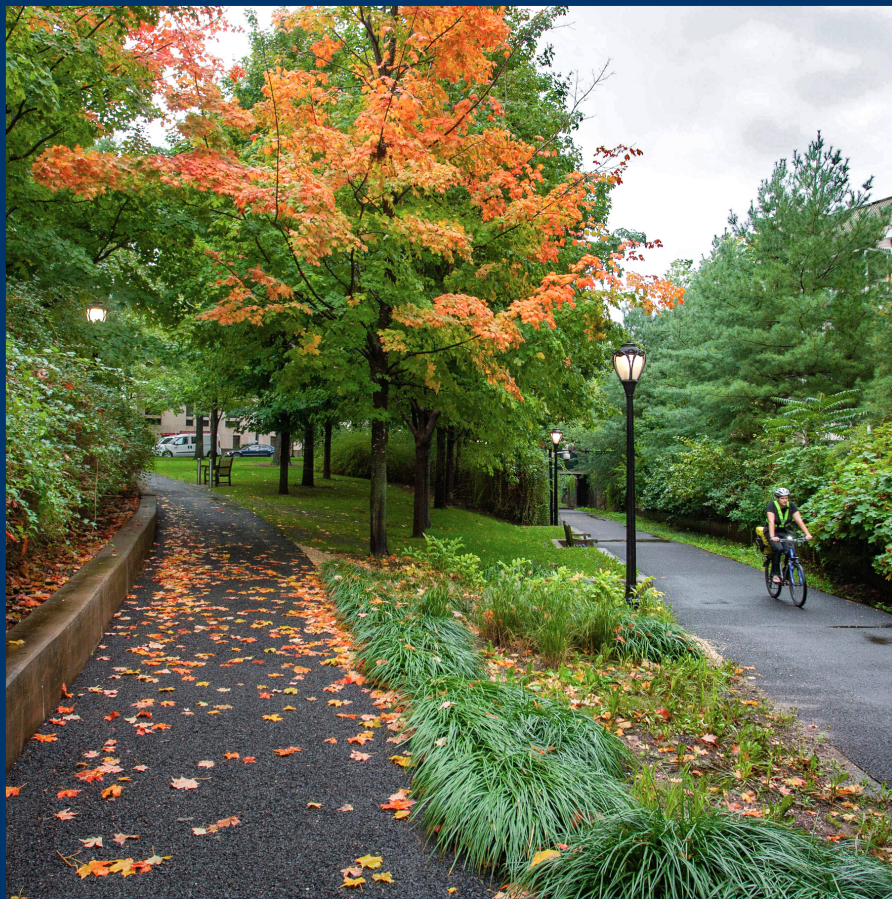


Yale Department of English



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English 114 Guide
created by Felisa Baynes-Ross

Close Reading for Argument

This guide outlines the steps involved in close reading, a strategy for analyzing academic arguments.



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design & layout: Sarah Harford and Felisa Baynes-Ross

What is close reading?

Close reading is a method for *gathering and analyzing information* in academic arguments. It is a practice grounded in sustained and focused observation. Good close readers pay attention to **specific details** within a text before drawing larger conclusions about **how a text works**. This means that close reading *precedes* the formulation of claims about the texts you read. It is *not* casual reading. To close read well, you must read actively. You will need to annotate the text. It is only by actively reading and thinking along with the writer, that you can move on to the other stages of the process where you make connections and begin to formulate claims about what you have observed.

As you will discover in your Writing Seminars, close reading is not limited to written texts, and in fact, to varying degrees, you already engage in this practice when you analyze your own interactions with others or discuss creative works such as songs, film, or art. What the writing seminars will teach you to do is to recognize, focus, and hone those skills for academic argumentation.

Outlined in this guide are three steps for close reading. The steps will help you to read purposefully and provide a basis to develop new methods of your own.



Read actively

In your reading, pay attention to introductory paragraphs and **underline the main claim(s)** the writer makes. Try to **summarize the claim(s)** in your own words. As you read the rest of the text, take note of passages that stand out to you. At this stage, you are collecting data: whatever you notice about the claims the writer makes; the evidence and reasons they use; the assumptions they make about their readers; the questions they seek to answer; stated or implied audience; their conversation partners; and the method of the argument. In addition to marking the places where you **examine the writer's reasoning**, you might take note of **keywords or concepts** that are central to the writer's argument and how those concepts are defined. If your reading contains both texts and images, you might observe the extent to which the two modes of meaning align or are in tension with each other.

You should be conscious of your own feelings towards the text. If you find aspects of the text puzzling, highlight those places and make a note to yourself about what makes that part of the argument either confusing or unsettling to you. You might also find moments where you are surprised by something the writer says or does. You might also feel frustrated or even disappointed that the writer does not address a specific question or idea related to their subject. Make note of these moments. They might seem frustrating at first, but they could hold interesting tensions, gaps, and ambiguities for you to explore.

Close reading precedes the formulation of claims about the texts you read. It is not casual reading.

Analyze

To develop a compelling argument, it is not enough simply to summarize or list in paragraphs what you have noticed. There is an important distinction between summary and analysis. You summarize to give an overview of the information you have collected, but analysis involves your **interpretation** and **explanation** of those details. Let us say for example, that you are interested in examining the writer's choice of evidence. You will consider the kind of evidence the writer offers; what reason (s) that bit of evidence supports; and how well that evidence bears out the writer's claim. Or, if you are interested in the writer's definition of a keyword, you will want to consider how that term is used throughout the essay, the places where the meaning seems to shift, and how that meaning speaks to the writer's claim. Think of analysis as dissecting the details you have gathered and making sense of them in relation to the author's claim(s).

*Though this guide highlights the distinction between reading and analysis, you can engage in those activities simultaneously. That is, as you read the essay and highlight passages that stand out to you, you might jot down your analyses in the margins. Of course, when you prepare to write the essay, you will want to review and deepen those initial analyses.



Synthesize

While analysis involves your interpretation of each piece of detail, synthesis requires that you **draw connections** between the different pieces of evidence that you have gathered. At this stage of the process, you are moving from **particulars to generalities**, conclusions that are firmly grounded in the textual evidence. When you synthesize, you are able to identify **patterns**, recurring themes, important links, or divergences among the different pieces of evidence you have gathered. Studying those patterns might lead you to conclude, for instance, that the writer's use of a *keyterm* is ambiguous and you can make a claim about exactly how that meaning is conflicted or how it evolves. The goal is not *only* to state that you have discovered that tension or ambiguity, but to make a claim about *what the writer does with it*. In other words, you are developing a claim about *how the text creates meaning*.

Writing involves making decisions, and you will need to carefully select the details you will use to support your claims. As a writer, you have control over the data you have collected, and it is up to you to **shape the details** in such a way to help readers see your perspective. This means that not everything you have noticed will make it into your essay. Like an editor who decides which writers to feature in an anthology or an artist who decides what details to include in their painting, you too must **choose** what details to foreground in your argument. Choose compelling details. Notice that the whole process of close reading calls for you to **re-examine your observations**, emphasizing the importance of good note-taking and re-reading.

