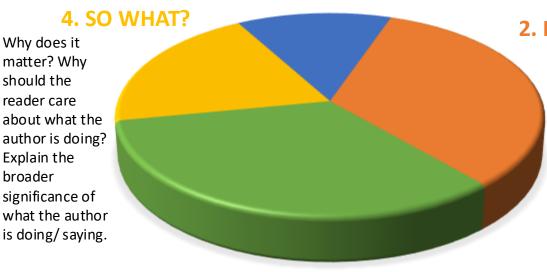## What is a Close Reading?

A close reading is a very **careful, in-depth analysis** of a text. Alternatively, close reading is often called "close textual analysis". Close reading often requires us to probe a text **line by line**, and to examine how a text "works" in terms of its composition. Close reading requires thinking about the **stylistic choices** the author made in the creation of the text, i.e. How do those choices interact with the content of the text? What is the relationship between the subject matter and the way that subject matter is being presented to us? What do those choices achieve in terms of effect? Why did the author make those choices?

How to Conduct a Close Reading

1. WHAT?
What is the author doing/ saying? Identify an observable pattern or trend.

4. SO WHAT?
Why does it matter? Why should the reader care about what the author is doing? Explain the broader significance of what the author is doing/ saying.

2. HOW?
How is the author doing/ saying it? How do you know? Provide evidence to prove, to map, and to explain the stylistic choices and literary techniques.

3. WHY?
Why is the author doing/ saying this in the specific way you've shown? What does the author achieve by doing so? Interpret the meaning/ subtext of the literary techniques being used.

Checklist for Close Reading
1. **WHAT**: Make an observation about the text.
2. **HOW**: Prove, map, and explain your observation with evidence from the text.
3. **WHY**: Interpret the meaning/subtext of your observation.
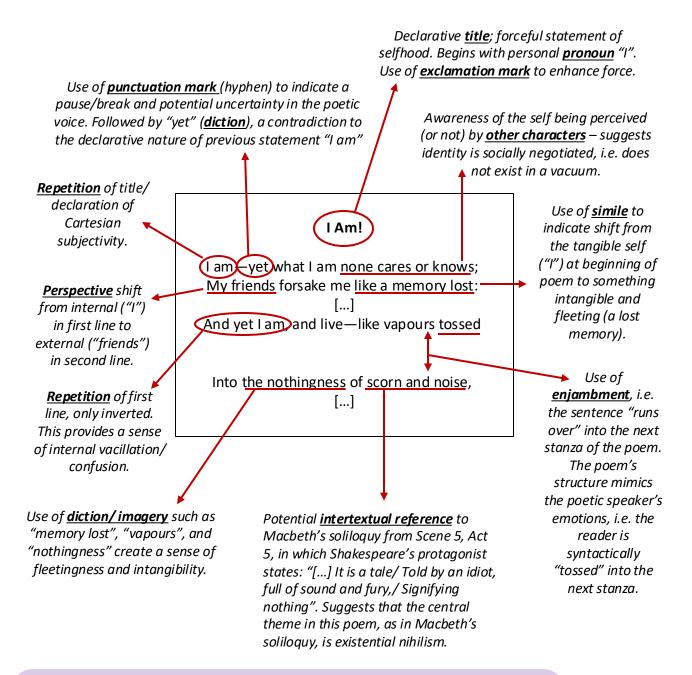4. **SO WHAT**: Explain the importance of your observation.

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Literary Toolkit: What to Discuss in a Close Reading of a Literary Text

WHAT?	**Make an observation about the text.** CONTENT: ✓ Plot (what happens/ unfolds and how it happens/ unfolds). ✓ Imagery (the visuals, i.e. descriptive accounts that appeal to the senses and create mental pictures). ✓ The *mise-en-scène* (the arrangement of all visual elements within a frame/scene of a play or film specifically, e.g. setting, lighting, costume, and actor positioning). ✓ Thematics (the underlying topics, ideas, concepts, ideologies, or messages). ✓ Metaphor (a figure of speech or image that directly describes one thing as being another to suggest a likeness or symbolic meaning between the). ✓ Symbolism (the use of an object, character, or action to represent a deeper meaning or abstract idea beyond its literal sense). ✓ Allegory (when characters, events, and settings symbolically represent abstract concepts or ideas to conveying a deeper/alternative meaning beneath the surface). ✓ Tropes (when a theme, motif, or literary device is recurring in order to convey familiar ideas or conventions in a recognisable way). ✓ Motifs (when elements, such as an image, phrase, action, or idea, is recurring in order to reinforce or develop a theme). ✓ Characterisation (how an author reveals a character's personality, traits, and development through their actions, dialogue, thoughts, appearance, and interactions with others). ✓ Setting (the time, place, and environment in which a story takes place, shaping the atmosphere and influencing characters and events). ✓ Dialogue (the spoken conversations of characters). FORM: ✓ Syntax (how the author *arranges*, orders, or deploys words, phrases, and clauses in a sentence). ✓ Diction (the *kinds* of words/ phrases the author uses, their literal and figurative connotations, their relevance to cultural contexts/ parlance). ✓ Textual/ linguistic techniques (sentence length, punctuation marks, grammar, visual layout, capitalisations, italics, etc.). ✓ The form, structure, and pacing/rhythm (how the text has been put together, how it moves from one moment to the next, and how information is being presented to us overall). ✓ Narrator, perspective, register, tone, and mood (the nature of the voice or voices that are presenting the story/information to us).
HOW?	**Prove, map, and explain your observation with evidence from the text.** ✓ How is the author using the featured you have identified? What is it 'doing', or what is being done to/with it? ✓ Does a pattern emerge? Is the author always using this feature in the same way, or does their treatment of it change at any point? ✓ What other stylistic choices is the author making in conjunction with this feature in terms of: plotting, diction, syntax, sentence, length, punctuation, grammar, visual layout, imagery, themes, metaphors, symbols, allegory, tropes, structure, narrator? ✓ Where appropriate/required, you can use theory and secondary material to support your interpretation.
WHY?	**Interpret the meaning/ subtext of your observation.** ✓ Why is the author doing this? To what end or purpose is the author/text deploying the feature in this particular way? When the author uses the feature in the way you have described and explained through evidence (in the **HOW?** section), what is being *accomplished*? What meaning or message is being conveyed? What is the feature's overall purpose in this section of the text, or in the text overall? ✓ Where appropriate/required, you can use theory and secondary material to support your interpretation.
SO WHAT?	**Explain the importance of your observation.** ✓ What is the broader significance of what the author is doing/ saying? ✓ Why does it matter beyond the scope of the text? ✓ Why should the reader care? ✓ What impact does this text have/ how does it reflect on society, culture, literature, philosophical ideas, research, policy, art, public consciousness, medicine, etc.?

Breaking the Text Down: Sample Lines of a Poem
John Clare, "I Am!" (1848)

*Declarative **title**; forceful statement of selfhood. Begins with personal **pronoun** "I". Use of **exclamation mark** to enhance force.*

*Use of **punctuation mark** (hyphen) to indicate a pause/break and potential uncertainty in the poetic voice. Followed by "yet" (**diction**), a contradiction to the declarative nature of previous statement "I am"*

*Awareness of the self being perceived (or not) by **other characters** – suggests identity is socially negotiated, i.e. does not exist in a vacuum.*

*ived**Repetition** of title/ declaration of Cartesian subjectivity.*

*Use of **simile** to indicate shift from the tangible self ("I") at beginning of poem to something intangible and fleeting (a lost memory).*

***Perspective** shift from internal ("I") in first line to external ("friends") in second line.*

***Repetition** of first line, only inverted. This provides a sense of internal vacillation/ confusion.*

> **I Am!**
>
> I am—yet what I am none cares or knows;
> My friends forsake me like a memory lost:
> […]
> And yet I am, and live—like vapours tossed
>
> Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
> […]

*Use of **enjambment**, i.e. the sentence "runs over" into the next stanza of the poem. The poem's structure mimics the poetic speaker's emotions, i.e. the reader is syntactically "tossed" into the next stanza.*

*Use of **diction/ imagery** such as "memory lost", "vapours", and "nothingness" create a sense of fleetingness and intangibility.*

*Potential **intertextual reference** to Macbeth's soliloquy from Scene 5, Act 5, in which Shakespeare's protagonist states: "[…] It is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing". Suggests that the central theme in this poem, as in Macbeth's soliloquy, is existential nihilism.*

Read the observations above. We have identified **WHAT** Clare is doing and **HOW** he is doing it. In some instances, we have begun to address **WHY** Clare is making these choices/ what is being achieved. In a close reading, we would now be required to:

1. Write out the **WHAT**, **HOW**, and **WHY** (noted above) into full, coherent sentences.
2. Explain the **SO WHAT**, i.e. broader significance of Clare's choices.
3. Where appropriate/required, use theory/secondary material to support our ideas.

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Writing the Close Reading: Example

Below is a short excerpt from Horace Walpole's 1764 novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, followed by a table that gives a breakdown of the close reading. The student has analysed the excerpt by using **WHAT**, **HOW**, **WHY**, and **SO WHAT**. Altogether, the close reading could be used as a full paragraph in an essay.

> Young Conrad's birthday was fixed for his espousals. The company was assembled in the chapel of the Castle, and everything ready for beginning the divine office, when Conrad himself was missing. Manfred, impatient of the least delay, and who had not observed his son retire, despatched one of his attendants to summon the young Prince. The servant, who had not stayed long enough to have crossed the court to Conrad's apartment, came running back breathless, in a frantic manner, his eyes staring, and foaming at the mouth. He said nothing, but pointed to the court. The company were struck with terror and amazement. The Princess Hippolita, without knowing what was the matter, but anxious for her son, swooned away. Manfred, less apprehensive than enraged at the procrastination of the nuptials, and at the folly of his domestic, asked imperiously what was the matter? The fellow made no answer, but continued pointing towards the courtyard; and at last, after repeated questions put to him, cried out, "Oh! the helmet! the helmet!" [...] The domestics, without observing the singularity of this direction, were guided by their affection to their mistress, to consider it as peculiarly addressed to her situation, and flew to her assistance. They conveyed her to her chamber more dead than alive, and indifferent to all the strange circumstances she heard, except the death of her son.

WHAT?	As evidenced in this passage, Walpole frequently depicts **physical swoons** in *The Castle of Otranto*, with his female characters often fainting away from scenes of heightened affect.
HOW?	For example, the excerpt states that: "The company were struck with terror and amazement. The Princess Hippolita, without knowing what was the matter, but anxious for her son, swooned away. [...] They conveyed her to her chamber more dead than alive, and indifferent to all the strange circumstances she heard, except the death of her son" (Walpole 10-11). Here, Hippolita's swoon is linked directly to her dead son; while the assembled company are terrified of and amazed at the supernatural occurrences taking place, **Walpole uses syntactical asides** to emphasise that Hippolita's primary focus within the chaos is her son, Conrad, and that she is indifferent to rumours of the supernatural in the face of her child's death; thus, **the swoon codifies her body exclusively as a vehicle of maternal affect.**
WHY?	Walpole does this to signal Hippolita's overt virtue and to map that virtue onto the tangible form of the human body. The affective representation of **Hippolita's swoon externalises emotion** within the text by bringing it to the empirical surface of the body.
SO WHAT?	This is significant in the broader context of the gothic mode. Such externalisation is part of the gothic's proclivity towards **revelation** and the unearthing of that which is repressed, unseen, or forgotten. As Lindsey Eckert suggests, the task of Romantic writers was to "overcome the familiar to reveal hidden truths" (Eckert 13). While Manfred and the domestics obsess over the appearance of Alfonso's helmet and the logical impossibility of the event (and thus reflect the disruption of Enlightenment certainty), Hippolita's body enacts **the revelatory process of the gothic** in microcosm by expressing emotion physically.

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Close Reading of the "Proteus" episode from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920):

In the "Proteus" episode of *Ulysses*, **Joyce constructs an extended interior monologue** as Stephen Dedalus walks along Sandymount Strand, thinking about perception, language, memory, and the body. The narrative is deeply introspective, offering a stream-of-consciousness form that imitates the way thought itself moves (circularly, unpredictably, and digressively), rather than along a clear, logical path. In doing so, Joyce represents the condition of modern consciousness, especially one preoccupied with questions about knowledge and experience. **Joyce achieves this effect through fragmented syntax, shifting diction, and layered imagery.** The episode opens with the highly abstract phrase: "Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes" (Joyce 31). The language here is philosophical and dense, drawing on Aristotelian ideas about the primacy of the senses in knowing the world. However, this tone is quickly interrupted by the more personal and embodied phrase, "thought through my eyes" (31), which grounds the abstraction in lived experience. This kind of contrast continues throughout the episode. Paradoxical lines such as "Shut your eyes and see" (31) challenge conventional assumptions about perception and invite a deeper interrogation of how thought operates. Stephen's mental landscape is populated with shifting observations, memories, and literary references, often presented without clear distinction. Such references include those to Cranly (31), Shakespeare (35-36), and the biblical Fall of Man (35). These fluid transitions between internal and external experience destabilise any fixed sense of reality within the passage. Additionally, the prose moves between registers, from elevated and poetic to crude and bodily. For instance, Stephen's describes the sea as "the snotgreen sea, the scrotumtightening sea" (33), which juxtaposes lyricism with vulgarity. Such bodily imagery undercuts any attempt to maintain a purely intellectual or aesthetic mode of perception. In this way, Joyce's formal choices reinforce a central theme: thought cannot be separated from embodiment, no matter how abstract it becomes. **The techniques used in "Proteus" reflect a broader philosophical concern with the limits of rationalism and the instability of meaning.** Stephen's thoughts are intellectually ambitious, but often disconnected from the physical and social world around him. This disconnection serves to highlight the isolating effects of abstract thinking. Language, theory, and aesthetic contemplation offer no stable foundation in a world that resists coherence. **The episode thereby illustrates the failure of traditional systems (be they religious, philosophical, or empirical) to provide certainty.** Joyce's experimental style becomes a vehicle for exploring this modern condition. The formal disjunctions mimic a world in which identity, knowledge, and language are continually in flux. The result is not simply a portrait of Stephen's mind, but a broader modernist critique of how consciousness attempts (and fails) to make meaning.

WHAT?

HOW?

WHY?

SO WHAT?

Developing + Contextualising a Close Reading

While close readings are often used as stand-alone assignments, <u>all</u> textual analyses rely on effective close reading skills (**WHAT**, **HOW**, **WHY**, and **SO WHAT**). On the next page you will find an example of how you can develop the close reading above when using it as part of a bigger assignment like an essay. To do this you can:

1. **APPLY** your close reading to the text as a whole to see if your ideas are consistent.
2. **SUPPORT + EXPAND** your ideas by using/ relating them to relevant theory and secondary material.
3. **SITUATE** your close reading within broader contexts beyond the text, e.g. cultural trends at the time, relevant historical backdrops, dominant philosophies of the time, etc.
4. **RETURN** to your essay's overarching thesis by explaining how your observations from the close reading support the thesis statement.

Contextualising the Previous Close Reading of "Proteus":

<u>**"Proteus" plays a critical role in establishing one of the most important structural and thematic contrasts in the novel more broadly**</u>: the difference between Stephen Dedalus's inward, philosophical consciousness and Leopold Bloom's more embodied, relational, and practical way of thinking. While Stephen intellectualises his surroundings and isolates himself in metaphysical speculation, Bloom approaches the world through emotional intuition, sensory engagement, and habitual experience. These contrasting modes of being underscore the novel's wider investigation into how human beings navigate modernity. Stephen's line, "Signatures of all things I am here to read" (31), positions him as a reader of the world, treating experience as a text to be interpreted. However, his interpretive method proves inadequate. Later episodes, such as "Scylla and Charybdis," show Stephen trying once again to impose intellectual order on the world, with similarly inconclusive results. The scientific cataloguing of "Ithaca" likewise ends in emotional ambiguity, revealing the limits of even the most structured modes of understanding. As Declan Kiberd notes, *Ulysses* is "less about certainty than about the search for certainty in a world where it is no longer guaranteed" (Kiberd 112). "Proteus," with its unresolved movement between perception and abstraction, introduces this theme formally as well as thematically. The episode functions as a kind of microcosm of the entire novel's epistemological and stylistic concerns. <u>**The techniques employed in "Proteus" place Joyce firmly within the modernist tradition**</u>, which sought new ways of representing human consciousness and responding to historical change. As Hugh Kenner writes, modernism involves a turn "from the objective world to the flickerings of subjective consciousness" (Kenner 53). Like Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust, Joyce abandoned realist narrative in favour of techniques that capture the fragmented and often incoherent inner life of modern individuals. <u>**The philosophical underpinnings of "Proteus" also resonate with early twentieth-century developments in thought**</u>. Stephen's meditations resemble Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which emphasises consciousness as the foundation of meaning. Richard Ellmann suggests that Joyce shared the belief "that consciousness was more real than any external object" (Ellmann 383). The stream-of-consciousness style of "Proteus" reflects this commitment by privileging internal perception over external narration. <u>**The historical backdrop further illuminates the novel's formal choices in "Proteus" and overall.**</u> *Ulysses* was written during a time of widespread cultural dislocation: the decline of imperial power, the questioning of religious authority, and the aftermath of the First World War. Jed Esty argues that this era witnessed a "crisis of inwardness," where inherited systems of meaning could no longer guarantee a coherent self or stable worldview (Esty 7). In response, Joyce crafts a narrative that captures that very uncertainty—not by resolving it, but by embedding it in the texture of the prose itself. The "Proteus" episode is foundational to both the style and meaning of *Ulysses*. Through fragmented language, sensory paradoxes, and philosophical reflection, Joyce explores the nature of thought and the instability of modern consciousness. Stephen's internal monologue exemplifies the modernist condition: an intellect seeking order in a disordered world, only to find that language, perception, and memory are all shifting and unreliable. <u>**This narrative strategy, which we can map in microcosm through a close reading of "Proteus", not only defines Stephen's character in the novel more broadly, but also supports the central thesis of this essay: that *Ulysess* reveals how modern identity is shaped by fragmentation and uncertainty, as well as the fact that art must reflect this condition through equally radical forms.**</u>

APPLY: Close reading applied to the novel in its entirety + supported using relevant theory.

SUPPORT, EXPAND, SITUATE: Relevant theory used to support ideas + to situate ideas in broader literary trends + cultural contexts.

RETURN: Explains how ideas support thesis.

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Close Reading of a Primary Source/ Historical Document

Primary sources are original, first-hand sources of information that have not been interpreted, altered, or filtered through secondary analysis, e.g. original documents, letters, diaries, government records, photographs, raw experimental data, lab results, field observations, survey data, interview transcripts, ethnographic field notes, statistics, original contracts, witness testimony, physical evidence presented in court, a set module text, etc.

To provide a close reading of a primary source like an historical document, we can still use **WHAT**, **HOW**, **WHY**, and **SO WHAT** to analyse the text. For example, see the close reading below of Winston Churchill's famous 1940 speech, "We shall fight on the beaches":

Churchill's "We shall fight on the beaches" speech served a crucial historical purpose:**it reframed the evacuation of Dunkirk from a potential defeat into a rallying point for national unity and resistance**, using carefully crafted rhetoric to reinforce Britain's determination to continue the war alone, if necessary. Delivered on the 4th of June 1940, just days after the Dunkirk evacuation, **Churchill used careful rhetorical devices like admission, repetition, and mythology**. For example, he acknowledged that "wars are not won by evacuations" (Churchill, 1940), which provides a moment of seeming candour in an otherwise very political speech. This admission foregrounds the seriousness of the military situation while simultaneously setting the stage for a redirection of public focus. Churchill goes on to declare: "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets…" (Churchill, 1940). The rising, rhythmic repetition here functions as both rhetorical device and political act. The repeated phrase "we shall fight" creates a cumulative effect that not provides affective amplification, but which also instils a sense of continuity and collective resolve. According to Charteris-Black (2005), Churchill's wartime rhetoric relied on the creation of a "heroic myth" in which Britain's moral and spiritual defiance took centre stage, even when military success was uncertain. **The subtext of Churchill's speech does not simply highlight perseverance, but rather it redefines the terms of success in a moment when conventional military victory was lacking**. Instead of presenting the retreat from Dunkirk as a strategic collapse, Churchill uses rhetorical skill to reframe it as a moment of courage, organisation, and resilience. As research suggests, this reinterpretation was vital for bolstering civilian morale and preparing the public for a long and difficult war (Toye, 2013). Furthermore, the speech implicitly addresses Britain's isolation in the war effort following the fall of France. Churchill insists: "…even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated… then our Empire beyond the seas… would carry on the struggle" (Churchill, 1940). Here, Churchill subtly prepares the public for the possibility of invasion, while simultaneously invoking the global strength of the British Empire. This layered assurance plays into what Addison (2005) identifies as Churchill's ability to use "rhetoric as a substitute for material advantage", which was an essential leadership quality at a time when Britain was at risk of standing alone against Nazi Germany. **Historically, the speech is a turning point in British wartime consciousness**. It allowed Churchill to solidify his political leadership and unify both Parliament and the public at a time of profound military uncertainty. As Kersaudy (1990) argues, Churchill's speeches were not only expressions of belief, but "strategic weapons" in themselves, which were used to project confidence abroad and to steel resistance at home. By shaping public perception of Dunkirk as a moral rather than military victory, Churchill established the narrative foundation for the subsequent "Battle of Britain" mentality. His rhetorical skill thus had tangible historical consequences insofar as it enabled the nation to reconceive its apparent weakness as enduring strength.

WHAT?

HOW?

WHY?

SO WHAT?