

How to Do a Close Reading

The process of writing an essay usually begins with the close reading of a text. Of course, the writer's personal experience may occasionally come into the essay, and all essays depend on the writer's own observations and knowledge. But most essays, especially academic essays, begin with a close reading of some kind of text—a painting, a movie, an event—and usually with that of a *written* text. When you close read, you observe facts and details about the text. You may focus on a particular passage, or on the text as a whole. Your aim may be to notice all striking features of the text, including rhetorical features, structural elements, cultural references; or, your aim may be to notice only *selected* features of the text—for instance, oppositions and correspondences, or particular historical references. Either way, making these observations constitutes the first step in the process of close reading.

The second step is interpreting your observations. What we're basically talking about here is inductive reasoning: moving from the observation of particular facts and details to a conclusion, or interpretation, based on those observations. And, as with inductive reasoning, close reading requires careful gathering of data (your observations) and careful thinking about what these data add up to.

How to Begin:

1. Read with a pencil in hand, and annotate the text.

"Annotating" means underlining or highlighting key words and phrases—anything that strikes you as surprising or significant, or that raises questions—as well as making notes in the margins. When we respond to a text in this way, we not only force ourselves to pay close attention, but we also begin to think with the author about the evidence—the first step in moving from reader to writer.

Here's a sample passage by anthropologist and naturalist Loren Eiseley. It's from his essay called "The Hidden Teacher."

. . . I once received an unexpected lesson from a spider. It happened far away on a rainy morning in the West. I had come up a long gulch looking for fossils, and there, just at eye level, lurked a huge yellow-and-black orb spider, whose web was moored to the tall spears of buffalo grass at the edge of the arroyo. It was her universe, and her senses did not extend beyond the lines and spokes of the great wheel she inhabited. Her extended claws could feel every vibration throughout that delicate structure. She knew the tug of wind, the fall of a raindrop, the flutter of a trapped moth's wing. Down one spoke of the web ran a stout ribbon of gossamer on which she could hurry out to investigate her prey.

Curious, I took a pencil from my pocket and touched a strand of the web.

Immediately there was a response. The web, plucked by its menacing occupant, began to vibrate until it was a blur. Anything that had brushed claw or wing against that amazing snare would be thoroughly entrapped. As the vibrations slowed, I could see the owner fingering her guidelines for signs of struggle. A pencil point was an intrusion into this universe for which no precedent existed. Spider was circumscribed by spider ideas; its universe was spider universe. All outside was irrational, extraneous, at best raw material for spider. As I proceeded on my way along the gully, like a vast impossible shadow, I realized that in the world of spider I did not exist.

2. Look for patterns in the things you've noticed about the text—repetitions, contradictions, similarities.

What do we notice in the previous passage? First, Eiseley tells us that the orb spider taught him a lesson, thus inviting us to consider what that lesson might be. But we'll let that larger question go for now and focus on particulars—we're working inductively. In Eiseley's next sentence, we find that this encounter "happened far away on a rainy morning in the West." This opening locates us in another time, another place, and has echoes of the traditional fairy tale opening: "Once upon a time . . .". What does this mean? Why would Eiseley want to remind us of tales and myth? We don't know yet, but it's curious. We make a note of it.

Details of language convince us of our location "in the West"—*gulch*, *arroyo*, and *buffalo grass*. Beyond that, though, Eiseley calls the spider's web "her universe" and "the great wheel she inhabited," as in the great wheel of the heavens, the galaxies. By metaphor, then, the web becomes the universe, "spider universe." And the spider, "she," whose "senses did not extend beyond" her universe, knows "the flutter of a trapped moth's wing" and hurries "to investigate her prey." Eiseley says he could see her "fingering her guidelines for signs of struggle." These details of language, and others, characterize the "owner" of the web as thinking, feeling, striving—a creature much like ourselves. But so what?

3. Ask questions about the patterns you've noticed—especially how and why.

To answer some of our own questions, we have to look back at the text and see what else is going on. For instance, when Eiseley touches the web with his pencil point—an event "for which no precedent existed"—the spider, naturally, can make no sense of the pencil phenomenon: "Spider was circumscribed by spider ideas." Of course, spiders don't have ideas, but we do. And if we start seeing this passage in human terms, seeing the spider's situation in "her universe" as analogous to our situation in our universe (which we think of as *the* universe), then we may decide that Eiseley is suggesting that our universe (*the* universe) is also finite, that *our* ideas are circumscribed, and that beyond the limits of our universe there might be phenomena as fully beyond our ken as Eiseley himself—that "vast impossible shadow"—was beyond the understanding of the spider.

But why vast and impossible, why a shadow? Does Eiseley mean God, extra-terrestrials? Or something else, something we cannot name or even imagine? Is this the lesson? Now we see that the sense of tale telling or myth at the start of the passage, plus this reference to something vast and unseen, weighs against a simple E.T. sort of interpretation. And though the spider can't explain, or even apprehend, Eiseley's pencil point, that pencil point *is* explainable—rational after all. So maybe not God. We need more evidence, so we go back to the text—the whole essay now, not just this one passage—and look for additional clues. And as we proceed in this way, paying close attention to the evidence, asking questions, formulating interpretations, we engage in a process that is central to essay writing and to the whole academic enterprise: in other words, we reason toward our own ideas.

References

Kain, P. (1998). How to do a close reading. Retrieved on July 21, 2009 from the Writing Center at Harvard University at <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CloseReading.html>.