

Close-Reading Poetry: An Overview

Purdue OWL

This presentation will cover :

Close Reading

- 1 What is a close reading?
- 2 What is the goal of close reading?
- 3 Tips for reading poems
- 4 Steps for close reading
- 5 More helpful resources

What is a Close Reading?

A close reading is the careful, sustained analysis of any text that focuses on significant details or patterns and that typically examines some aspect of the text's form, craft, meanings, etc.



What is the Goal of Close Reading?

Overall, the goals of performing a close reading are to...



Learn about
language and
rhetorical
technique



Gain a deeper
understanding of
a text



Explore a specific
theme or pattern
within a text



Understand how
writers craft their
work

Tips for Reading Poems

When you first approach a poem...

- Read the poem slowly
- Read it at least twice
- Read it aloud to yourself
- Annotate important words, images, phrases, and sections



Tips for Reading Poems

If you're struggling with a poem, also try the following:

Examine your beliefs about what poetry should be or do

Rewrite the poem as a prose paragraph

Read with your gut and your brain

Not all poems are logical and/or narrative

Close Reading: Step 1

Understand the **poet's project**.

- What subject(s) does the poem address?
- Who is the speaker of the poem?
- What is the poem's larger context?
- What genre or mode of poem are you dealing with?



Common Poetic Modes

Mode can affect our expectations of a poem and the conventions the poet employs/ alters.

Lyric	➡	Associative, vivid language
Narrative	➡	Tells a story
Dramatic	➡	Lyric and narrative elements
Elegy	➡	Laments or remembers
Ars Poetica	➡	Explores writing as a subject

Close Reading: Step 2

Examine the poem's **form** and **structure**.

- Use of closed or nonce form
- Stanzaic make-up
- Devices like repetition, punctuation, or section divisions
- Use of negative vs. positive space
- How is the poem put together?



Closed Form

These forms have set rules for the poet to follow:

Sonnets

- 14 lines
- iambic pentameter
- Rhyme scheme: ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG
- Final heroic couplet

Villanelles

- 5 tercets + 1 quatrain
(19 lines total)
- Rhyme scheme: ABAX5, ABAAX1



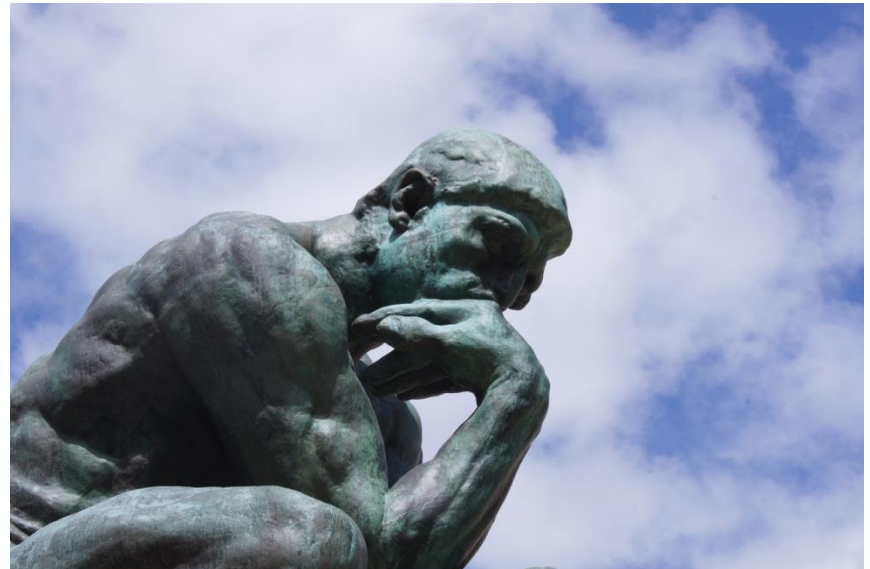
This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-NC

Closed Form

Not sure if the poet used a closed form?

Look for these tell-tale clues:

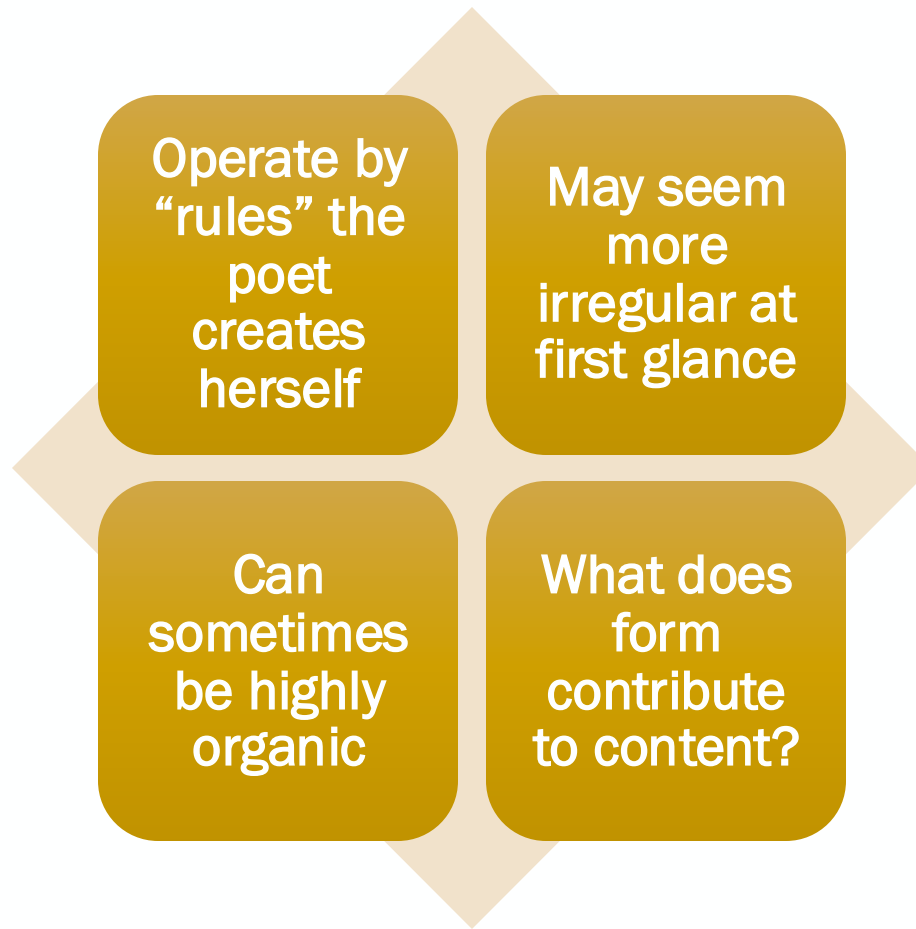
- Number of lines and/or stanzas
- Patterns of repetition or regularity
- A rhyme scheme
- Rhythmic or syllabic patterns (meter)



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY

Nonce Form

Nonce form refers to any new form a poet creates for a particular poem.



Stanzaic Structure

Stanzaic structures can carry connotations:



Couplets (2) = balance, movement



Tercets (3) = imbalance, religious references



Quatrains (4) = balance, stability



Stanza means room in Italian. Think of each stanza as a room in the house of the poem

More Structural Devices

Repetition

- Does the poet use anaphora or refrain?
- Is there a repeated word or image?
- Are there words/ideas that echo each other?
- Example: night, black, dark

Punctuation

- Does the poet favor dashes, semi-colons, etc.?
- Is there a lack of punctuation?

Positive vs. Negative Space

Both positive space (the text) and negative space (or white space) make meaning in a poem. White space can:



Emphasize a word or phrase



Give the reader room to pause



Facilitate movement between ideas

Close Reading: Step 3

Look more closely at **line** within the poem:

- Meter or rhythm within line
- Line length and variation
- Line break (white space)
- Enjambed vs. end-stopped lines
- Elements of line can be dictated by form.

Analyzing Line

What to notice

- Meter might indicate a closed form
- Line breaks influence flow and speed
 - End-stopped lines slow our reading down
 - Shorter lines move more quickly
- Look for places where form and line *change*.



Close Reading: Step 4

Look closely at the **language** the poet uses:



What kind of diction does the poet use?



What is the tone/mood of the poem?



Which images stand out and why?



Does the poet use figurative language?

Analyzing Language

Diction affects tone

Notice the poet's diction

- Is it Latinate (multi-syllabic)?
- Is it colloquial?
- Is it formal or elaborate?

Diction affects tone

Example: emerald vs. snot vs. celery

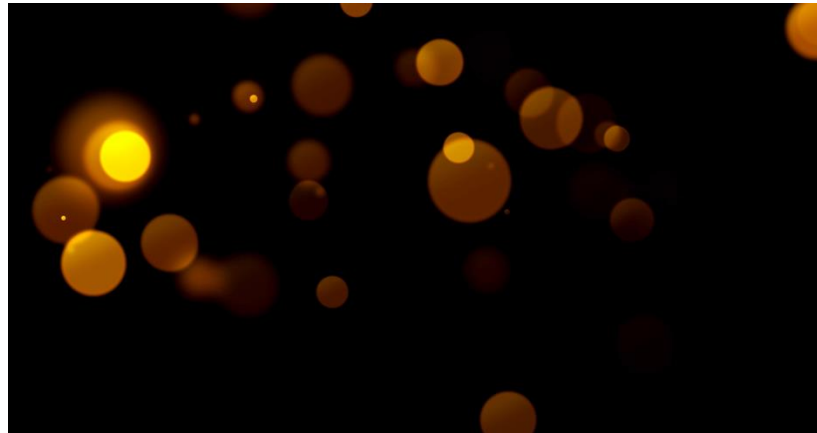
Analyzing Language

Tone affects the *mood* of a poem

Compare the following lines:

She walked out into the **black**, yawning night.

She walked through the **warm**, glittering night.



Analyzing Language

An image can work as an important nexus of emotion and idea in a poem.

What is the tone of the image?

Does the poet use metaphor to alter the image or layer on other associations?

What does the image embody?

Final Advice

The job of the poet is to “make it new.”

- Does the poet combine unexpected elements, like form and subject?
- Does the poet employ an unusual perspective?
- How does the poet’s language make something new or surprising?



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY](#)

Close Reading: Step 5

Make a claim about how the poem works or what the poet is doing (your thesis).

- What is the overall effect of the poem's craft of all the poem's craft elements?
- Where does the poem take us (emotionally, intellectually, narratively, etc.)?



More Helpful Resources

Visit the OWL's Creative Writing Suite here:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/creative_writing/index.html



For more help, you can also visit

<https://poets.org/text/close-reading-i-cannot-live-you>. You will find a sample of a close reading of an Emily Dickinson poem.



Poets.org has examples of other close readings, too.

Thank You

Purdue OWL

Krach Leadership Center

Web: <https://owl.purdue.edu/>

Phone: (765) 494-3723

Email: writing.lab@purdue.edu



Purdue OWL®