

## 21L.003-Eiland More Suggestions for Writing about Passages of Fiction E. Fox

In the first paper, most of you focused well on a passage. For the second paper, you will interpret another passage, this time from *Great Expectations* (note: titles of novels are *italicized*; those of short stories are set off by double quotation marks: “Joy”). Choose a passage that appeals to you, puzzles you, suggests themes that interest you, or presents characters that annoy you—anything that captures your interest will make the paper more rewarding to you and readers. Let us assume that you choose the opening passage from the novel.

**Reminder:** *Analysis* (whether of a molecule, bridge, budget, fugue, or formula) considers the *contribution of parts to a whole*. Good analyses examine the contributions of many parts in many ways and unify the contributions in a thesis. In evaluating the significance of one or more paragraphs, your reading should consider words, phrases, imagery, sentences, dialogue, characters, actions, tone, themes, the continuum between documentary realism and “the fabular” or fairy tale, dream, romance, etc.. To construct a thesis or organizing idea, comb over these elements to gather ideas about the significance of the passage: its appeal for you, the ways it opens up important ideas in the book, ideas other readers can gain from your interpretation of it, or, most *generally*, *the ways in which it matters*. Use this list of tips to compile your information about the passage.

**First:** As you analyze or “read closely,” stay focused on the passage, not links to themes outside the novel or even in the novel, if discussed only in general terms. Characterize the nitty-gritty specifics of the passage that give it a distinctive texture, flavor, mood, power, and significance. To succeed with this, you will probably begin with some idea(s) about the passage. Comb and sift through the passage for as much evidence as possible BEFORE starting to write. This stage of close reading leads you to discover ways that parts of the passage contribute to, extend, refine, and support your thesis. We will practice this in individual conferences as we go over the separate words in the passage. Sometimes the difference between “a” and “the” matters and contributes to a witty, ironic, poignant, or other tone.

### **Some points to consider in close- (or closely) reading a passage:**

Location in the text: While this may seem obvious, especially for the opening passage, the location often provides an occasion for the author (and you) to mark important events and themes. If the passage occurs at the beginning or end of a text, chapter, or section of the book, it carries extra significance, so note what that is.

For example, the opening of *G. E.* presents the narrator in a sentence giving his family or last name, his first name, and his nickname. Thinking about just this sentence and its elements, you may realize that the emphasis on naming occurs not only in the repetition of names (Pip’s names appear repeatedly) but also in the echoes among those names (Pirrup, Philip, Pip), and in the coincidence of what he “called [him]self” and what he “came to be called.” An emphasis on names suits an introduction but also highlights

concerns about identity, a theme of the novel. Ask what the significance of key locations could be; what content or theme does the passage's location emphasize, and why?

Diction: Consider (and comment on) connotations as well as denotations. Certain words, i.e., "property," "possession," and "relinquish," suggest the business or legal professions; "heart," "tears," and "fond farewell" or "forgive," however, come from a more emotional and psychological register (category or level) of language. Dictionaries will help here.

Patterns of words, phrases, objects, etc.: Note repetitions, parallels, and other similarities of wording, events, imagery, and themes. Examples include mentions of moisture, the sea, the wind, circles of light, perhaps light and dark in general, hearts, and forgiveness.

Figurative language: Note metaphors (comparison on the basis of a common trait, i.e., "stone lozenges" and little brothers "on their backs with their hands in their trousers-pockets") and similes (metaphors using "like" or "as": "my love is like a red, red rose"). Discuss the combination of tombstones and little workers, being born in trousers, "signs" of death and money. Consider the image of children "who gave up trying to get a living . . . early in the universal struggle" and effects on our "expectations" for the novel.

Setting: The location, time, landscape, interior décor, and atmosphere can all contribute to the significance of a passage. For instance, the opening passage refers to the outdoors and moves from the focus on tombstones to the marshes out to the sea and back to Pip.

Events in the passage: Consider the actions that occur within, before, and just after the passage. If the characters engage in actions described in the passage, name their significance: are they routine, characteristic, out of character, reminiscent of some other character or event, or otherwise noteworthy? The events may contribute to the tone of the passage or the characters' emotions and may dictate the kinds of topics in the passage or the level and associations of the words in the passage—see more under Diction.

In our example, nothing precedes the passage. That might seem obvious and not worth noting. If we note that point, however, we may notice that Pip's family actually "precedes" him, so the description of his family (and its absence, paralleled by the absence of any preceding passage) suits the second paragraph's meditation on family. Thinking more about this, we might conclude that death precedes Pip—not a cheery thought, but perhaps relevant and worth putting in our collection of observations on the opening. We might jot down a question—what significance does death hold in the novel? This might constitute a *tentative organizing idea*: the opening emphasizes death or links identity and death.

Characters in the passage: If your passage features one or more characters, you should probably state the significance of those characters to each other. State whether the character(s) is (are) major or minor and any significance of their appearance together. Is one a double or opposite of the other? a father, mother, or sibling figure? opposite or similar in terms of class, background, family position, appearance, aspirations, profession or training, dress, etc.? If the two parallel or oppose each other, connect this point with their roles elsewhere in the text, especially if some key action links them.

We might notice that Pip appears alone. Remembering discussion, we realize that his older self describes his younger self, so even *alone* Pip bears a relation to himself; we might label this retrospection or note the meditative mood. The fact that Pip appears among tombstones relates him to his family in a sad way; this might suggest that his family relations mix the uncomfortable or awkward formality of calling his sister “Mrs. Joe Gargery” instead of her first name and the sadness of using no proper name for his parents and siblings. Instead of mentioning any closeness to his family, the passage gives the full names for Pip and Joe, suggesting Pip’s relative isolation or loss of family and his close connection with Joe. We might revise the *tentative* main idea to include a mention of connection beyond death: “The opening emphasizes lost family relations, ties beyond death, and risks in family life as much as it emphasizes Pip’s identity.”

Or,

“The opening introduces Pip and his identity as tied to a lost family, focused on loss and death, and concerned with origins.” (Other ideas might interest you more.)

Progress or movement within the passage. Notice the sequence of ideas within the passage; this might lead to a point about the linking themes, the concerns of the narrator or the characters and events described, the tone of the passage, and themes of the text. Mentioning the order and juxtaposition of “meta-”(or general) topics is another way to discuss a passage; it might mix legal, business, and emotional ideas in one sentence.

For instance, our passage introduces the narrator by name, moves to a paragraph about his (mostly dead) family, in a third paragraph broadens the focus to the landscape, and returns to locate the narrator within that landscape. We discussed the significance of the movement in several ways: as a widening view that emphasizes Pip’s smallness and youth; as a way of locating and cataloguing elements (relationships, esp. familial ones, the marshes, “impressions[s] of the identity of things” (page 3) that will gather significance as the plot progresses); as a philosophical, metaphysical, or almost spiritual mapping of the themes of names, positions into which characters are born, inscriptions such as names and labels, etc.

The continuum between documentary realism and the fabular or fairy tale conventions: Recalling the diagram and discussion from the first day of class, place the passage on one or more points between the “truths” of empirical perception and of dream-like representations of wishes, the unconscious, and internal realities.

Using Quotations: Introduce and explain quotations instead of dropping them into your paragraph and relying on a reader’s intuition. Put double quotation (“Hi!”) marks around quotations up to three lines long. Longer quotations belong in block form, indented one inch on the left-hand margin, without quotation marks. Put page # inside parentheses: (1). MLA-style page references follow quotation marks and precede the period or other mark. (See Using Quotations file.)