who is the author? Has the text been translated?*
- *What is the title? Are there subtitles or chapter titles?*
What might you infer on the basis of those headings and sub-headings?

- *Is a complete work or a selection from a larger whole?*
- *If there is an index, what kinds of keywords does it include?*
This will give you a sense of some of the text's key concepts or main ideas.

Active Reading: *Inquisitive & Interested*

Active reading involves more than simply reading and understanding the words on the page. An active reader is actively formulating questions about the text they are reading and attempting to answer those questions on the basis of what they find.

The most useful active reading questions will be ones that you formulate for yourself in response to the particular text you are reading. But consider the following general questions, to get started:

1. What is the text about, as a whole?
2. What is being said in detail, and how?
3. Is it true, in whole or in part?
4. Why does it matter? What is the significance of this text or those ideas?

*(These are slightly modified versions of the questions offered by Adler and van Doren in *How to Read a Book*.)

Close-reading: *Attentive & Analytical*

Close-reading involves careful paying attention to what is written and how it is written. It involves careful analysis and interpretation of a textual passage on the basis of the rhetorical, structural, and extra-textual elements it contains. This is often achieved by annotating the text – that is, marking it up by underlining, circling key words or important concepts, adding your own notes and questions in the margins, etc. – and then reflecting on any patterns or significant findings you identify thereby.

Examples of textual elements that might be noteworthy:

- *Rhetorical elements* – diction, word order, syntax, metaphors, allusions, imagery, puns, translation choices, etc.
- *Formal and structural elements* – paragraph or section breaks, stanza organization, repeating patterns or key words, argumentative structure, rhyming patterns, etc.
- *Cultural references and extra-textual allusions* – references or allusions to historical, mythological, religious, or literary figures, events, texts, or symbols; implicit or explicit references to other texts, etc.

Once such features have been inventoried, close-reading involves *interpreting* the significance of those observations – that is, hypothesizing and developing an argument about what those details mean. E.g., Why might the author be using *that* particular metaphor? Is it significant that the main character's surname is also the name of a famous historical figure? Why are so many of this painting's features arranged in threes or in triangles? Why does the poem's line break *there*?

Because close-reading involves exegesis of ideas or implications latent in the selected passage(s), it is normal for the resulting interpretation to be longer than the source text.

Why do we do it? What are the benefits of active reading and close-reading?

These ways of reading can feel demanding, especially at first. But the more practice you get, the more efficient and rewarding it becomes. Active and close-reading are more engaged, and this often means that they are also more *engaging*; it's fun to peel back the layers of a text and to discover volumes of meaning hidden in the subtext. And the more (high-quality material) you read, the more connections you'll notice between even seemingly disparate texts. Active reading and close-reading thus afford us a deeper understanding and appreciation of the texts we read.

Active reading and close-reading are also crucial for *argumentative writing*. The questions and answers you formulate during active reading will ensure that you understand the text's overall project and will enable you to notice if there are unstated presuppositions, implicit assumptions, broader patterns, etc., that strengthen or undermine that project. And the nuances you note through close-reading constitute the evidence for your eventual argument about the text: these are the elements to which you'll point to show your reader that your thesis about the text is defensible. Finally, careful active and close-reading ensures air-tight argumentation by ensuring that your interpretive claims are supported by sound textual evidence.