

Close Reading Essay Assignment

This assignment requires you to compose an essay based on your close reading and interpretation of one of the stories/narratives you are reading this semester. Quote from the text to illustrate your analysis. Your essay must be a minimum of 1500 words in length. It must follow MLA formatting and citation rules.

To compose your essay, focus your analysis on one of the elements of fiction. You may use ideas from your own weekly discussion posts and/or the questions below:

Questions about character

- Who is the major character? What do you learn about this character for his or her actions and speeches? From the speeches and actions of other characters? How else do you learn about the character?
- How important is the character to the work's principal action? Which characters oppose the major character? How do the major character and the opposing character(s) interact? What effects do these interactions create?
- In what ways is the character's major trait a strength – or a weakness? As the story progresses, to what degree does the trait become more or less prominent? How does this affect the development of the story?

Questions about plot and structure

- If the story departs from the formal structure of exposition, complication, crisis, climax, and resolution, what purpose do those departures serve?
- Where does an important action or major section (such as the climax) begin? End? How is it related to the other formal structural elements, such as the crisis? Is the climax an action, a realization, or a decision? To what degree does it relieve the work's tension? What is the effect of the climax on your understanding of the characters involved in it? How is this effect related to the arrangement of the climax?

Questions about setting

- What connections, if any, are apparent between locations and characters? Do the locations bring characters together, separate them, facilitate their privacy, make intimacy and conversation difficult?
- What cultural, religious, and political conditions are brought out in the story? How do the characters accept and adjust to these conditions? How do the conditions affect the characters' judgements and actions?

- What is the state of houses, furniture, and objects? What connections can you find between these conditions and the outlook and behavior of the characters?

Questions about ideas or themes

- What idea seems particularly important in the work? Why? Is it asserted directly, indirectly, dramatically, ironically? Does anyone method predominate? Why?
- How pervasive in the work is the idea? To what degree is it associated with a major character or action? How does the structure of the work affect or shape your understanding of the idea?
- What value or values are embodied in the idea? Of what importance are the values to the work's meaning?

Questions about symbolism and allegory

- What symbols that you consider cultural or universal can you discover in names, objects, places, situations, or actions in the work? How are these symbols used? What do they mean, both specifically, in the story, or universally, in a broader context?
- What enables you to identify the story as a parable or fable? What lesson or moral is either clearly stated or implicit?

Questions about historical, intellectual, and cultural context

- Are historical circumstances specifically mentioned? What are they? How do they affect the characters and plot?
- To what national, ethnic, social, and economic class do the principal characters belong? What is their background? What values do they hold or represent?
- Is the principal character (or any character) an important part of the prevailing social and economic system as outlined in the work, or is he an outsider? If he is outside the system, what conditions have put and now keep him there? Are you made to feel pleased or angry with these conditions?