

What is Close Reading?

- A close reading is a very **careful, in-depth analysis** of a text.
- Alternatively, close reading is often called “**close textual analysis**”.
- Close reading often requires us to probe a text **line by line**, and to examine how a text “works” in terms of its composition.
- Close reading requires thinking about the **stylistic choices** the author made in the creation of the text, i.e.
 - How do those choices interact with the **content** of the text? What is the relationship between the subject matter and the way that subject matter is being presented to us?
 - What do those choices achieve in terms of **effect**? Why did the author make those choices?

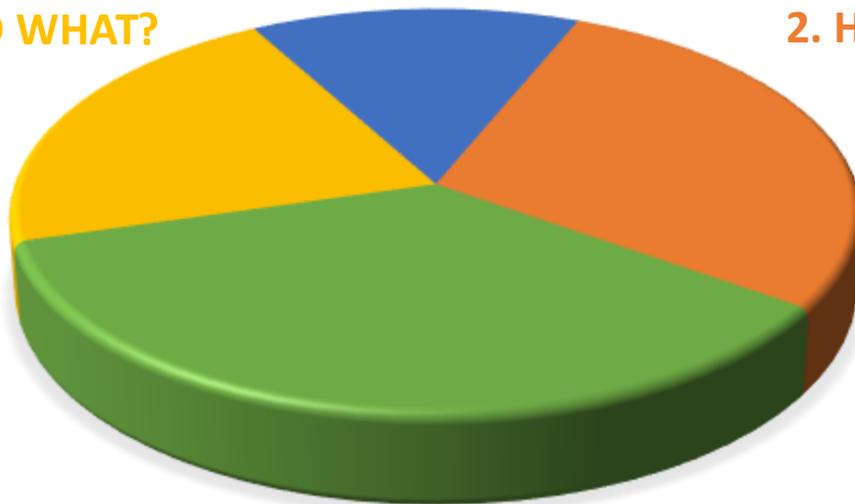
How to Conduct a Close Reading

1. WHAT?

What is the author doing/ saying?

2. HOW?

How is the author doing/ saying it? (Stylistic choices)



4. SO WHAT?
What is the broader significance of what the author is doing/ saying? Why does it matter? Why should the reader care?

3. WHY?

Why is the author doing/ saying that in that specific way? What does the author achieve by doing so?

Close Reading of a Literary Text

<p>WHAT?</p>	<p>Identify a prominent <i>feature</i> in the text.</p> <p><u>Content:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Plotting (what happens in the narrative/ poem/ play/ speech/ document). ✓ A particular image or set of related images. ✓ A particular theme that is prevalent throughout the text. ✓ The use of metaphor, symbolism, allegory, or recurrent tropes. <p><u>Form:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Syntactical choices (how the author <i>arranges</i> words and clauses in a sentence). ✓ Diction (the <i>kinds</i> of words and phrases the author uses, and their effects). ✓ Textual/ linguistic techniques (sentence length, punctuation, grammar, visual layout, etc.). ✓ The form and structure (how the text has been put together/ is presented to us). ✓ Narrative voices (first, second, or third person narration + tone).
<p>HOW?</p>	<p>Describe <i>how</i> this feature is being represented.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ What is it 'doing', or what is being done to/with it? ✓ Does a pattern emerge? Is the author always using this feature in the same way, or does their treatment of it change? ✓ What stylistic choices is the author making in terms of: plotting, diction, syntax, sentence, length, punctuation, grammar, visual layout, imagery, themes, metaphors, symbols, allegory, or recurrent tropes? ✓ How has the author structured the text and presented it to us? ✓ How would you describe the voice presenting the information to us?
<p>WHY?</p>	<p>Account for <i>why</i> the author is using this feature in that way.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ To what end or purpose is the author/text addressing the feature in this particular way? ✓ When the author uses the feature in the way you have described (in point 2), what is being <i>accomplished</i>? What meaning or message is being conveyed? ✓ What is the feature's significance, or overall purpose?
<p>SO WHAT?</p>	<p>Account for the broader <i>significance</i> of the author's choices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ What is the broader significance of what the author is doing/ saying? ✓ Why does it matter? ✓ Why should the reader care? ✓ What impact does this text have on society, culture, literature, research, policy, art, public consciousness, medicine, etc.?

Breaking the Text Down: Sample Lines of a Poem

John Clare, "I Am!" (1848)

Declarative **title**; forceful statement of selfhood. Begins with personal **pronoun** "I".
Use of **exclamation mark** to enhance force.

Use of **punctuation mark** (hyphen) to indicate a pause/break and potential uncertainty in the poetic voice. Followed by "yet" (**diction**), a contradiction to the declarative nature of previous statement "I am"

Awareness of the self being perceived (or not) by **other characters** – suggests identity is socially negotiated, i.e. does not exist in a vacuum.

Repetition of title/declaration of Cartesian subjectivity.

Perspective shift from internal ("I") in first line to external ("friends") in second line.

Repetition of first line, only inverted. This provides a sense of internal vacillation/confusion.

Use of **diction/imagery** such as "memory lost", "vapours", and "nothingness" create a sense of fleetingness and intangibility.

Potential **intertextual reference** to Macbeth's soliloquy from Scene 5, Act 5, in which Shakespeare's protagonist states: "[...] It is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing". Suggests that the central theme in this poem, as in Macbeth's soliloquy, is existential nihilism.

Use of **simile** to indicate shift from the tangible self ("I") at beginning of poem to something intangible and fleeting (a lost memory).

Use of **enjambment**, i.e. the sentence "runs over" into the next stanza of the poem. The poem's structure mimics the poetic speaker's emotions, i.e. the reader is syntactically "tossed" into the next stanza.

Read the observations above. We have identified **WHAT** Clare is doing and **HOW** he is doing it. In some instances, we have begun to address **WHY** Clare is making these choices/ what is being achieved. In a close reading, we would now be required to:

1. Write out the **WHAT**, **HOW**, and **WHY** (noted above) into full, coherent sentences.
2. Explain the **SO WHAT**, i.e. broader significance of Clare's choices.

Writing the Close Reading: Sample Excerpt from a Novel

Below you will read a short excerpt from Horace Walpole's 1764 novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, followed by the breakdown of a close reading, in which the author has focused on one feature of the passage.

Young Conrad's birthday was fixed for his espousals. The company was assembled in the chapel of the Castle, and everything ready for beginning the divine office, when Conrad himself was missing. Manfred, impatient of the least delay, and who had not observed his son retire, despatched one of his attendants to summon the young Prince. The servant, who had not stayed long enough to have crossed the court to Conrad's apartment, came running back breathless, in a frantic manner, his eyes staring, and foaming at the mouth. He said nothing, but pointed to the court. The company were struck with terror and amazement. The Princess Hippolita, without knowing what was the matter, but anxious for her son, swooned away. Manfred, less apprehensive than enraged at the procrastination of the nuptials, and at the folly of his domestic, asked imperiously what was the matter? The fellow made no answer, but continued pointing towards the courtyard; and at last, after repeated questions put to him, cried out, "Oh! the helmet! the helmet!" [...] The domestics, without observing the singularity of this direction, were guided by their affection to their mistress, to consider it as peculiarly addressed to her situation, and flew to her assistance. They conveyed her to her chamber more dead than alive, and indifferent to all the strange circumstances she heard, except the death of her son.

WHAT?	As evidenced in this passage, Walpole frequently depicts physical swoons in <i>The Castle of Otranto</i> , with his female characters often fainting away from scenes of heightened affect.
HOW?	For example, the excerpt states that: "The company were struck with terror and amazement. The Princess Hippolita, without knowing what was the matter, but anxious for her son, swooned away. [...] They conveyed her to her chamber more dead than alive, and indifferent to all the strange circumstances she heard, except the death of her son" (Walpole 10-11). Here, Hippolita's swoon is linked directly to her dead son; while the assembled company are terrified of and amazed at the supernatural occurrences taking place, Walpole uses syntactical asides to emphasise that Hippolita's primary focus within the chaos is her son, Conrad, and that she is indifferent to rumours of the supernatural in the face of her child's death; thus, the swoon codifies her body exclusively as a vehicle of maternal affect.
WHY?	Walpole does this to signal Hippolita's overt virtue and to map that virtue onto the tangible form of the human body. The affective representation of Hippolita's swoon externalises emotion within the text by bringing it to the empirical surface of the body.
SO WHAT?	This is significant in the broader context of the gothic mode. Such externalisation is part of the gothic's proclivity towards revelation and the unearthing of that which is repressed, unseen, or forgotten. As Lindsey Eckert suggests, the task of Romantic writers was to "overcome the familiar to reveal hidden truths" (Eckert 13). While Manfred and the domestics obsess over the appearance of Alfonso's helmet and the logical impossibility of the event (and thus reflect the disruption of Enlightenment certainty), Hippolita's body enacts the revelatory process of the gothic in microcosm by expressing emotion physically.