# Close Reading Literature

Close reading may seem like an unfamiliar approach to analyzing a piece of text. However, it can often yield insights that will help you to create a unique paper developed from your own interpretation of the text. To analyze the work effectively, it is useful to concentrate on specific components of literature used to build and reveal the themes in the work. This process will help you explain how a passage relates to central themes in the text allowing you to reach an intelligent and creative thesis for a literary analysis.

First, choose a passage (or a series of passages) that intrigues you. Read the passage several times and think about why you are drawn to the passage. The form and genre of literature you are studying will help determine what central elements you will need to think about to handle the text critically. For example, you may be performing a close reading on a novel, a poem, a work of creative nonfiction, or a film. In close reading a novel, you might focus on narrative pacing or character development, for instance, but particular camera angles or uses of montage may factor into a close reading of a film. While you will need to attend to elements unique to each medium, the following resources from UT’s Department of English can generally help you to get started.

1. **Reading Closely with CRIT**: This short video introduces students to an approach to literary interpretation called the Close Reading Interpretive Tool (CRIT). The six steps of CRIT are completed sequentially: paraphrase, observe, contextualize, analyze, argue, and reflect. Paraphrasing slows the reading process down and prompts readers to check for their understanding of the text’s surface-level meaning. Observing encourages readers to attend to the language and form a piece of literature takes. Contextualizing helps readers prepare for future analysis by taking into consideration broader historical, political, biographical, and literary circumstances that may have bearing on the text’s meaning. Analyzing allows readers to develop their observations with context in mind, arriving at conclusions about the text’s significance. Arguing prompts readers to cohere their analytical claims about the text, and reflecting calls for consideration of what their argument leaves out. Although [this video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdZH3EkjgdY) focuses on a poem, the CRIT steps can be performed for a short piece of text of any form or genre.
2. **Reading Text and Context:** This video dives more deeply into how to use context to help interpret a literary text. It introduces biographical, cultural, and literary historical contexts commonly considered by scholars when reading a piece of literature. [This video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9u9mV_2peMY) then uses a poem to demonstrate how a reader might consider these contexts during literary interpretation. The consideration of context, however, is not limited to close reading poetry; rather, contextual knowledge can enrich a reader’s understanding of any type of literature.
3. **Reading Race in American Literature and Culture:** [This video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tF6Kuq2IyvE) supports students grappling with race in the context of American literature. In discussing stereotyping of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), the video introduces readers to America’s fraught history of dehumanization. Additionally, the video articulates the persistence of these stereotypes in our contemporary moment and raises questions about how works of literature can both perpetuate and critique racialization.
4. **Reading Actively—How to Annotate a Text:** One of the best tools for close reading is textual annotation. Presenting seven different ways to annotate, [this video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNr-E8g35nI) details how to interact with a text while reading it. When readers keep track of their emotional reactions to a text, these annotations leave a powerful record to build upon in later analytical writing or discussions. In addition to recording these emotional sparks, the video suggests unpacking figurative language, observing patterns and repetitions, marking turns and shifts, considering the text’s genre, noticing allusions to other literary works or historical events, and recording questions that arise during reading.
5. **Reading with the *Oxford English Dictionary*:** Analyzing the literal and figurative meanings of word choices can help you determine the tone and underlying theme the passage addresses. [This video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgj5-jtIxww) advises you to look up the definitions of words that stand out to you to see how they enrich or expand your understanding of the themes and characters of the work. By focusing on the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) as a resource that provides etymological definitions (origins and historical developments) of words, the video empowers readers to closely read texts by historically contextualizing word meanings. You can find the *OED* on the UT library website under research tools/databases.

## Creating Your Argument:

At this point, the larger argument of your reading of the passage should begin to emerge. You want your thesis to grow out of an observation that you have made about the text. Often your thesis will explain how the components of your passage relate to the literary work as a whole. Here are some helpful tips to remember when composing your thesis:

* Your thesis must make an contestable statement about a literary work. In other words, make sure your thesis does not just summarize or paraphrase your observations about a passage, but instead makes a statement that can be challenged by another person’s analysis.
* Use your text as evidence to back up your claim. Depending on the requirements of your assignment, you may not need a secondary resource for your analysis.
* Focus on details. This will not only help you narrow the scope of your argument but will also create a thesis that is unique to your reading of the work.
* Question everything. After each observation, ask yourself why and how it reveals the larger meaning of the novel. Your observations should lead you to a conclusion about the meaning and value of the literary work.
* Reread your assignment prompt to make sure your paper covers all the issues your instructor has directed you to address.