Close Reading: Basics

Close reading is a method of analyzing how the presentation of content affects its meaning. As the name suggests, close reading involves reading a text slowly and thoughtfully, attending to how form and meaning interact. While it can be applied to all types of texts, from poetry to advertising, in this class we will be working predominantly on close reading scholarly articles and theory.

As with all scholarship in the Humanities (and to some degree the Social Sciences), close reading will be an important, if not the most important type of evidence you employ. The interpretations you develop will form the foundation of your claims and serve as the backbone of your paragraphs.

In some cases, you will be reading “with the grain,” demonstrating how the form of a text influences its content. More often, though, you will be reading the text “against the grain,” elucidating tensions and conflicts in the way the ideas are expressed and constructed.

Since it comprehends a wide variety of techniques, close reading is easy to learn but hard to master. Among many aspects of writing, close reading of prose often focuses on:

- **Choice of terms:** examine the specific terms the passage uses. Why has the author chosen one particular term over another? Especially with key terms of an argument, think about the alternative connotations they offer. Referring to the Information Age as a digital “regime” rather than an “era” or “epoch,” for example, evokes negative associations with authoritarian control and political oppression. Try looking up terms in the Oxford English Dictionary Online, which provides a wealth of information on usage and etymology.

- **Reasoning:** think about the connection between each claim. Does “Claim A” necessarily lead to “Claim B”? What other possibilities does this reasoning exclude? What other forces or influences (e.g. gender, race, social class) does this reasoning ignore? This mode of close reading can be effectively employed by interrogating the “warrants” of a claim – the principles and/or assumptions behind an argument. For instance, if an author argues that school shootings are caused simply by violent video games, what factors or forces is he/she overlooking?

- **Evidence & examples:** consider the relevance, quantity, and credibility of the evidence the author provides. Is there enough evidence to substantiate his/her claim? The amount of evidence provided should be proportionate to the ambition of the claim; a claim about all of American culture, for instance, should be premised on more than two examples from *The Great Gatsby*. Is the evidence convincingly analyzed? Is there an alternative interpretation of the evidence? Does is possess rhetorical facets the argument overlooks?

- **Rhetorical devices:** how do rhetorical devices, such as antitheses and repetitions influence the meaning of the passage? How does the phrasing of the sentences, including their order, length, and complexity, influence their meaning? Think about the way such devices shape the tone and impact of a claim. At the same time, consider the ways that rhetorical devices conceal or manage flaws in the argument. Couldn’t a rhetorical question, for instance, subtly encourage us to go along with a problematic argument?