What does it mean to read a text closely and analyze it? Why do we do close reading in literary study?

The answers to these questions emerge more from the doing than the talking. Briefly, close reading is a basic tool for understanding, taking pleasure in, and communicating one's interpretation of a text. The skills employed in literary close reading lend themselves to other kinds of investigation and analysis (for works in other media, for example) but focus on language as conveying meaning.

When an assignment calls for close reading, it's best to start by choosing a brief but promising passage, one that you find intriguing. Here are some useful steps.

1. Choose a short passage that allows you to investigate the details closely.   Here, for example, is a paragraph in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Vol. 1, Ch. 4.

> I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window-shutters, I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed down stairs. I took refuge in the court-yard belonging to the house which I inhabited; where I remained during the rest of the night, walking up and down in the greatest agitation, listening attentively, catching and fearing each sound as if it were to announce the approach of the demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life.

Read your passage multiple times, annotating it and responding to whatever you find striking in the language and its technical features.

2. For example, look at **diction**. What kinds of words does Shelley use? Look up any that are unfamiliar. Does she aim for lofty diction (used for special occasions) or common diction? Are the words long or short, Latinate or Anglo-Saxon, specialized (i.e. legalistic, medical, jargon, elite) or ordinary? Remember that the rules for diction are different at different times in history.

3. Next, look at **sentence structure**. Can you map the sentences (find the subject and verb, locate phrases and clauses)? Does the author use active or passive verbs? What rhythms or patterns does the sentence structure create—long flowing ones, short choppy ones—and how do these relate to the meaning?
4. Does the passage contain **figurative language**? What sensory images or metaphors or similes do you observe? What is the significance or effect of the author's use or lack of figurative language?
5. What do you notice about the **structure** of the passage overall? Does it have a climax or significant turning point? How does it organize or develop its ideas, impressions, or themes?
6. You can also analyze **tone**. Is the narrator being straightforward, factual, open? Or is he taking a less direct route toward his meaning? Does the voice carry emotion? Or is it detached from its subject? Do you hear irony? If so, what do you make of it?
7. Once you have a grasp of the language, you can begin to look for **problems or complications** in your reading of the passage, to move beyond **description to interpretation**. What are the effects of the technical features of the passage? In the example above, you may discover some difference between what the author appears to be doing (giving you a complete, unbiased narrative) and what she also accomplishes (raising doubts about the narrator's point of view, whether he fully understands the implications of what he's seen, whether this narrator can be trusted, etc.). You can now begin to talk about the ways Shelley's language, which *seems* to invite our confidence, is also raising these doubts.
8. At this point, you can propose a generic **hypothesis**, something like, "In this passage, Shelley raises questions about Victor Frankenstein's character through her contrast between the violence Frankenstein witnesses and his seemingly bland, even inappropriate response to it." You can proceed to fill in the outlines of this point by explaining what you mean, using details and quotations from the passage to support your point.
9. You still need an argument and will need to go back to your opening to sharpen the thesis. The question is *Why*? **Or** *to what effect*? Your thesis might build on what you've already written by suggesting the larger implications of your observations and by structuring your paper more rigorously.
10. Using this method to get started, you will have achieved some very important things, namely:
    1) you have chosen a specific piece of the text to work with, hence avoiding generalizations and abstractions that tend to turn a reader off;
    2) you have moved from exposition (explaining or summarizing what's there) to arguing a point, which will involve your reader in a more interactive and risky encounter;
    3) you have carved out your *own* reading of the text rather than taking the more well-worn path;
    4) you have identified something about Shelley's method that may well open up other areas of the text for study and debate. Bravo!
11. With your more refined thesis in place, you can go back and make sure your supporting argument explains the questions you've raised, follows through on your argument, and comes to a provocative conclusion. By the end, you may be able to

expand from your initial passage to a larger point, but use your organization to keep the reader focused all the way.

The most exciting thing for a reader, and the most useful for an essayist, is that close reading generally offers *surprises*. Your project is not so much about telling readers what they probably can see for themselves but also about revealing what they might have missed that could delight them. It's helpful, then, to go into the paper with an open mind and be ready to adjust your thesis to the evidence you find in the text.

MIT OpenCourseWare
http://ocw.mit.edu

21L.000J / 21W.734J Writing About Literature
Fall 2010

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: http://ocw.mit.edu/terms.