

Reading like a Detective

Part 1: What is close reading? How do you introduce your students to the concept? What kind of difficulties do they face with understanding close reading?

Discussion:

- Have you ever watched a crime TV show or movie?
- How would you describe a detective?
- How does a detective figure out who committed the crime?
- What strategies does he or she use?
- What makes a strong detective? What characteristics do they usually have?

Detective fiction seems especially unique among narrative genres because it thematizes narrative, or storytelling, itself. The classical detective novel focuses on reconstructing a hidden or lost story – the crime – and the process of its reconstruction, its detection, is often hidden from the reader. Being a close reader is a little like being a detective, in that you analyze the details and structure of the text to come to your own interpretation of how that text works.

Watch *Sherlock* Excerpt and Discuss:

Let's look at an example of a detective in action from BBC's remake of Sherlock Holmes. This is from the first episode called, "A Study in Pink," which is loosely based on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's original story, "A Study in Scarlet." [Excerpt is about 5 minutes].

<https://vimeo.com/97368777>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Feb_ufxhwXE

Take notes as you watch. Be ready to answer these questions afterwards:

- How does Sherlock come to conclusions about what he sees around him?
- What kind of information does he seek?
- How does he make sense of this information?

In some ways Sherlock here is **INTERPRETING the crime scene** – he's doing work similar to the literary critic, what we do in English studies. He looks at information and then makes educated interpretations of what this information might mean. Sherlock draws upon his knowledge of the weather, the woman's clothes, etc., to come to a conclusion about what happened to her.

Part 2: Performing close-reading step by step

In an investigation, a detective will determine crime scene boundaries; conduct detailed search; record and collect the evidence; initiate preliminary survey. The detective really does the work that is similar to what we as literary critics do, what's involved in interpreting a text.

Discussion: How to choose a significant quotation (or excerpt)?

- A successful paper needs to choose a “significant” quotation to work with. This is not as easy as it looks or sounds. What makes a quotation / an excerpt “significant?” Conversely, what’s an “insignificant” quotation?
- Begin planning your paper by making sure you understand where in the text the passage you have chosen comes so that you can set the context of your quotation. Who’s talking and to whom? When? Where? Why?

What “counts” as a clue? :

For the detective, the traces left by the criminal appear as clues. Footprints, objects, dirt under the fingernails, the weather and even the lack of objects like the pink suitcase. Everything has the possibility to signify something else.

Discussion: What sorts of details do we as readers look at when close reading a short story or poem?

- Underline the words or phrases in the quotation that you find interesting. Notice any patterns, repetition, emphasis etc. in the quote.

Pre-Writing:

Organize your pre-writing ideas and separate them into paragraphs: what ideas belong together?

What connections are you seeing between words and phrases?

Elaborate on the clues and evidence of your case!

Who are the likely suspects of your argument?

Presenting your case in court!: Making a coherent, persuasive argument in a paper

- Organise your pre-writing ideas and separate them into paragraphs: what ideas belong together?
- It helps to ensure that each paragraph contributes to the question: *how does this quotation contribute to the overall effect or meaning of the text?*

This is a short excerpt from Alice Munro's short story, "The Bear Came Over The Mountain". In groups, we will perform a close-reading of this quotation using the steps we have just discussed:

Or they might be in Aubrey's room. But he did not know where that was.

The more he explored this place the more corridors and seating spaces and ramps he discovered, and in his wanderings he was still apt to get lost. One

Saturday he looked out a window and saw Fiona – it had to be her – wheeling Aubrey along one of the paved paths now cleared of snow and ice.

She was wearing a silly wool hat and a jacket with swirls of blue and purple, the sort of thing he had seen on local women at the supermarket. It must be that they didn't bother to sort out the wardrobes of the women who were roughly the same size and counted on the women not to recognize their own

clothes anyway. They had cut her hair, too. They had cut away her angelic halo.

Part 3: Working with a novel – The Great Gatsby

Revisit this question – how do we do this with a longer text?

- A successful paper needs to choose a “significant” quotation to work with. This is not as easy as it looks or sounds. What makes a quotation “significant?” Conversely, what’s an “insignificant” quotation?

Identifying a Question or Problem for a Paper

When Sherlock approached his crime scene, he already had a problem or question that centered his investigation – i.e. who is the criminal? And later on, he refined this question into a more specific problem: where is the pink suitcase?

What is an interpretive question? It is a question about how we as readers should understand the story, and it does not yield a simple or straightforward answer. It should raise a problem, conflict, or tension in the text. This could be something that you think the author incorporated into the texture of the story, or it could be a problem the author isn’t aware of – for instance, a problematic treatment of race, gender, or class.

This question will later help you to choose a “significant quotation” and also to develop a thesis for your paper.

Discussion: Identifying a Question or Problem about *The Great Gatsby*

What question(s) do you have about *The Great Gatsby*? Is there anything that doesn’t make sense to you? Do you notice any patterns, contradictions, or problems that recur across the novel? Does it raise any issues regarding race, gender, class, or other issues?

Once you have identified a problem or question, consider which sections of the novel will help you to answer this question. *How does this quotation contribute to the overall effect or meaning of the novel?*

This is a short excerpt from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Perform a close reading of this excerpt in the ways we've discussed throughout this exercise. Notice any important details, patterns, repetition, emphases, etc. How do these details give us insight into the question we raised about *The Great Gatsby*?

About half way between West Egg and New York the motor-road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes--a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud which screens their obscure operations from your sight.

But above the grey land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic--their

retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face but, instead, from a pair
of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose.

Part 4: Putting Together the Paper: Making a Case

Objectives:

- What is an essay?
- What is an introduction?
- Crafting effective thesis statements.

Outline:

- Discussion of **What is an essay?** An essay is a literary composition that expresses a certain idea, claim, or concept and backs it up with supporting statements. It will follow a logical pattern, to include an introductory paragraph (make the claim), a body (support), and a conclusion (summary of statements and support).

Introduction

- The introduction is the first paragraph in your essay, and it should accomplish a few specific goals.
1. **Capture the reader's interest:** It's a good idea to start your essay with a really interesting statement, in order to pique the reader's interest. Encourage the people to continue reading.
 2. **Introduce the topic:** The next few sentences should explain your first statement, discuss how the texts you are using illustrate your theme and prepare the reader for your thesis statement. (Funnel in)
 3. **Make a claim or express your opinion in a thesis statement:** (Can also be expressed in two sentences if necessary). Your thesis sentence should provide your specific assertion and convey clearly your point of view. A thesis statement must be specific, interesting and not very obvious. It should also pass the 'so what?' test. It might be a claim that others might dispute. This is also the only part of your essay that I will accept 'I will argue' or 'I argue'.
 4. **Please note that the introductory paragraph and the conclusion (and all paragraphs in your essay) should be a MINIMUM of three sentences.**

Body

- The body of the essay will include at least three sections (that's at least the norm; for the short essay, you can aim for two, and for longer essays, four is acceptable), each limited to one central idea/ or string of ideas that supports your thesis. You should state your idea in a strong topic sentence, then back it up with a number of sentences of evidence or and quotations that are analysed in context of your argument. Secondary criticism can also be effective here.

- Include a few more supporting statements with further evidence, then use transition words to lead to the following paragraph. Sample transition words include: **moreover; in fact; on the whole; furthermore; as a result; simply put; for this reason; similarly; likewise; it follows that; naturally; by comparison; surely; yet.**

Conclusion

- The final section will summarize your main points and re-assert your main argument. It should begin with a rephrasing of your thesis statement but should not repeat specific examples. Broaden your argument to its relationship to the period, genre or broader themes in literature. (Funnel out).

Drafts

- Once you complete the first draft of your essay, it is a good idea to re-visit the thesis statement in your first paragraph, as it may need to be modified. Read your essay to see if it flows well. You might find that the supporting paragraphs are strong, but they don't address the exact focus of your thesis. Simply re-write your thesis sentence to fit your body and summary more exactly. By doing this, you will ensure that every sentence in your essay supports, proves, or reflects your thesis. **Aim for COHERENCE, CAUSALITY, LOGIC.**

Workshop Activity:

Please proofread/edit the following thesis statements on Margaret Atwood's 'Happy Endings' and Alice Munro's 'The Bear Came over the Mountain' and be prepared to discuss their strengths and weaknesses.

Sample essay question would be:

Discuss how irony functions in relation to plot and character development in any two of the set texts.

1. In both texts, Atwood and Munro use irony to reveal that relationships are anything but 'happy endings' and that love has a complex beginning, middle and end.
2. By examining the irony in the titles, the idea of happiness and the dark resolutions of the texts, I will argue that the use of irony in Margaret Atwood's 'Happy Endings' and Alice Munro's 'The Bear Came over the Mountain' allows readers to capture the nuances and the absurdity of relationships and expands narrative possibilities.
3. I will compare the two texts to show that many elements of Atwood's 'Happy Endings' occur in Munro's short story and show how ironic it is that so many stories of love follow the same themes of adultery and self-deception.