

# Close Reading Assignment

## R1B, 2021

DUE: Tuesday September 14, 8pm to my email: [HZeavin@berkeley.edu](mailto:HZeavin@berkeley.edu)

PURPOSE: To practice detailed analysis of language  
To work on connecting close reading to larger themes and ideas

TASK: Choose one passage from any single text, best to use one from class, but outside literary text is ok.

Your assignment must contain the following three parts:

1. The passage: Typed, at the top of the assignment. **The passage you choose should be no more than 500 words of prose or 20 lines of poetry (less is fine).** It may not be a passage that was discussed in lecture or section. Otherwise you are free to choose anything you like.

2. Close reading: **A numbered list of at least 15 observations** about the passage. These can be as long or short as you need to explain: 1.) what you're seeing and 2.) why it is significant—two sentences will probably suffice in most cases. There are a lot of things you can/should look for, including (but not limited to): tone, style, word choice, repetition, juxtaposition, contradiction, omission, paradox, imagery, metaphor, multiple meanings, irony, sound, rhythm, rhyme, pace, personification, pronouns, characterization, structure, syntax, surprise, idiom, symbolism, foreshadowing, etc.

Tips: Read slowly. Read a second time. Put a pen in your hand. Read a third time. Underline and mark up absolutely everything. Read a sixth time. Look up words you don't know. Ask yourself: Why this word instead of a different one? Why this line break? What other connotations does this word have? How does an image link ideas together?

3. **A short paragraph of synthesis.**

Finally, look for patterns or themes emerging from your observations. What can you say about this passage as a whole? What idea does it produce? This idea should be more sophisticated than what the average reader would see on a first pass. **Your observations should lead you to a more complex thought.** This final paragraph should probably be between 5-7 sentences. You do not need to account for all 15 of your observations; some may not fit the idea you end up writing about.

The last sentence of your paragraph should take this form: "In conclusion, [AUTHOR'S TEXT] seems to be suggesting that \_\_\_\_\_." What you fill in the blank with should be an idea the author is communicating about life, the world, people, society, experience, etc.

EXPECTATIONS: Your work will be assessed for its quality in the following areas:

1. Specificity: avoid vague generalities about the passage.
2. Insight: provide interpretation of the text that goes beyond its direct, surface meaning.
3. Thoughtfulness and persuasiveness of your final reflection.
4. **Connection between your final reflection and the observations**

you've made.

5. Fulfillment of all assignment requirements.

#### SAMPLE

Close reading observations from lines 31-40 of John Dryden's "To My Lord Chancellor"

Note that each item contains both an observation and an attempt at seeing the significance of that observation.

1. The phrase "our Eye" in line 31 seems to be a contradiction—as though everyone shares one eye. This may suggest that the people are like one person, with no individual identity.

2. The passage repeats diction of enclosure: "bounded," "limited," "enclos'd." This suggests that the people's lack of knowledge (sight) is accompanied by limited movement in the world, almost like a prison. However, this contradicts the poem's overall message of willing subservience.

3. The use of rhyming couplets parallels the poem's theme about two great leaders who are in sync with each other. It suggests such leadership is natural.

4. The only references to individuals in this passage are to "you" and "King." Everyone else is part of the unnamed mass of people, indicating that their identity does not matter.

#### Final paragraph:

On first reading, this poem seems to straightforwardly praise the King and the Chancellor for their superior wisdom. But Dryden doesn't simply place the people in a subservient role; he actually goes so far as to strip them of their individuality. While the two leaders each have unique individual identities, the people are presented as a single, undifferentiated mass who share a single "Eye" and a single "Sight." Moreover, the people not only have limited sight but limited movement—as though they are imprisoned. And while people's lack of wisdom may be a natural condition, their lack of movement comes from being actively "enclos'd" by their rulers, which creates a tension: is the people's subservience voluntary or imposed? In conclusion, there is a troubling side to Dryden's vision of social order. While his poem tells us that kings should be exalted, he seems to also be suggesting that their successful rule depends on suppressing the individualism and freedom of the people.