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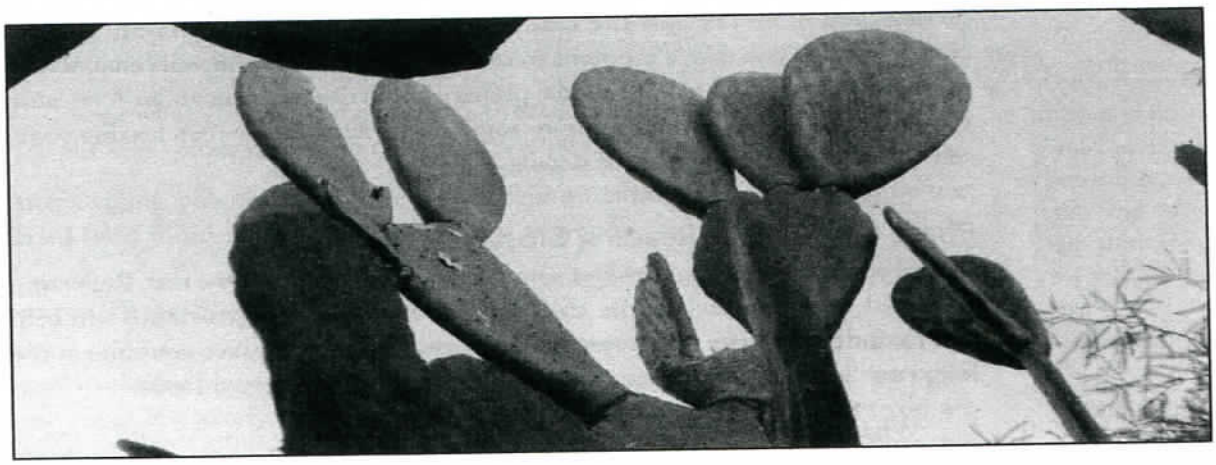
Close Reading and Interacting with the Text



3.1 Close Reading: An Overview

We often read texts just once or scan them for relevant or important information. For example, you might skim the "Arts & Leisure" section of the newspaper to find film times, or you might read an encyclopedia entry about the *Mona Lisa* quickly for the information you are most interested in. You might also scan a chapter in a biology textbook, looking for important terms that will be on your next exam. But such one-time reading for information is insufficient for the tasks you'll perform in your first-year writing courses. In addition to reading a text for information, you'll need to read texts with a particular **purpose**. You should plan to read any text, especially those you write about, at least twice because you will need to get a feel for how language is being used in the piece and to review specific elements of the text in order to develop your analysis.

For more on close reading, see *Rules for Writers*, pages 346–47.

When you practice close reading, you focus your attention on the aspects of the text that seem most important. One common way to think about the strategies you use when you read is to divide the process into three phases: before reading closely, active reading, and reviewing. To read more effectively, you should first **scan** a text to get a basic sense of the text and its purpose. Then, in the second phase of the process, you should **read more closely for content and meaning,**

considering how the text is constructed. In addition, you should consider your reactions to the text. How does it affect you emotionally and intellectually? During your second reading, engage your text in a dialogue by asking questions on the page and picking out the most important points. In the third phase of the process, you should **review the text and your responses** to form some general conclusions. If you take a moment to review your reading, you will remember it more effectively; you will be better prepared to write and talk about it because you will have reduced the reading to some main ideas, rather than leaving yourself with a confusing jumble of details.

Phase One: Before Reading Closely

Before you start reading, consider some basic questions about the text. Reflecting on broad elements such as the title, subject matter, and organization will help you to understand the text faster as you're reading and will save you time in the long run. Some questions you might want to ask at this stage include:

- What assumptions do you have about the text after reading the title? What does it suggest to you?
- What do you think the subject of the text is going to be?
- Look at the opening to the article, essay, or story—just the first paragraph or even just the first few sentences. What does it suggest to you?
- What are the headings of chapters and major sections? What can you learn from these?
- Scan the conclusion of the text. What does the author consider most important for the audience to remember, and why is it important?

Examining these larger elements does not take long, but doing this will prepare you to understand the material in the body of the text. By studying the structural features before reading the main text, you'll better understand the organization and will therefore read more effectively.

Phase Two: Active Reading

Now that you have scanned the text, you're ready to begin reading it in detail. When you practice close reading, you should think of yourself as an active participant engaging the material; you want to make the text your own. Reading actively will make it easier for you to remember what you have read and will enable you to use it effectively in your writing. While you are reading, you should *always* raise questions about **what** is happening and **how** it is significant. If you're reading a short story, for instance, talk back to that story by ***annotating*** and/or writing in your journal, noting your thoughts about the narrative, the characters, and the plot. Ask yourself questions like:

- How do you feel about what is happening in the text?
- Where is the text headed? Why is it headed in that direction?
- How do certain word choices or images make you feel?
- What does the text remind you of?
- Note what you think the author's overall purpose is at different points in the text—does it seem to change at any point?

After reading, you may want to return to your notes on specific events in the text to see what in the story caused you to feel as you do.

Phase Three: Reviewing for Analysis

Once you have read a text carefully, made annotations, and taken notes, you need to think of how you will use what you read in your writing. You can often read more effectively by thinking as specifically as you can about how you are going to use the reading in your assignments. For example, if you have annotated a text that will serve as your primary source for textual analysis or rhetorical analysis, you will probably use the annotations to help you clarify the claim you are making about the text, to identify the passages you think are most relevant to your argument, and to define the main points that you will discuss and analyze in your essay. On the other hand, if you are reading an article as a secondary source to provide background on a topic you're researching, but the ideas are difficult to grasp because the article is written for scholars and uses a complicated structure and technical vocabulary, you'll probably first want to look carefully over the text and then make frequent annotations as you read to help you understand the author's main ideas.

Your annotations will help to guide your analysis in your own writing, so take the time to read your notes while considering what the author of the text wanted to convey as well as how he or she tried to convey it. This will develop a helpful overall understanding of the text regardless of whether you intend to use it as a **primary** or a **secondary** source. Sections 3.5 and 3.6 offer specific ways you can review and reorganize your annotated notes after reading and use them to form a complete analysis of a text.

For help with annotation and determining what to look for, see section 3.2. You can also find samples of annotation in sections 3.3 and 3.4. For help with annotating for research essays, see Chapter 7.

3.2 Annotation and Close Reading

By Annie Holub

When you read more complex texts, you need to interact with the text so that you don't miss things that might be hard to see. By interacting with the text, we mean one simple thing: write on it. Annotation is the process of writing notes and comments about a text. Back in high school, you were more than likely told specifically NOT to write in your textbooks, but in college, they're yours—you paid for them—so feel free to make as much use of them as you'd like. Write in

the margins. Underline things. Take notes on the pages. You can also annotate texts by having a piece of paper handy for notes if you're borrowing books or planning on selling them back in a more pristine condition—just remember to keep track of the page numbers and/or lines from the text you're annotating so you can find things again later.

What Am I Supposed to Look for or Write Down?

Here are some steps that will help you annotate any text that you're reading:

1. **Underline** words or phrases that confuse you or seem important.
2. **Circle** words you don't know or words that pop up more than once. Look up the words you don't know, and write the definition next to them.
3. Write ideas and comments in the **margin** that come to you as you read. If something in a text reminds you of something, write down what that line reminds you of and why.
4. If something surprises you or seems funny, put an **exclamation point** by it.
5. If something completely confuses you or doesn't make sense, put a **question mark** there so you know where to go back and re-read more closely.
6. What kind of feeling or tone are you getting from the text as you read? Try to **jot down a couple of words** that describe the tone. If the tone changes, mark where it happens.
7. Who is talking? What do you know about the speaker/narrator?
8. Who is the speaker/narrator talking to? What do you know about the audience?
9. What is the speaker/narrator trying to tell the audience?
10. Are there certain images that stand out, or that seem to reoccur? Keep track of these somehow (I use **stars in the margin** for this).

We may all be brilliant, but often we don't remember everything we thought of five minutes after reading a text, so it helps to have notes. And that's all annotation is, your notes about the text you're reading.

The following is an annotation of Stephen Crane's short story "The Snake."

Wended = winding?

Oppressive heat, cicadas, like a summer day in the Sonoran desert. Not a very picturesque scene?

The brook is fighting with the rocks—maybe more things will fight with each other?

Where the path wended across the ridge, the bushes of huckleberry and sweet fern swarmed at it in two curling waves until it was a mere winding line traced through a tangle. There was no interference by clouds, and as the rays of the sun fell full upon the ridge, they called into voice innumerable insects which chanted the heat of the summer day in steady, throbbing, unending chorus.

A man and a dog came from the laurel thickets of the valley where the white brook brawled with the rocks. They followed the deep line of

the path across the ridges. The dog—a large lemon and white setter—walked, tranquilly meditative, at his master's heels.

Suddenly from some unknown and yet near place in advance there came a dry, shrill whistling rattle that smote motion instantly from the limbs of the man and the dog. Like the fingers of a sudden death, this sound seemed to touch the man at the nape of the neck, at the top of the spine, and change him, as swift as thought, to a statue of listening horror, surprise, rage. The dog, too—the same icy hand was laid upon him, and he stood crouched and quivering, his jaw dropping, the froth of terror upon his lips, the light of hatred in his eyes.

Slowly the man moved his hands toward the bushes, but his glance did not turn from the place made sinister by the warning rattle. His fingers, unguided, sought for a stick of weight and strength. Presently they closed about one that seemed adequate, and holding this weapon poised before him the man moved slowly forward, glaring. The dog with his nervous nostrils fairly fluttering moved warily, one foot at a time, after his master.

But when the man came upon the snake, his body underwent a shock as if from a revelation, as if after all he had been ambushed. With a blanched face, he sprang forward and his breath came in strained gasps, his chest heaving as if he were in the performance of an extraordinary muscular trial. His arm with the stick made a spasmodic, defensive gesture.

The snake had apparently been crossing the path in some mystic travel when to his sense there came the knowledge of the coming of his foes. The dull vibration perhaps informed him, and he flung his body to face the danger. He had no knowledge of paths; he had no wit to tell him to slink noiselessly into the bushes. He knew that his implacable enemies were approaching; no doubt they were seeking him, hunting him. And so he cried his cry, an incredibly swift jangle of tiny bells, as burdened with pathos as the hammering upon quaint cymbals by the Chinese at war—for, indeed, it was usually his death-music.

"Beware! Beware! Beware!"

The man and the snake confronted each other. In the man's eyes were hatred and fear. In the snake's eyes were hatred and fear. These enemies maneuvered, each preparing to kill. It was to be a battle without mercy. Neither knew of mercy for such a situation. In the man was all the wild strength of the terror of his ancestors, of his race, of his kind. A deadly repulsion had been handed from man to man through long dim centuries. This was another detail of a war that had begun evidently when first there were men and snakes. Individuals who do not participate in this strife incur the investigations of scientists. Once there was a man and a snake who were friends, and at the end, the man lay dead with the marks of the snake's caress just over his East Indian heart. In the formation of

Ridge is also sort of like "rift."

Why this specific detail about the dog?

Tranquilly meditative = really, really calm—why both words?

Assonance makes this sound ominous.

Also ominous.

Ominous.

Even the dog is scared.

Seems instinctual—he's in hunting mode.

The snake's body or the man's? Could be both? Why call attention to what his body does as opposed to what his mind does?

Snakes also muscular.

Also instinctual—snake-like, even?

Snake is mystical, otherworldly

This sounds like what happens to the man in the previous paragraph—snake and man have similar instincts?

Instinct

Lots of emotion in the snake's rattle—why liken to Chinese at war? Makes the snake more exotic?

Man and snake share same emotions.

Instinctual again!

What's with this parable? Why an East Indian? Exotic, strange—the snake caresses with his body, he has no hands, the caress = death.

3.2

What is the narrator saying about Nature here if the snake is the "supreme point"? Snakes are hellish, worse than fire...

devices, hideous and horrible, Nature reached her supreme point in the making of the snake, so that priests who really paint hell well fill it with snakes instead of fire. The curving forms, these scintillant coloring create at once, upon sight, more relentless animosities than do shake barbaric tribes. To be born a snake is to be thrust into a place a-swarm with formidable foes. To gain an appreciation of it, view hell as pictured by priests who are really skilful.

Tone Biblical, but then "really skilful" seems out of place.

Death-fingers again—see third paragraph.

As for this snake in the pathway, there was a double curve some inches back of its head, which, merely by the potency of its lines, made the man feel with tenfold eloquence the touch of the death-fingers at the nape of his neck. The reptile's head was waving slowly from side to side and its hot eyes flashed like little murder-lights. Always in the air was the dry, shrill whistling of the rattles.

Repeated again—the snake's rattle is like someone talking.

"Beware! Beware! Beware!"

Perspective seems distant—where is the narrator? Who's seeing this? Who's telling us this story?

The man made a preliminary feint with his stick. Instantly the snake's heavy head and neck were bended back on the double curve and instantly the snake's body shot forward in a low, strait, hard spring. The man jumped with a convulsive chatter and swung his stick. The blind, sweeping blow fell upon the snake's head and hurled him so that steel-colored plates were for a moment uppermost. But he rallied swiftly, agilely, and again the head and neck bended back to the double curve, and the steaming, wide-open mouth made its desperate effort to reach its enemy. This attack, it could be seen, was despairing, but it was nevertheless impetuous, gallant, ferocious, of the same quality as the charge of the lone chief when the walls of white faces close upon him in the mountains. The stick swung unerringly again, and the snake, mutilated, torn, whirled himself into the last coil.

???

Time moving very very slowly.

The lone chief loses.

Instinct makes you crazy—how can he feel the emotions of his forefathers?

And now the man went sheer raving mad from the emotions of his forefathers and from his own. He came to close quarters. He gripped the stick with his two hands and made it speed like a flail. The snake, tumbling in the anguish of final despair, fought, bit, flung itself upon this stick which was taking his life.

It's the stick doing the killing, not the man—the man is only wielding the stick.

Like the Chinese-war thing: man is superior to the snake here but the snake is also hell and worse than fire?

At the end, the man clutched his stick and stood watching in silence. The dog came slowly and with infinite caution stretched his nose forward, sniffing. The hair upon his neck and back moved and ruffled as if a sharp wind was blowing, the last muscular quivers of the snake were causing the rattles to still sound their treble cry, the shrill, ringing war chant and hymn of the grave of the thing that faces foes at once countless, implacable, and superior.

Rover? C'mon!

"Mr. Snake" = condescending. Something cute to show the girls.

"Well, Rover," said the man, turning to the dog with a grin of victory, "we'll carry Mr. Snake home to show the girls."

Why didn't the dog do anything? Just a battle between man and snake?

His hands still trembled from the strain of the encounter, but he pried with his stick under the body of the snake and hoisted the limp thing upon it. He resumed his march along the path, and the dog walked tranquilly meditative, at his master's heels.

After annotating this story, already I can see some patterns. I can identify the tone and perhaps begin to make an argument about what this story is about on a deeper level. Based on the annotations above, I know I need to explore themes and ideas like the struggle between man and nature and what the snake represents about nature. There's definitely something here about instinct as well.

Try it for yourself:

- Read and annotate a story of your choice from *Writing as Revision*—try something short but challenging, like Kate Chopin's "Story of An Hour," or Karen Brennan's "Floating."
- Read and annotate whatever your instructor assigned you to read for the next class.
- Read and annotate something you were assigned to read for another course.

Why Annotate?

Once you've read through something for the first time and marked up the text with your notes, then you can go back and try to find **patterns** and think more about things that confused you. Student Brittney Martinez makes a good point about the time-saving benefits of annotation:

> My suggestion for the Text-in-Context essay for future English 101 students is to read the primary text, which was a novel for my class, very carefully and put annotations in the margins of the book, so you won't have to read the whole novel over again to find a specific quote.

For more advice on reading arguments closely, see *Rules for Writers,* pages 371–79.

Instead of reading the whole book or story again, you just need to reread the parts you already pulled out and your notes about those parts. Annotation makes thinking deeply about the text you're reading much easier: Maybe you realize that you circled a certain word more than once—why? Maybe something that confused you at the beginning makes more sense now that you've read the whole thing. Maybe you noticed certain kinds of images popping up more than once, or a certain feel to the text. Maybe you noticed that the audience doesn't really seem to be listening to the speaker. Start asking yourself why these things you noticed might be happening. What effect do these things have on you as a reader?

Annotating a text is the first, and in many ways, most important step toward analyzing that text. If you are actively reading and processing the text as you go, writing down ideas as they pop up and marking things to go back to and ponder, you are already starting to take apart the text to see how it works, which is the basic definition of analysis. The things you underline or highlight may very well end up being the things you cite and quote in your textual analysis essay. The things that confused you may lead you to the meaning and significance of the text, which in turn may lead you to your argument about the text. Mortimer Adler wrote in his essay, "How to Mark a Book" that "mark-

ing up a book is not an act of mutilation but of love. You shouldn't mark up a book which isn't yours." And you make a book you already own more yours by **annotating** it—you haven't made that book a part of your educational experience until you've thoroughly interacted with it through annotation. It might as well just continue sitting on the shelf, its spine uncracked. And what's the point of spending time reading something if you can't incorporate it in some way into your own educational life and work?