

HINTS FOR CLOSE READING

These are simply suggestions of ways that may help you look more closely at a passage, and are by no means exclusive. Each passage is different and, accordingly, different things will need to be emphasized.

I. Literal Reading: This is simply designed to make sure that you understand, on a literal level, what is going on in your passage. Try paraphrasing it. Here is an example:

Now Mother St. Justine will be waiting for you. I have sent a girl who has been with us for nearly a year. Her name is Louise—Louise de Plana. If you feel strange, she will explain everything.

(Wide Sargasso Sea)

In plain English, the nun tells Bertha that the mother superior is waiting for her, that a girl name Louise de Plana will greet Bertha, and if Bertha has any questions that Louise will know the answers. But there is a tension between what the passage means on a literal level, and what it says. Why repeat Louise twice? Why does the Nun say “if you feel strange” rather than “if you have any questions?” Literal reading is also important if you are analyzing dialogue between characters.

II. Grammatical Structure: This includes looking at things like: syntax, grammar, subordinate clauses, parallel structure, punctuation, length and structure of the sentence, ambiguous pronouns, word order and choice, the overabundance of nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. Here is an example:

With the Gardiners, they were always on the most intimate terms. Darcy, as well as Elizabeth, really loved them; and they were both sensible of the warmest gratitude towards the persons who, by bringing her into Darbyshire, had been the means of uniting them.

(Pride and Prejudice)

- Normal sentence order, (subject-verb-object) is being changed—the Gardiners are placed at the beginning of the sentence, and in the second sentence the verb is placed at the end of “uniting them.”
- Subordinate clauses—“as well as Elizabeth,” “by bringing her into Darbyshire.” Both clauses refer to Elizabeth, but the first serves to put Darcy into a subordinate position—i.e., besides Elizabeth, Darcy felt this way as well.
- Word order—first the Gardiners, then Darcy, then Elizabeth, etc.

III. Figures of Speech: This category would include: metaphors, similes, personification, ellipsis, alliteration, chiasmus, zeugma, etc. Here is an example:

You are my sympathy—my better self—my good angel. I am bound to you with a strong attachment. I think you good, gifted and lovely: A fervent, a solemn passion conceived in my heart, draws you to my center and spring of life, wraps my existence around you...

(Jane Eyre)

- Begins with a metaphor—“you are my sympathy”—and then gives several alternative metaphors, “My better self” and “my good angel.” This suggests either that the three are equal, or that Rochester is being indecisive.

- Parallel construction of the first and third sentences: the three terms of the metaphor and then “good, gifted and lovely” suggests that these may perhaps be terms of the first metaphor.
- Extended figure of speech in the third sentence—solemn passion is personified, it can draw Jane towards it. “Existence” is likened to a cloak which the personified “passion” can “wrap” around Jane.

IV. Images and Themes: Some words can have more than one meaning (it’s good to look them up in the dictionary, especially the *OED*). Also, words within the passage can invoke previous scenes, images, or ideas—ones that the novel has already presented. Here is an example:

There was a terrible cutting truth in Tom’s words—that hard rind of truth which is discerned by unimaginative minds. Maggie always writhed under this judgment of Tom’s: she rebelled and was humiliated at the same time...

(Mill on the Floss)

- There is more than one kind of truth presented in the passage—regular truth and “terrible truth”—and an argument could be made that these two kinds of truth are also presented in the novel as a whole.
- “Cutting”—related to Tom’s threatening Maggie with the scimitar—also Maggie cutting her hair when she has been criticized. Tom’s “cutting” remarks characteristic of his relationship with Maggie.
- “Judgment”—relates to the sense of justice and judgment that the novel presents.
- “Writhing”—Tom making animals “writhe”—the work suggests pain, degradation, and punishment.

V. Context: When you are analyzing a passage you are taking it out of context. Make sure that you put it back into context! Remember that you experience a novel cumulatively, and that your feelings and impressions of characters, themes, etc. change. For example, if you’re looking at the passage where Jane Eyre rebels against John Reed, you need to consider that this is early on in the novel and that other aspects of her character are developed as the novel progresses. This does not mean that you would have to discuss all other aspects of Jane’s character, but you should acknowledge the limitations of doing a close reading of a single passage.

VI. Putting It All Together: After you have looked at literal meaning, grammatical structure, figures of speech, themes and images, and context, you need to decide what all these say about your passage. Sometimes there won’t be any clear distinctions—that is to say, the use of metaphor in a sentence might be dependent upon the sentence’s syntax, for example. Some arguments that could be made from the examples given here are:

- In this passage from *Wide Sargasso Sea* we see the nun treating Bertha as if she has some mental deficiency. She repeats Louis’s name twice, as if Bertha has difficulty understanding her, and she seems to assume that Bertha might feel “strange.”
- Rochester’s choice of words in this passage from *Jane Eyre* suggest either that he cannot find specific words to express his feelings, or that he sees a similarity between terms “sympathy,” “my better self,” and “my good angel.”

STEPS FOR CLOSE READING or, *Explication de texte*

An *explication de texte* (cf. Latin *explicare*, to unfold, to fold out, or to make clear the meaning of) is a finely detailed, very specific examination of a short poem or short selected passage from a longer work, in order to find the focus or design of the work, either in its entirety in the case of the shorter poem or, in the case of the selected passage, **the meaning of the microcosm, containing or signaling the meaning of the macrocosm** (the longer work of which it is a part). To this end, “close” reading calls attention to all dynamic tensions, polarities, or problems in the imagery, style, literal content, diction, etc. By examining and thinking about opening up the way the poem or work is perceived, writers establish a central pattern, a design that orders the narrative and that will, in turn, order the organization of any essay about the work.

Close Reading or *Explication de texte* operates on the premise that literature, as artifice, will be more fully understood and appreciated to the extent that the nature and interrelations of its parts are perceived, and that that understanding will take the form of insight into the thematic and stylistic *commitments* of the work under examination. This kind of work must be done before you can begin to appropriate any theoretical or specific literary approach.

So, follow these steps *before* you begin writing. These are pre-writing steps, procedures to follow, questions to consider before you commence actual writing. Remember that the knowledge you gain from completing each of the steps is cumulative. There may be some information that overlaps, but do not take shortcuts. In selecting one passage from a short story, poem, or novel, limit your selection to a short paragraph (4-5 sentences), but certainly no more than one paragraph. When one passage, scene, or chapter of a larger work is the subject for explication, that explication will show how its focused-upon subject serves as a **macrocosm** of the entire work—a means of finding in a small sample **patterns** that fit the whole work.

If you follow these 12 steps to literary awareness, you will find a new and exciting world! Do not be concerned if you do not have all the answers to the questions. Keep asking questions, and keep your intellectual eyes open to new possibilities.

1. **Figurative Language.** Examine the passage carefully for similes, images, metaphors, and symbols. Identify any and all. List implications and suggested meanings as well as denotations. What visual insights does each word give? Look for multiple meanings and overlapping meanings. Look for repetitions, for oppositions. Check out the etymology of each word, because you may find that the word you think you are familiar with is actually dependent upon a metaphoric concept. Consider how each word or group of words suggests a pattern and/or points to an abstraction (e.g., time, space, love, soul, death). Can you visualize the metaphoric world? Are there spatial dimensions to the language?
2. **Diction.** This section is closely connected with the section above. Diction—or word choice—provides the **crux** of the *explication*. Mark all verbs in the passage, mark or list all nouns, all adjectives, all adverbs etc. At this point it is advisable that you type out the passage on a separate sheet to differentiate each grammatical type. Examine each grouping. Look up as many words as you can in a good dictionary, *even if you think that you know the meaning of the word*. The dictionary will illuminate new connotations and new denotations of a word. Look at **all** the meanings of the key words. Look up the etymology of the words. How have they changed? The words will begin to take on multiple meanings. Be careful to return to and check in on the text, in

order to keep meaning contextually sound. *Do not assume you know the depth or complexity of meaning at first glance.* Rely on the dictionary, particularly the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Can you establish a word web of contrastive and parallel words? Do dictionary meanings establish any new dynamic associations with other words? What is the etymology of these words? Develop and question the metaphoric, spatial sense of the words. Can you see what the metaphoric words are suggesting?

3. **Literal content:** this should be done as succinctly as possible. Briefly describe the skeletal contents of the passage in one or two sentences. Answer the journalist's questions (Who? What? When? Where? Why?) in order to establish characters, plot, and setting as it relates to this passage. What is the context of this passage?
4. **Structure.** Divide the passage into the more obvious sections (stages of argument, discussion, or action). What is the interrelation of these units? How do they develop? Again, what can you postulate regarding a controlling design for the work at this point? If the work is a poem, identify the poetic structure and note the variations within that structure. What is free verse? Is this free verse or blank verse? What is the significance of such a form? Does the form contribute to the meaning?
5. **Style.** Look for any significant aspects of style—parallel constructions, antithesis, etc. Look for patterns, polarities, and problems. Examine clause structures. And reexamine all postulates, adding any new ones that occur to you. Look for alliteration, internal rhymes and other poetic devices that are often used in prose as well as in poetry. Caesura? Enjambment? Anaphora? What kinds of meanings are connected to these techniques?
6. **Characterization.** What insight does this passage give us into specific characters as they develop through the work? Is there a persona in this passage? Are there any allusions to other literary characters? Look to other literary works that might suggest a perspective. Look for a pattern of metaphoric language to give added insight into the motives and feelings that are not verbalized. You should now be firming up a few of the most important encompassing postulates for the governing design of the work, and for some of its overriding themes or conflicts.
7. **Tone.** What is the tone of the passage? How does it elucidate the entire passage? Is the tone ironic? Sentimental? Serious? Humorous? Pedagogical?
8. **Assessment.** This step is not to suggest a reduction; rather, a "close reading" or *explication* should enable you to problematize and expand your understanding of the text. Ask what insight the passage gives into the work as a whole. How does it relate to themes, ideas, or larger actions in other parts of the work? Make sure that your hypothesis regarding the theme(s) of the work is contextually sound.
9. **Context:** If your text is part of a larger whole, make reference to its position in the whole; if it is a short work, say, a poem, refer it to other works in its author's canon, perhaps chronologically, but also thematically. Do this expeditiously.
10. **Texture:** This term refers to all those features of a work of literature which contribute to its meaning or signification, as distinguished from that signification itself: its *structure*, including features of grammar, syntax, diction, rhythm, and (for poems, and to some extent) prosody; its *imagery*, that is, all language which appeals to the senses; and its *figuration*, better known as

similes, metaphors, and other verbal motifs.

11. **Theme:** A theme is not to be confused with thesis; the *themes* of a work of literature are its broadest, most pervasive concern, and it is contained in a complex combination of elements. In contrast to a thesis, which is usually expressed in a single, argumentative, declarative sentence and is characteristic of expository or analytical prose rather than creative literature, a theme is *not* a statement; rather, it often is expressed in a single word or a phrase, such as “love,” “illusion versus reality,” or “the tyranny of circumstance.” Generally, the theme of a work is never “right” or “wrong.” There can be as many themes as there are readers, for the concept of theme refers to the emotion and insight that results from the experience of reading a work of literature. As with many things, however, such an experience can be profound or trivial, coherent or giddy, and discussions of a work and its theme can be correspondingly worthwhile and convincing, or not. Everything depends on how well you present and support your ideas. Everything you say about the theme must be supported by the brief quotations from the text. Your argument and proof must be *convincing*. And that, finally, is what explication is about: **marshaling the elements of a work of literature in such a way as to be convincing**. Your approach must adhere to the elements of ideas, concepts, and language inherent in the work itself. Remember to avoid phrases and thinking which are expressed in the statement, “what I got out of it was. . . .”
12. **Thesis:** An explication should most definitely have a thesis statement. Do not try to write your thesis until you have finished all 12 steps. The thesis should take the form of an assertion about the meaning and function of the text that is your subject. It must be something that you can argue for and prove in your essay.

Conclusion. Now you are ready to begin your actual writing. If you find that what you thought about the work at Step 1 isn’t as compelling at Step 12, try retracing your steps with an open mind. This is a trial-and-error exercise. You learn by doing. **Remember: the *explication de texte* should be a means to see the complexities and ambiguities in a given work of literature—it is not for finding solutions.**