

AP English IV—Literature and Composition

Summer Reading

- Purchase John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.
- Read "What Is Close Reading?" and "Dialectical Journals" (below) before you begin the novel.
- Using the techniques outlined in the first article, read the novel closely.
- As you read and annotate, keep a dialectical journal according to the instructions in the second article—ask higher level questions, contemplate relevant passages, respond to stylistic nuances, decipher figurative language, etc.
- I expect at least three entries per chapter in your journal. Your journals are due the first day of class.
- Please do not put this off until the week before school starts. Give yourself plenty of time to read thoughtfully and enjoy the process.

What is Close Reading?

1. Close reading is the most important skill you need for any form of literary studies. It means paying especially close attention to what is printed on the page. It is a much more subtle and complex process than the term might suggest.
2. Close reading means not only reading and understanding the meanings of the individual printed words; it also involves making yourself sensitive to all the nuances and connotations of language as it is used by skilled writers.
3. This can mean anything from a work's particular vocabulary, sentence construction, and imagery, to the themes that are being dealt with, the way in which the story is being told, and the view of the world that it offers. It involves almost everything from the smallest linguistic items to the largest issues of literary understanding and judgment.

Close reading can be seen as four separate levels of attention which we can bring to the text. Most normal people read without being aware of them, and employ all four simultaneously. The four levels or types of reading become progressively more complex.

Linguistic - You pay especially close attention to the surface linguistic elements of the text - that is, to aspects of vocabulary,

grammar, and syntax. You might also note such things as **figures of speech** or any other features which contribute to the writer's individual style.

Semantic - You take account at a deeper level of what the words mean - that is, what information they yield up, what meanings they denote and connote.

Structural - You note the possible relationships between words within the text - and this might include items from either the linguistic or semantic types of reading.

Cultural - You note the relationship of any elements of the text to things outside it. These might be other pieces of writing by the same author, or other writings of the same type by different writers. They might be items of social or cultural history, or even other academic disciplines which might seem relevant, such as philosophy or psychology.

5. Close reading is not a skill which can be developed to a sophisticated extent overnight. It requires a great deal of practice in the various **linguistic** and literary disciplines involved—and it requires that you do a lot of reading. The good news is that most people already possess the skills required. They have acquired them automatically through being able to read—even though they haven't been conscious of doing so. This is rather like many other things which we learn unconsciously. After all, you don't need to know the names of your leg muscles in order to walk down the street.

6. The four types of reading also represent increasingly complex and sophisticated phases in our scrutiny of the text.

Linguistic reading is largely *descriptive*. We are noting what is in the text and naming its parts for possible use in the next stage of

reading.

Semantic reading is *cognitive*. That is, we need to understand what the words are telling us - both at a surface and maybe at an implicit level.

Structural reading is *analytic*. We must assess, examine, sift, and judge a large number of items from within the text in their relationships to each other.

Cultural reading is *interpretive*. We offer judgments on the work in its general relationship to a large body of cultural material outside it.

7. The first and second of these stages are the sorts of activity designated as “Beginners” level; the third takes us to “Intermediate”; and the fourth to “Advanced” and beyond.

8. One of the first things you need to acquire for serious literary study is a knowledge of the vocabulary, the technical language, indeed the jargon in which literature is discussed. You need to acquaint yourself with the technical vocabulary of the discipline and then go on to study how its parts work

9. What follows is a short list of features you might keep in mind whilst reading. They should give you ideas of what to look for. It is just a prompt to help you get under way.

Close reading - Checklist

Grammar

The relationships of the words in sentences

Vocabulary

The author's choice of individual words

Figures of speech

The rhetorical devices used to give decoration and imaginative expression to literature, such as simile or metaphor

Literary devices

The devices commonly used in literature to give added depth to the work, such as imagery or symbolism

Tone

The author's attitude to the subject as revealed in the manner of the writing

Style

The author's particular choice and combination of all these features of writing which creates a recognizable and distinctive manner of writing.

10. Now here's an example of close reading in action. The short passage which follows comes from the famous opening to Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*.

11. If you would like to treat this as an interactive exercise, read the passage through a number of times. Make notes, and write down all you can say about what goes to make up its literary "quality." That is, you should scrutinize the passage as closely as possible, name its parts, and say what devices the author is using. Don't be afraid to list even the most obvious points.

12. If you are not really sure what all this means, however, allow yourself a brief glance ahead at the first couple of discussion notes which follow, and then come back to carry on making notes of your own.

13. Don't worry if you are not sure what name to give to any feature you notice. You will see the technical vocabulary being used in the discussion notes which follow, and this should help you pick up this skill as we go along.

Bleak House

London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full grown snowflakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.

14. This is the sort of writing which many people, when asked for their first impressions, would say was very “descriptive.” But if you looked at it closely enough you will have seen that it is imaginative rather than descriptive. It doesn't “describe what is there”— but it invents images and impressions. There is as much “it was as if ...” material in the extract as there is anything descriptive. What follows is a close reading of the extract, with comments listed in the order that they appear in the extract.

London

This is an abrupt and astonishingly short 'sentence' with which to start a six hundred page novel. In fact technically, it is grammatically incomplete, because it does not have a verb or an object. It somehow implies the meaning 'The scene is London.'

Sentence construction

In fact each of the first four sentences here are “incomplete” in this sense. Dickens is taking liberties with conventional grammar—and obviously he is writing for a literate and fairly sophisticated readership.

Sentence length

These four sentences vary from one word to forty-three words in length. This helps to create entertaining variation and robust flexibility in his prose style.

Michaelmas Term

There are several names (proper nouns) in these sentences, all signaled by capital

letters (*London, Michaelmas Term, Lord Chancellor, Lincoln's Inn Hall, November, Holborn Hill*). This helps to create the very credible and realistic world Dickens presents in his fiction. We believe that this is the same London which we could visit today. The names also emphasise the very specific and concrete nature of the world he creates.

Michaelmas Term

This occurs in autumn. It comes from the language of the old universities (Oxford and Cambridge) which is shared by the legal profession and the Church.

Lord Chancellor sitting

Here “sitting” is a present participle. The novel is being told in the present tense at this point, which is rather unusual. The effect is to give vividness and immediacy to the story. We are being persuaded that these events are taking place now.

Implacable

This is an unusual and very strong term to describe the weather. It means 'that which cannot be appeased'. What it reflects is Dickens's genius for making almost everything in his writing original, striking, and dramatic.

as if

This is the start of his extended simile comparing the muddy streets with the primeval world.

the waters

There is a slight Biblical echo here, which also fits neatly with the idea of an ancient world he is summoning up.

but newly and wonderful

These are slightly archaic expressions. We might normally expect 'recently' and “astonishing” but Dickens is selecting his vocabulary to suit the subject - the prehistoric world. 'Wonderful' is being used in its original sense of—“something we wonder at.”

forty feet long or so

After the very specific “forty feet long,” the addition of “or so” introduces a slightly conversational tone and a casual, almost comic effect.

waddling

This reinforces the humorous manner in which Dickens is presenting this Megalosaurus—and note the breadth of his vocabulary in naming the beast with such scientific precision.

like an elephantine lizard

This is another simile, announced by the word “like.” Here is Dickens's skill with language yet again. He converts a “large” noun (“elephant”) into an adjective (“elephantine”) and couples it to something which is usually small (“lizard”) to describe, very appropriately it seems, his Megalosaurus.

up Holborn Hill

There is a distinct contrast, almost a shock here, in this abrupt transition from an imagined prehistoric world and its monsters to the “real” world of Holborn in London.

lowering

This is another present participle, and an unusual verb. It means “to sink, descend, or slope downwards.” It comes from a rather “poetic” verbal register, and it has a softness (there are no sharp or harsh sounds in it) which makes it very suitable for describing the movement of smoke.

soft black drizzle

He is comparing the dense smoke (from coal fires) with another form of particularly depressing atmosphere—a drizzle of rain. Notice how he goes on to elaborate the comparison.

as big as full grown snow flakes

The comparison becomes another simile: “as big as.” And then “full grown” almost suggests that the snowflakes are human. This is a device much favored by Dickens: it is called *anthropomorphism*—attributing human qualities or characteristics to things which are themselves inanimate. Then “snowflakes” is a well-observed comparison for an enlarged flake of soot, because they are of similar size and texture. Notice next how Dickens immediately goes on to play with the notion that whilst soot is black, snowflakes are white.

gone into mourning

This reinforces the anthropomorphism. The inanimate world is being brought to life. And of course “mourning” reinforces the atmospheric gloom he is trying to evoke. It also introduces blackness (the color of mourning) to explain how these snowflakes (actually flakes of soot) might have changed from white to black.

the death of the sun

This is why the flakes have changed color. And if the sun has died the light and life it brings to earth have also been extinguished - which reinforces the atmosphere of pre-historic darkness he is creating.

15. We will stop at this point. It would in fact be possible to say even more about the extract if we were to relate it to the novel as a whole—but almost everything listed was accessible even if you were reading the passage for the first time.

16. Literary studies are not conducted in such detail all the time, but it is very important that you try to develop the skill of reading as closely as possible. It really is the foundation on which everything else is based.

17. The next point to make about such close reading is that it becomes easier if you get used to the idea of reading and re-reading. The Russian novelist [Vladimir Nabokov](#) (famous for *Lolita*) once observed that "Curiously enough, one cannot read a book: one can only re-read it".

18. What he meant by this apparently contradictory remark is that the first time we read a book we are busy absorbing information, and we cannot appreciate all the subtle connections there may be between its parts—because we don't yet have the complete picture before us. Only when we read it for a second time (or even better, a third or fourth) are we in a position to assemble and compare the nuances of meaning and the significance of its details in relation to each other.

19. This is why the activity is called *close reading*. You should try to get used to the notion of reading and re-reading very carefully, scrupulously, and in great detail.

20. Finally, let's try to dispel a common misconception. Many people ask, when they first come into contact with close reading: "Doesn't analyzing a piece of work in such detail spoil your enjoyment of it?" The answer to this question is "No—on the contrary—it should enhance it." The simple fact is that we get more out of a piece of writing if we can appreciate all the subtleties and the intricacies which exist within it. Nabokov also suggested that "In reading, one should notice and fondle the details."

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Dialectical Journals

The term "Dialectic" means "the art or practice of arriving at the truth by using conversation involving question and answer." Think of your **dialectical journal** as a series of conversations with the texts we read during this course. The process is meant to help you develop a better understanding of the texts we read. Use your **journal** to incorporate your personal responses to the texts,

your ideas about the themes we cover and our class discussions. You will find that it is a useful way to process what you're reading, prepare yourself for group discussion, and gather textual evidence for your Literary Analysis assignments.

Procedure:

- As you read, choose passages that stand out to you and record them in the left-hand column of a T-chart (*ALWAYS include page numbers*).
- In the right column, write your response to the text (ideas/insights, questions, reflections, and comments on each passage)
- If you choose, you can label your responses using the following codes:
 - (Q) Question – ask about something in the passage that is unclear
 - (C) Connect – make a connection to your life, the world, or another text
 - (P) Predict – anticipate what will occur based on what's in the passage
 - (CL) Clarify – answer earlier questions or confirm/disaffirm a prediction
 - (R) Reflect – think deeply about what the passage means in a broad sense – not just to the characters in the story. What conclusions can you draw about the world, about human nature, or just the way things work?
 - (E) Evaluate - make a judgment about the character(s), their actions, or what the author is trying to say
- Complete **journal** entries for at least two passages each week. You can earn up to 25 points per week for your journals.

Sample **Dialectical Journal entry: THE THINGS THEY CARRIED by Tim O'Brien**

Passages from the text	Pg#s	Comments & Questions
"-they carried like freight trains; they carried it on their backs and shoulders- and for all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns, there was at least the single abiding certainty that they would never be at a loss for	Pg 2	(R) O'brien chooses to end the first section of the novel with this sentence. He provides excellent visual details of what each soldier in Vietnam would carry for day-to-day fighting. He makes you feel the physical weight of what soldiers have to carry for simple survival. When you combine the emotional

things to carry".

weight of loved ones at home, the fear of death, and the responsibility for the men you fight with, with this physical weight, you start to understand what soldiers in Vietnam dealt with every day. This quote sums up the confusion that the men felt about the reasons they were fighting the war, and how they clung to the only certainty - things they had to carry - in a confusing world where normal rules were suspended.

Choosing Passages from the Text:

Look for quotes that seem significant, powerful, thought provoking or puzzling. For example, you might record:

- Effective &/or creative use of stylistic or literary devices
- Passages that remind you of your own life or something you've seen before
- Structural shifts or turns in the plot
- A passage that makes you realize something you hadn't seen before
- Examples of patterns: recurring images, ideas, colors, symbols or motifs.
- Passages with confusing language or unfamiliar vocabulary
- Events you find surprising or confusing
- Passages that illustrate a particular character or setting

Responding To the Text:

You can *respond* to the text in a variety of ways. The most important thing to remember is that your observations should be **specific and detailed**. You can write as much as you want for each entry. You can use loose leaf paper for your journals or a notebook.

Basic Responses

- Raise questions about the beliefs and values implied in the text
- Give your personal reactions to the passage

- Discuss the words, ideas, or actions of the author or character(s)
- Tell what it reminds you of from your own experiences
- Write about what it makes you think or feel
- Agree or disagree with a character or the author

Sample Sentence Starters:

I really don't understand this because...

I really dislike/like this idea because...

I think the author is trying to say that...

This passage reminds me of a time in my life when...

If I were (name of character) at this point I would...

This part doesn't make sense because...

This character reminds me of (name of person) because...

Higher Level Responses

- Analyze the text for use of literary devices (tone, structure, style, imagery)
- Make connections between different characters or events in the text
- Make connections to a different text (or film, song, etc...)
- Discuss the words, ideas, or actions of the author or character(s)
- Consider an event or description from the perspective of a different character
- Analyze a passage and its relationship to the story as a whole