**“With the Grain” vs. “Against the Grain” readings**

* A “with the grain” reading provides the conventional plot or summary of the text[[1]](#footnote-1). This kind of reading offers a generally agreeable, uncontroversial *description* of what the text is about.
* An “against the grain” reading is *your own* surprising or counterintuitive interpretation of the work. It should be contestable and illuminate something about the text that a “with the grain” reading would not address. An “against the grain” reading doesn’t emerge out of thin air; it comes from paying attention to specific, concrete details that others might miss. We call this kind of careful attention to the text *close reading.*

**What is “Close Reading”?**

Most students learn close reading as the process of “marking up” a text or work with questions, observations, and pattern recognition that can be considered important to understanding the meaning of the work. We want to give you a more complex definition that we think will help you both in the writing seminar and in many other classes you might take at Princeton.

***Close reading is the process of interpreting a text in a way that reveals something* new, surprising, or illuminating *that a casual reader might miss, but which is nevertheless crucial to understanding how the text functions.***

One of the assumptions of this writing seminar is that *all texts* (of any medium) are available for close reading because language always says more than it initially appears. Language is filled with ambiguities, connotations, paradoxes, contradictions, and multiple meanings that demand our careful attention. Close reading, then, is the act of uncovering that “more” in order to reveal something interesting, surprising, or counterintuitive about the way particular texts work.

**\*\*\* In the language of the Writing Lexicon, close reading is what we do with primary sources to turn them into *evidence* for our arguments!**

**Some Elements to Focus on in Close Readings**

1. Word Choice: Words are weird and wonderful things! They often have multiple or contradictory meanings, strange etymologies, a variety of connotations, and interesting family trees. Ask yourself: why did the author or speaker choose *this* particular word over a different one? Is this word unusual in some way? Is this word reminiscent of other words in a different part of the text? Is there a *subtext* to the author’s word choice that influences the meaning of the work as a whole?
2. Figurative Language: There’s often more to figurative language than meets the eye. Ask yourself how a particular metaphor or simile actually *works*. What is it asking the reader to compare, contrast, or make equivalent? Does the figurative language introduce new suggestions or connotations that complicate or destabilize the meaning it is trying to convey?
3. Imagery: Often, and sometimes even unintentionally, authors or speakers will associate particular ideas, characters, or places with certain images or ideas, and these images can tell us a lot about how meaning accrues to them. Ask yourself *why* a particular place, person, or idea is associated with particular images. How do these images function within the text as a whole?
4. Allusion: Primary sources are often filled with references to other texts, historical events, figures, and locations—either explicitly or implicitly. When reading for allusion, ask yourself: does the primary source make references to its *own* historical moment? What is it trying to say about it? Does it make reference to *other* literary or historical texts, and to what end? How does it position itself in relation to other kinds of writings that have come before it?
5. Form: Form refers to the physical structure or “shape” of the text or document that you are engaging with. In a written document, this can refer to line length, rhyme scheme, poetic meter (if there is one), punctuation, and the paratextual apparatus (ie. footnotes, appendix, illustrations) etc. In a visual document this can refer to *how* a scene or image is composed. Form also refers to the *kind* of document we have in our hands: ballad, limerick, novel, short story, dialogue, haiku, etc. The form of a text contributes to its meaning because it shapes *how* it is read.

**\*\*\* There are many other possible “elements” to focus on in close reading that are not covered here: syntax, irony, style, tone, example, rhetoric, and many others. The important point is to pay attention to *specifics* in any case.**

**Principles of Close Reading**

1. Close reading **is not summarizing or paraphrasing**. Close reading not only sheds light on *what* something means but *how* it means.
2. Close reading should **reveal something interesting (ie. unintuitive)** about the text at hand. Perhaps the “obvious” meaning of a passage is not as obvious as it first appears? Perhaps the author or speaker’s language conveys more than they intend to convey? Perhaps the meaning of a passage takes on new significance if certain historical or cultural are taken into account when we read it? Perhaps the text is wrestling with a tension, problem, or contradiction that it cannot quite resolve? Perhaps the ambiguity of a sentence or phrase allows it be read in a way counter to its literal meaning?
3. A successful close reading **must be contestable**, which means that it must propose an interpretation that someone could plausibly disagree with by providing a different analysis of the same details. If a close reading is too obvious (ie. no one would even bother to disagree with it) or not sufficiently grounded in textual evidence (ie. it’s impossible to disagree with) then chances are it is not a strong close reading.

**Tips For Successful Close Reading**

1. Slow down! Good reading, like good writing, doesn’t happen immediately. You will want to spend significant time with the document or object you are close reading. Get comfortable annotating it, commenting in the margins, asking questions of it, and engaging it carefully and rigorously. You may want to start by underlining words, expressions, and details that intrigue or confuse you. Allow yourself to get lost in uncertainty; this is often the first step toward arriving upon an illuminating insight!
2. Establish connections between the individual details you are noticing and important themes or ideas running through the work as a whole. Remember, your job is to illuminate something about the text that a casual reader would not necessarily notice.
3. Show how an analysis of specific details reveals something about the text’s broader concerns. This is how we form strong arguments rooted in textual analysis.

**\*\*\* Consider close reading one extremely powerful tool in a diverse toolkit of reading and writing practices. It can help you take your reader out of the familiar and the mundane into really exciting intellectual territory. Take time to practice these skills – they’re important!**

1. The word “text” here is used to refer to any object—written, spoken, visual, multimedia, or otherwise—that can be interpreted. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)