

What is Close Reading?

eng 2900 / spring 2026 / ohio university / chang



Close reading is a necessary skill that will be very useful to you no matter your interests, discipline, or job. Your classes, your work, your government, and even your pastimes will require you to read or evaluate something difficult, to find hand- and footholds in the material, and make sense of it. Basically, “close reading” simply means paying close attention to a text, analyzing a text very carefully – be it a photograph, a scholarly essay, an operation manual, a website, a tax form – and then drawing conclusions or making decisions based on your analysis. Depending on the class or your discipline, the kind of close reading you will be asked to do will vary. Different disciplines, different methodologies, even different contexts ask you to pay attention to different things. In this class, we will be primarily close reading written texts, analyzing writing and arguments, paying close attention to what is being said, how it is being said, and why it is being said. In general, for our purposes, there are three kinds or levels of close reading: literary close reading, rhetorical close reading, and critical close reading:

Literary Close Reading: The first level of close reading is the most basic, literal analysis of a text. Most of you are familiar with this kind of close reading, where you **identify** and **summarize** themes, symbols, figures of speech, patterns, language, and other rhetorical features. The claim for a literary close reading is usually superficial, general, descriptive, and local to just the words on the page.

Example: *The eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg in Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby represent the watchful of eyes of god looking over the wasteland of not only the valley of ashes between West Egg and New York City but the wasteland of the characters’ empty lives.*

Rhetorical Close Reading: The second level of close reading not only identifies the rhetorical features of a text but goes on to analyze and argue something about how the author or text uses those features for a certain purpose. In other words, a rhetorical close reading does more than describe what is in the text but **how** it is being used, **why** it is persuasive, and argues whether the text is rhetorically successful or not. You might encounter a specific kind of rhetorical close reading based on the three, classical rhetorical appeals: ethos, pathos, and logos. The claim for rhetorical close reading is more analytical and has bigger stakes than a literary close reading, but it still stays close to the argument of the passage.

Example: *Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby’s repetition of the language of seeing, watching, and being watched reveals a novel preoccupied with the sense of sight and a cinematic vision.*

Example: *Frederick Douglass’s language invokes a powerful pathos, the rhetorical appeal to the audience’s emotions, to evoke pity, frustration, and anger in his readers. Douglass’s emotional appeal is strongest when he writes about being treated like a “brute” as a slave and the anguish and liberation that learning how to read and write represents in his life.*

Critical Close Reading: The third level of close reading is the hardest to do and has the biggest stakes. This third level of close reading is built on top of a literary or rhetorical close reading. This kind of close reading connects what is being said and why it is being said to how and why it is important for a larger social or cultural **context**. This kind of close reading is necessarily **intertextual**, **complex**, and often requires careful framing, attention to terms, and analytical goal. In other words, the claim for a critical close reading links your analysis to the goals of the whole text, to contexts surrounding the text, and to some larger scholarly or political **stakes**.

Example: *Although the Harry Potter series describes Hogwarts and the wizarding world as “colorblind” and “genderblind,” the novels still perpetuate certain stereotypical and prejudicial logics, particularly of gender. Close reading and analysis of the novels allow for articulation of the “cultural assumptions and ideological tensions” (Anatol xv) in Harry Potter. Looking specifically at the characters of Hermione, Professor McGonagall, and Mrs. Weasley, the novels on the one hand try to present smart, independent, and capable women characters yet on the other hand still limit and caricaturize them and subordinate them to men.*

To sum:

Literary	Rhetorical	Critical
general descriptive literal at the level of plot, character, setting, symbol, metaphor, imagery often assumes "universal" truths, stable meanings, strict valuations observations that can be the basis of further analysis	analyzes argument, how a text makes meaning identifies rhetorical features analyses why those features are important, why they are persuasive often addresses rhetorical appeals: ethos, pathos, logos can connect literary observations to rhetorical analysis	requires complex claim intertextual supported by research, scholarship, other texts draws on literary and rhetorical observations and analyses connects details to larger social or cultural contexts answers the "so what?" of the observations/analyses