

Understanding the Meaning of What You Read

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the basic elements of interpretation and analysis. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Critical Analysis

Reading actively helps facilitate critical analysis. Once again, the difference between what is expected of you when you read in high school and what is expected of you when you read in college is your engagement with the text. Thinking and reading critically means that you don't just passively absorb the content of what you read; instead, you reflect on the motivations and methods of the author. What goals do you think the author is trying to accomplish in this piece of writing? How is the author working toward those goals? Are they successful? In order to answer these questions, you need to analyze the text.

HOW TO ANALYZE WHAT YOU READ

A**RE-READ A SECTION OF TEXT**

Analysis requires multiple reads.

B**IDENTIFY THEMES OR PATTERNS**

Is there repetition of any kind, or an overall idea?

C**LOOK FOR FIGURES OF SPEECH**

Are there similes, metaphors, symbolism, or personification?

D**CONSIDER THE INTENT OF THE AUTHOR**

Why did the author choose to use these themes, patterns or figures of speech?

Analyzing a text means examining it closely and separating it into its component parts to see how it works,

which provides the basis for interpretation. Analyzing a text is distinguished from summarizing a text by going beyond the surface level of what a given text explicitly says. Of course, you need to sufficiently understand a text before you can analyze it, but simply demonstrating that you understand what the author wrote is not analysis. Instead, analysis is more interested in questions about how or why an author has chosen to write something in the way that they did.

IN CONTEXT

For your political science class, you are given a short assignment to critically analyze the preamble to the Constitution of the United States. The preamble is as follows:

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

What are some ways you might go about analyzing this short passage? How about starting with the famous opening phrase “We the People”? The pronoun is first-person plural, so who is the author, or authors, of the text? Some quick research tells you that there are multiple authors of the Constitution, but what about the authors’ choice to identify themselves as “the People of the United States”? What can this tell you about the perspective and intent of the authors?

2. Close Reading

In order to effectively analyze a text, you’ll need to know how to practice what is called **close reading**. Close reading involves more focused and strategic attention to the words on the page, and this typically means re-reading key passages of your assigned text. A close reader looks for patterns in a text. For instance, are certain words or phrases repeated or otherwise emphasized?

IN CONTEXT

Here is an excerpt from James Baldwin’s story *Sonny’s Blues*:

“There they sit, in chairs all around the living room, and the night is creeping up outside, but nobody knows it yet. You can see the darkness growing against the windowpanes and you hear the street noises every now and again, or maybe the jangling beat of a tambourine from one of the churches close by, but it's real quiet in the room. For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky outside. And my mother rocks a little from the waist, and my father's eyes are closed. Everyone is looking at something a child can't see. For a minute they've forgotten the children. Maybe a kid is lying on the rug, half asleep. Maybe somebody's got a kid in his lap and is absent-mindedly stroking the kid's head. Maybe there's a kid, quiet and big-eyed, curled up in a big chair in the corner. The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frighten the child obscurely.”

If you were close reading this story, what sticks out to you in this short passage? Is some idea or theme emphasized by repetition?

A close reader might note that the darkness is mentioned several times and is used to describe not only the night but the people in the passage. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the darkness, whatever it might indicate or symbolize, is central to what Baldwin is trying to accomplish in this paragraph.

A close reader is also on the lookout for figurative language—that is, language that is not literal or straightforward, but rather complex or multi-dimensional in some way. Examples of types of figurative language include simile and metaphor, symbolism, or personification.

IN CONTEXT

Here is the beginning of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story *Young Goodman Brown*:

“Young Goodman Brown came forth at sunset into the street at Salem village; but put his head back, after crossing the threshold, to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife. And Faith, as the wife was aptly named, thrust her own pretty head into the street, letting the wind play with the pink ribbons of her cap while she called to Goodman Brown.”

After reading the passage carefully (maybe two or three times), what strikes you?

You might note the character names. The story is set in colonial America and “Goodman” was a term of address like “Mister” is today, but there still might be more to it, and the narrator notes that Faith is “aptly named,” so perhaps this character will represent the concept of faith. Also, it is sunset and Brown is “crossing the threshold” of his home—isn’t a sunset also a kind of “threshold” between night and day? Could there be symbolic import there? These are things a close reader might take note of.



TERM TO KNOW

Close Reading

A method to analyze and better understand the meaning of what you read and the intention of the author. Close reading involves re-reading a section of text to look for themes, repeated ideas, and figures of speech to consider what the author was trying to convey with their choice of words.



SUMMARY

Critical analysis involves analytical reading, which means you are questioning why the author wrote something as they did. **Close reading** means you are carefully studying a section of text for themes, repetition, and figures of speech that may have significance to what the author is trying to communicate.



ATTRIBUTIONS

- Young Goodman Brown | **Author:** Nathanael Hawthorne
- Sonny's Blues | **Author:** James Baldwin
- United States Constitution



TERMS TO KNOW

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