

## Close Reading Assignment

Genre: 1,200 word minimum, 1,400 word maximum close reading paper

Style: Please use MLA formatting (<http://guides.lib.unc.edu/citing-information/mla-sample>).

Grade: Your midterm paper is worth 20% of your final grade

Due: Your midterm paper is due before class (**before 6PM**) on **Tuesday, October 18<sup>th</sup>**. Please submit your paper via the **assignments** tab on our course Sakai page.

Texts: Your close reading may be drawn from *The Scarlet Letter*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Turn of the Screw*, or *The Sun Also Rises*

Description: This assignment asks you to sustain a close reading of a text for 1,200-1,400 words without consulting or bringing in outside sources. "Close reading" is a mode of attending to ("reading") a text that focuses on details and tries to understand the way these details produce meaning in the overall text. It requires that you notice, interpret, and use details that you might otherwise have passed over. Thus, "close" reading also means "slow" reading. It requires that you spend time with the text's language, rhythms, tones, structures, and other "forms" upon which meaning is built. These details can be single words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs (or even an image, a chapter title, a line break, a weird punctuation mark) that, when you read them, strike you as strange, interesting, out of place, beautiful—that is, worthy of your sustained attention.

### PROCESS

At first, it is not necessary to know what these details "mean" or what you want to say about them. Begin this exercise simply by identifying a passage with which you want to work.

Then begin building your analysis. You can do this part any which way. **But I suggest the following steps:**

- *Take the passage out of context and free associate on it.* What does this passage evoke for you? What do you think of when you hear those particular words? What *impression* does it make? You might find it helpful to write down these associations in "free writing" form.

- *Put the passage back in the context of the paragraph/section it came from.* See how it is working with the other language in the text. Is it different or similar from the surrounding language? Why and how? For example, you might notice that the word you're focusing on sounds hard or abrupt (or, perhaps, elegant and mellifluous) in the

context of the paragraph or line of poetry. Why might that be, and what is the effect of that abruptness?

- *Comb through the text to see if there are other words, passages, or moments that you would associate with that phrase.* Identify “like” moments or usages and compare and contrast them. For example, you might find that a different character uses the same word later in the text. What does that reuse signify? Why might the text have recycled that particular word? And how does it change when uttered by that other character?

- *Start to bring it all together* by considering the importance of your passage to the text’s overall project. Start to *make an argument* about how that passage makes meaning. Here, you’ll have to think about the text’s whole arc, its message, themes, and politics. How does the passage advance, complicate, impeded, foreshadow, stall, muddy, contradict, or contribute to that overall project?

## WRITING

Close reading is also a mode of writing. The writer strategically presents details that help her make an argument about the text’s overall meaning. She “shows” the reader these details and then shows her interpretation of them. That is, she demonstrates her “reading” of them. Close reading-in-writing oscillates between the presentation of textual evidence (quotations, paraphrases, etc.) and the writer’s interpretation of this evidence.

Since you only have 1,200- 1,400 words, you can’t waste any time. Dive right into your reading—no “throat clearing” or padding or statements of what you’re going to say later in the paper. Avoid “fluffy,” vague, or cutesy introductory statements. For example:

### **Pretty good:**

*In “The Island,” a chapter narrated by Lulu Nanapush in Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine, the speaker says, “I was not immune, and I would not leave undamaged” regarding her love affair with Moses Pillager (82). This statement introduces the reader to the idea that love is a type of war—a perpetual conflict that leaves all touched by it “damaged...”*

### **Not so good:**

*Throughout the ages, novelists and poets have described love as war. Indeed, the old adage that “love is war” still rings true, as any college-aged student will no doubt know . . .*

You don’t necessarily need a thesis statement at the end of your first paragraph—though that writing strategy may be one that you find useful. Nevertheless, a “thesis-like idea” should emerge by the end of the paper. That is, your analysis should build toward a point about the **overall text** that you’re trying to make. This point doesn’t have to be an earth-

shatteringly brilliant argument about something “big.” Rather, it suffices to say something clear and compelling about the relationship between your significant detail and the text in general. For example:

*Lulu’s description of the physical and psychological effects of love in her relationship with Moses ultimately offers the reader a way of understanding all types of love (e.g. familial, friendly, romantic, sexual, etc.) as we encounter them in Love Medicine. By equating “desire” and “poison,” “hurt” and love, and by blurring the line between active and passive roles in relationships, the novel suggests that love is not an easy state of being, but rather is more of a process akin to warfare (82).*