

## **A Beginner's Guide to Close Reading**

English papers are most frequently argumentative essays in which the author applies literary criticism to a text in order to take a stand on some point of contention. In order to properly analyze a text, students must familiarize themselves with a skill known as **close reading**. To "read closely" means to foster an advanced understanding and interpretation of a literary passage that is focused primarily on the words themselves.

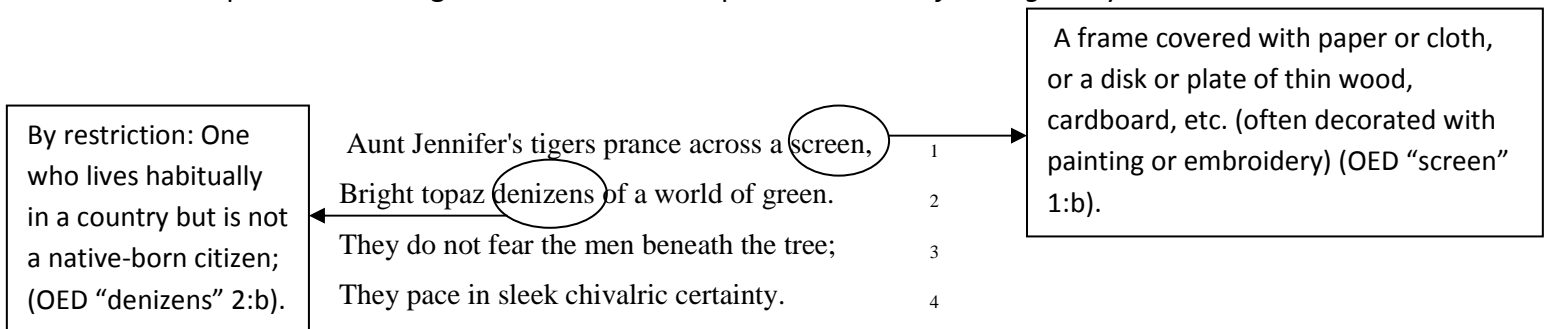
### **Things to Look for in Close Reading**

Close reading looks at details within the text in order to identify larger, overarching themes. Some things to look for are:

- **Word Choice** – Most authors have very specific intentions in deciding to use one word over another. It is important to look up the definitions of any strange or unfamiliar words in order to understand their significance. A useful tool when looking up definitions is the Oxford English Dictionary Online ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)).
- **Structure** – Pay careful attention to the structure of the passage. Notice any abrupt changes, which the author could be using to signify important moments within the text.
- **Imagery** – Specific descriptions can offer important insight into a passage, whether it is of characters, objects, or a landscape. Many authors use imagery patterns to emphasize crucial details.
- **Syntax** – Just as word usage is important, so is the systematic way in which the words are arranged. Authors might try to make subtle points by the way in which he or she constructs their sentences.
- **Literary Devices** – These can range anywhere from metaphors to allusions to irony. Take careful note, because they can highlight important themes and recurring motifs.
- **Context** – Pay attention to how the passage or individual sentences within it work in conjunction with the surrounding text. Often times context can alter the meaning of the passage.
- **Tone** – It is important to recognize a writer's tone because it can often be used to convey emotion that may not become evident after a superficial reading.
- **Strange or Surprising Statements** – It may seem obvious, but any piece of information that seems striking or out of the ordinary was likely written that way for a reason. If something does not seem to line up, do your best to piece together why this might be.
- **Rhythm (mostly in poetry)** – Sometimes even the sound of lines or phrases can hold significance. Make a point to read your passage out loud at least once.

## Sample Close Reading

A sample close reading of a stanza from the poem *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* by Adrienne Rich:



Observations:

- The verses are in couplets, or sets of two lines that rhyme and have similar meter.
- Lines are short and sharp, giving the poem an almost abrasive tone.
- Screens are used when embroidering, an act often considered feminine. Yet Aunt Jennifer is embroidering tigers, which might suggest an act of rebellion against the domestic activities associated with her gender.
- Potential symbolism is found Rich's choice to have Aunt Jennifer embroider tigers. Their sleek beauty and gracefulness can be viewed as feminine, and felines in general are often associated with women. For instance, the OED asserts that the word "kitten" can apply to young girls who have a playful nature (OED "kitten" 1:c).
- The word "denizen" seems to be in reference to the tigers. The animals can then be seen as foreigners in this domestic realm of embroidery. The image becomes representative of Aunt Jennifer's situation. The powerful female, the tiger, is captured from her natural environment and forced into a constrictive setting. Similarly, Aunt Jennifer was "taken" from the natural freedom she was born into and placed in a role that is in concordance with her gender.
- Line 3 compliments this reading, as the "men beneath the tree" can be seen as animal poachers who trapped the tigers and forced them into this setting. Aunt Jennifer's captors may be individuals like her husband or father, or mankind in general.

## Writing the Paper

After close reading a number of passages, the next step is tying together the discoveries you have made. Hopefully the passages will reveal some similar themes, and can thus help you formulate a thesis. A sample thesis drawn from the above close reading is: While Aunt Jennifer is trapped in her role as "woman," the tigers in her embroidery represent her longing for independence.

Good Luck!