

Close Reading With Open Eyes

Learning to read a text closely and carefully is a practical skill that serves students in any discipline—and introductory literature is no exception. Every semester of my English 1302 course begins with an introduction to tragedy and the ancient Greeks, particularly with Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. The ancient Greeks were inquisitive and busybody enablers who pondered everything under the Mediterranean sun. For them, everything was purposeful with individual meaning.

With a focus on meaning, I begin the course by having students think about two words: “knowledge” and “wisdom.” These words do not have the same meaning, just as “listening” and “hearing” do not describe the same activity. *Words have specific functions.*

Since my course prepares students for academic writing for an academic audience, I encourage students to avoid using the first person in their writing, especially the ubiquitous “I feel” phrase commonly used by college freshman. Paying attention to meaning again, “I feel” is subjective, while “I think” is more rational. After looking at the specific functions of words and their individual meaning, we delve into the heart of the course using close reading.

Close Reading and Strategies

Close reading had its genesis with British critic and poet I.A. Richards, whose ideas influenced the New Criticism literary movement and the French academy's development of “explication de texte.” One of the issues in academic writing, particularly in critical analysis, is understanding the meaning of “close reading.” Literary analysis and close reading require a development of meaning and interpretation of a text by the reader. Think of close reading as analogous to peeling an onion. A text has layers upon layers of meaning, which requires stamina, a sharp eye, and razor-sharp coordination as you unfold them. The use of reasoning skills empowers the reader to decipher the text to its rudimentary core. For practitioners of any field, close reading is essential for deeper understanding.

Focus on Hidden Meaning and Root Words

When using close reading, I give students a clear, legitimate task or purpose. The prologue to *Oedipus* is a good start for my English course because it allows students to read an interesting section and connect it to prior learning. It is important here for students to know the different levels of irony imbedded in this Sophoclean

drama (i.e., dramatic irony, verbal irony, situational irony, cosmic irony, etc.). For example, students may see the relationship between Oedipus' use of the phrases “I know” and “I see” as possible links to the use of irony.

Next, we relate common props used by the ancient Greeks to establish meaning and order. As such, root words become our inquisitive norm. For instance, the Greek word for “mask” is “persona.” The root of our English word “personality” is derived from “persona,” a term used to represent the overall profile of characteristics that capture the unique nature of a person as he or she reacts and interacts with others. Observing Oedipus as he interacts with other characters provides readers with a glimpse to his psychological traits, which underlie his enduring style of thinking, feeling, and acting. By examining the persona of Oedipus, students can determine whether he is an extrovert or introvert—and, thus, analysis is afoot (no pun intended, since Oedipus means “swollen foot”). As we continue to analyze the play, students begin to learn several Greek root words and see a historical correlation between word origins and their purposeful meanings.

Understanding Through Problem Solving

Students continue to read the play and I provide background information. The story of Oedipus, which is partly about destiny and partly about free will, takes place in the Greek city of Thebes. One of the play's most memorable scenes is when Oedipus encounters the Sphinx and answers its riddle. This scene is paramount to understanding how logic and rationality played a part in the ancient Greek world.

The Sphinx, a creature with the head of woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle, terrorizes the Thebans by asking a riddle; she devours those who fail to answer the riddle. However, if a Theban solves the riddle, the Sphinx will plunge from a high cliff to her death. With that background information, I then give students the famous riddle: *What creature crawls on four legs in the morning, walks on two legs at noon, but hobbles on three legs in the evening?*

We break up into groups and students spend time pondering and discussing the riddle. Before long, a hand goes up to give the answer: man.

The idea of solving riddles is one of the great strategies employed by the ancient Greek pedagogues. If we have time in class, I give students another riddle for fun: *I can run but never walk/I have a mouth but never talk/I have a bed but never sleep/I have a head but never weep/who am I?* Soon a group answers: a river.

Close Reading Strategy Guide

- **Model higher-order reading and thinking:** Read aloud a portion of the text and model a development of thinking about the selection. Try to show students how to stay focused on purposeful reading, how to appreciate craft, how to grapple with unfamiliar vocabulary, and lastly, how to annotate. Annotating lets students write their own interpretation of the section/quotation and indicate what phrases stand out to them as important, thereby allowing opportunities for further inquiry.
- **Partner practice:** After modeling reading the selected quotation, let students try a paragraph or two. Instead of having them read independently, have students read aloud in pairs, annotating as they go. This forces them to stop and think as they read. The partnering process also allows students to evaluate how their peers reached a certain conclusion.
- **Check for understanding:** While students are working, walk around and monitor their work. Are they creating useful annotations? Are they slowing down enough to record their thinking and respond to the text?
- **Independent practice:** Finally, students are cut loose. Try to have them do this at least twice every week.
- **Analytical inquiry:** The process of annotation, partnering, questioning, and revising allows students to probe their ideas and provide rational scaffolding for their theses.

Writing the Analytical Paper

After students have read the entire text and finished an objective examination, they are ready to partake in a literary analysis essay. They have engaged in close reading and put their ideas to work as a class and in pairs. Now, have them individually select three quotations and develop a working thesis around their selected quotes. Within a week, students share their selected quotes with one another and engage in a thoughtful analysis about why these quotes are foundational for their thesis. Like the ancient Greek pedagogues, I compare their thesis to the construction of a house, and the students are the builders. The topic paragraphs are supporting beams that hold up the roof; however, if their foundation is weak, the slab cracks, the beams buckle, and the roof collapses.

Close Reading in Multi-Disciplinary Courses

Oedipus the King is rich in nuance and layered with metaphors where irony reigns supreme. Before long, the use of close reading may be applied to other genres in any introductory literary course and in other disciplines.

Close reading is foundational for any course or discipline because it enables students to go directly to the core of meaning. It also helps students understand that the relationship between words, sentences, and paragraphs are the building blocks of written language. Extracting meaning from complex texts may be interpreted as direct or indirect, layered with connotation within content and context. Students in any discipline can benefit from close reading strategies because it enables them to read critically and creatively. As Socrates says, "The unexamined life is not worth living."

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