

Hints for Close Reading

These are simply suggestions of ways that may help you look more closely at a passage, and are by no means exclusive. Each passage is different and, accordingly, different things will need to be emphasized.

- I. **Literal Reading:** This is simply designed to make sure that you understand, on a literal level, what is going on in your passage. Try paraphrasing a passage:

Now mother St. Justine will be waiting for you. I have sent a girl who has been with us for nearly a year. Her name is Louise—Louise de Plana. If you feel strange, she will explain everything. (*Wide Sargasso Sea.*)

In plain English, the nun tells Bertha that the mother superior is waiting for her, that a girl named Louise de Plana will greet Bertha, and if Bertha has any questions that Louise will know the answers. But there is a tension between what this passage means on a literal level, and what it says. Why repeat “Louise” twice? Why does the nun say “if you feel strange” rather than “if you have any questions?” Literal reading is also important if you are analyzing dialogue between characters.

- II. **Grammatical Structure:** This includes looking at things like syntax, grammar subordinate clauses, parallel structure, punctuation, length and structure of the sentence, ambiguous pronouns, word order and choice, the overabundance of nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.

With the Gardiners, they were always on the most intimate terms. Darcy, as well as Elizabeth, really loved them; and they were both sensible of the warmest gratitude toward the persons who, by bringing her into Darbyshire, had been the means of uniting them. (*Pride and Prejudice*)

1. Normal sentence order, (subject-verb-object) is being changed—the Gardiners are placed at the beginning of the sentence, in the second sentence the verb is placed at the end “uniting them.”
2. Subordinate clauses—“as well as Elizabeth,” “by bringing her into Darbyshire.” Both subordinate clauses refer to Elizabeth, but the first served to put Darcy into a subordinate position, i.e., besides Elizabeth Darcy felt this way as well. This sentence works both ways. This is an argument, not a statement.
3. Word order—first the Gardiners, then Darcy, then Elizabeth, etc.

- III. **Figures of Speech:** This category would include metaphors, similes, personification, ellipsis, alliteration, chiasmus, zeugma, etc.

You are my sympathy—my better self—my good angel. I am bound to you with a strong attachment. I think you good, gifted and lively: a fervent, a solemn passion conceived in my heart, draws you to my center and spring of life, wraps my existence around you. (*Jane Eyre*)

1. Begins with a metaphor—“you are my sympathy,” and then gives several alternative metaphors—“my better self” and “my good angel.” This suggests either that the three are equal, or that Rochester is being indecisive.
2. Parallel construction of the first and third sentences—the three are terms of the metaphor and then “good, gifted and lovely” suggests that these may be terms of the first metaphor.

3. Extended figure of speech in the third sentence—solemn passion is personified—it can “draw” Jane toward it. “Existence” is likened to a cloak which the personified “passion” can “wrap” around Jane.

IV. **Images and Themes:** Some words can have more than one meaning (it’s good to look them up in the dictionary. And also, within the passage can evoke previous scenes, images or ideas—ones the novel has already presented.

There was a terrible cutting truth in Tom’s words—that hard rind of truth which is discerned by unimaginative, unsympathetic minds. Maggie always writhed under this judgement of Tom’s: she rebelled and humiliated at the same time.... (*Mill on the Floss*)

1. There is more than one kind of truth presented in the passage—regular truth and “terrible truth”—and an argument could be made that these two kinds of truth are also presented in the novel at a whole.
2. “Cutting”—related to Tom’s threatening Maggie with the scimitar—also Maggie cutting her hair when she has been criticized. Tom’s cutting remarks characteristic of his relationship with Maggie.
3. “Judgement”—relates to the sense of justice and judgement that the novel represents.
4. “Writhing”—Tom makes animals “writhe”—the word suggest pain, degradation and punishment. Tickling the toad?

V. **Context:** When you are analyzing a passage you are taking it out of context. Make sure that you put it back into its context! Remember that you experience a novel cumulatively, and that your feelings and impressions of the characters, themes, etc. change. For example, if you’re looking at the passage where Jane Eyre rebels against John Reed, you need to consider that this is early on in the novel and that other aspects of her character are developed as the novel progresses. This does not mean that you would have to discuss all the other aspects of Jane’s character, but you should acknowledge the limitations of doing a close reading of a single passage.

VI. **Putting it All Together:** After you have looked at literal meaning, grammatical structure, figures of speech, themes and images and context, you need to decide what all of these say about your passage. Sometimes there won’t be clear distinctions—that is to say, the use of metaphor in a sentence might be dependent upon the sentence’s syntax, for example. Some arguments that could be made from the examples given here are:

1. In this passage from *Wide Sargasso Sea* we see the nun treating Bertha as if she has some mental deficiency. She repeats Louisa’s name twice, as if Bertha had hearing problems, and she seems to assume that Bertha might feel “strange.”
2. Rochester’s choice of words in this passage from *Jane Eyre* suggest either that he cannot find specific words to express his feelings, or that he sees a similarity between the terms “my sympathy,” “my better self” and “my good angel.” “My sympathy” implies a somewhat condescending attitude towards Jane (that is, she is the object of his sympathy), but “my good angel” suggests, paradoxically, that Rochester is the one to pitied (Jane, as the “good angel,” is an object of pious reverence). At the same time, “my better self” implies a splitting of the self into two halves (into an inferior self and a superior or “better” self that is also, in essence, Jane’s double).