What Is Close Reading?

Close reading, sometimes called explication of text, means developing an understanding of a text that is based on its small details and the larger ideas those details evoke or suggest. Although you might worry that taking a work apart somehow lessens its power or the pleasure of reading it, the opposite is usually true. By looking at the various parts of a poem or passage of fiction, you come to appreciate the writer’s artistry and understand how a writer uses various techniques to make a statement, suggest an emotion, or convey an idea. John Ciardi’s classic book on analyzing poetry is entitled *How Does a Poem Mean?* — and that’s the purpose of close reading: to analyze not just what a piece of literature means but how that meaning comes about. When you write a close analysis essay, you start with the larger ideas you’ve discovered and use the small details—the words themselves and how they’re arranged—to support your interpretation of the meaning of the piece.

The key to close reading is, of course, observation—taking note of what you read and what you think about it, and asking questions. The good news is that the texts you are asked to read closely are usually not that long, which means you can read them several times. Each time you read a text, you will notice more and more. Later in the chapter we’ll suggest specific strategies—such as annotating and using a graphic organizer—that will help you organize what you notice, pose questions about your observations, and even answer the questions you’ve posed. Let’s start with what you notice when you first read a poem or passage of fiction.

First-Impression Questions

Take a look at this excerpt from *My Antonia* by Willa Cather, a novel about early settlers in the American West, narrated by a young boy who moves from Virginia to Nebraska to be brought up by his grandparents. As you read, jot down some questions that arise from your first impressions.

I sat down in the middle of the garden, where snakes could scarcely approach unseen, and leaned my back against a warm yellow pumpkin. There were some
ground-cherry bushes growing along the furrows, full of fruit. I turned back the papery triangular sheaths that protected the berries and ate a few. All about me giant grasshoppers, twice as big as any I had ever seen, were doing acrobatic feats among the dried vines. The gophers scurried up and down the ploughed ground. There in the sheltered draw-bottom the wind did not blow very hard, but I could hear it singing its humming tune up on the level, and I could see the tall grasses wave. The earth was warm under me, and warm as I crumbled it through my fingers. Queer little red bugs came out and moved in slow squadrons around me. Their backs were polished vermilion, with black spots. I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.

[1918]

After just one reading, you can probably get a sense of the tone of this passage and the mood it creates; you might even be able to imagine a few things about its narrator, its setting, and even its themes. You will surely have questions about how and why Cather’s style is so distinct, and that is the first step in reading closely.

Here are some questions that a first reading may raise. Your questions may be similar to the ones here, or you may have come up with completely different ones.

• What part do the snakes play in this passage about happiness?
• What might it mean that the passage is set in a garden?
• How big is that pumpkin? How big are the grasshoppers, really?
• What makes the objects in the passage so vivid?
• Why does the narrator connect happiness and death?
• How does the narrator fit—literally and figuratively—into the landscape?
• How does the passage change from beginning to end?

What’s important at this point is not necessarily answering the questions but simply asking them. By posing questions, you’re engaging with the text—you’re reading actively.

• ACTIVITY •

Read the following poem by A. E. Housman. Then create your own first-impression questions.
To an Athlete Dying Young
A. E. HOUSMAN

The time you won your town the race
We chaired you through the market-place;
Man and boy stood cheering by,
And home we brought you shoulder-high.

To-day, the road all runners come,
Shoulder-high we bring you home,
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsman of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay
And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose.

Eyes the shady night has shut
Cannot see the record cut,
And silence sounds no worse than cheers
After earth has stopped the ears:

Now you will not swell the rout
Of lads that wore their honours out,
Runners whom renown outran
And the name died before the man.

So set, before its echoes fade,
The fleet foot on the sill of shade,
And hold to the low lintel up
The still-defended challenge-cup.

And round that early-laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.

[1896]

The Elements of Style

The point of close reading is to go beyond merely summarizing a work to figuring out how a writer's stylistic choices convey the work's message or meaning. Once you begin to analyze literature closely, you will see how all of the parts of a piece of literature work together, from the structure of the piece down to individual word choices. The following is a brief introduction to the essential elements of style. Understanding these terms
and concepts will give you things to be on the lookout for as you close-read, as well as vocabulary to help you describe what you see. Examples for all of these concepts, and more, are available in the glossary at the back of the book.

**Diction**

Authors choose their words carefully to convey precise meanings. We call these word choices the author’s *diction*. A word can have more than one dictionary definition, or *denotation*, so when you analyze diction, you must consider all of a word’s possible meanings. If the words have meanings or associations beyond the dictionary definitions, their *connotations*, you should ask how those relate to the meaning of the piece. Sometimes a word’s connotations will reveal another layer of meaning; sometimes they will affect the tone, as in the case of *formal* or *informal diction*, which is sometimes called *slang*, or *colloquial* language. Diction can also be *abstract* or *concrete*. Let’s look at an example of diction from the third stanza of Housman’s poem:

> Smart lad, to slip betimes away  
> From fields where glory does not stay  
> And early though the laurel grows  
> It withers quicker than the rose.

In the third line, Housman plays with the multiple denotations of the word *laurel*, which is both a small evergreen tree, and an honor or accolade. Housman is using these multiple denotations to establish a paradox. Though the laurel that represents fame is evergreen, fame itself is fleeting, even more fleeting than the rosy bloom of youth.

**Figurative Language**

Language that is not literal is called figurative, as in a *figure of speech*. Sometimes this kind of language is called *metaphorical* because it explains or expands on an idea by comparing it to something else. The comparison can be explicit, as in the case of a *simile*, which makes a comparison using *like* or *as*; or it can be an implied comparison, as in the case of a *metaphor*. *Personification* is a figure of speech in which an object or animal is given human characteristics. An *analogy* is a figure of speech that usually helps explain something unfamiliar or complicated by comparing it to something familiar or simple.

When a metaphor is extended over several lines in a work, it’s called an *extended metaphor*. Other forms of figurative language include *overstatement* (or *hyperbole*), *understatement, paradox* (a statement that seems contradictory but actually reveals a surprising truth), and *irony*. There are a few different types of *irony*, but *verbal irony* is the most common. It occurs when a speaker says one thing but really means something else, or when there is a noticeable incongruity between what is expected and what is said.

**Imagery**

*Imagery* is the verbal expression of a sensory experience and can appeal to any of the five senses. Sometimes imagery depends on very concrete language—that is, descriptions of
how things look, feel, sound, smell, or taste. In considering imagery, look carefully at how the sense impressions are created. Also pay attention to patterns of images that are repeated throughout a work. Often writers use figurative language to make their descriptions even more vivid. Look at this description from the Cather passage:

Queer little red bugs came out and moved in slow squadrons around me. Their backs were polished vermilion, with black spots.

The imagery tells us that these are little red bugs with black spots, but consider what is added with the words “squadrons” and “vermilion,” both figurative descriptions.

Syntax

Syntax is the arrangement of words into phrases, clauses, and sentences. When we read closely, we consider whether the sentences in a work are long or short, simple or complex. The sentence might also be cumulative, beginning with an independent clause and followed by subordinate clauses or phrases that add detail; or periodic, beginning with subordinate clauses or phrases that build toward the main clause. The word order can be the traditional subject-verb-object order or inverted (e.g., verb-object-subject or object-verb-subject). You might also look at syntactic patterns, such as several long sentences followed by a short sentence. Housman uses inversion in several places, perhaps to ensure the rhyme scheme but also to emphasize a point. When he writes, “And home we brought you shoulder-high” (l. 4), the shift in expected word order (“We brought you home”) emphasizes “home,” which is further emphasized by being repeated two lines later.

Tone and Mood

Tone reflects the speaker’s attitude toward the subject of the work. Mood is the feeling the reader experiences as a result of the tone. Tone and mood provide the emotional coloring of a work and are created by the writer’s stylistic choices. When you describe the tone and mood of a work, try to use at least two precise words, rather than words that are vague and general, such as happy, sad, or different. In describing the tone of the Cather passage, you might say that it is contented and joyful. What is most important is that you consider the style elements that went into creating the tone.

Now that you have some familiarity with the elements of style, you can use them as a starting point for close reading. Here are some questions you can ask of any text:

**Diction**

- Which of the important words (verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs) in the poem or passage are general and abstract, and which are specific and concrete?
- Are the important words formal, informal, colloquial, or slang?
- Are there words with strong connotations, words we might refer to as “loaded”?
Figurative Language
• Are some words not literal but figurative, creating figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, and personification?

Imagery
• Are the images—the parts of the passage we experience with our five senses—concrete, or do they depend on figurative language to come alive?

Syntax
• What is the order of the words in the sentences? Are they in the usual subject-verb-object order, or are they inverted?
• Which is more prevalent in the passage, nouns or verbs?
• What are the sentences like? Do their meanings build periodically or cumulatively?
• How do the sentences connect their words, phrases, and clauses?
• How is the poem or passage organized? Is it chronological? Does it move from concrete to abstract or vice versa? Or does it follow some other pattern?

ACTIVITY

Reread Housman’s “To an Athlete Dying Young” (p. 21), and use it to answer the preceding questions on style.

A Sample Close Analysis
Let’s look at a passage from Eudora Welty’s short story “Old Mr. Marblehall.”

There is Mr. Marblehall’s ancestral home. It’s not so wonderfully large—it has only four columns—but you always look toward it, the way you always glance into tunnels and see nothing. The river is after it now, and the little back garden has assuredly crumbled away, but the box maze is there on the edge like a trap, to confound the Mississippi River. Deep in the red wall waits the front door—it weighs such a lot, it is perfectly solid, all one piece, black mahogany. . . . And you see—one of them is always going in it. There is a knocker shaped like a gasping fish on the door. You have every reason in the world to imagine the inside is dark, with old things about. There’s many a big, deathly-looking tapestry, wrinkling and thin, many a sofa shaped like an S. Brocades as tall as the wicked queens in Italian tales stand gathered before the windows. Everything is draped and hooded and shaded, of course, unaffectionate but close. Such rosy lamps! The only sound would be a breath against the prisms, a stirring of the chandelier. It’s like old eyelids, the house with one of its shutters, in careful working order, slowly opening outward.

[1937]
The passage begins with an incongruity: the house is an “ancestral home,” yet “it’s not so wonderfully large.” This sets up a discrepancy between what we might expect and what the speaker describes. The concrete details in the passage—columns, box maze, front door, knocker, tapestry, sofa, brocades, lamps—suggest formality and elegance, yet adjectives such as “wrinkling and thin,” “draped,” “hooded,” and “shaded” create images of decay, deception, even death. The S-shaped sofas are so snake-like that they practically hiss. The speaker’s description creates a sense of decay and menace, from this house that does not live up to the grand description of “ancestral home.”

Figurative language emphasizes these incongruities. The speaker uses a simile (in this simile, “like” is implied rather than explicit) to describe the way observers look at the house without actually seeing anything, “the way you always glance into tunnels and see nothing.” The box maze is not fun or beautiful but “like a trap,” a door knocker is not welcoming but “shaped like a gasping fish,” brocades are not elegant but “tall as the wicked queens in Italian tales.” Personification deepens this sense of mystery. The river “is after it now,” as if in pursuit of the house. The front door “waits,” prepared to swallow up any visitors. The furniture is “draped and hooded and shaded,” calling to mind both ghosts and executioners. The final simile personifies the house as being “like old eyelids.” This image literally refers to the shutters opening slowly but also emphasizes age and decrepitude while suggesting that this house is alive, and watching you. In fact, all of these figures of speech suggest that something sinister is afoot.

Apart from the one short sentence fragment—“Such rosy lamps!”—the sentences are fairly long and build through accumulation of detail. Most are in normal word order with clauses and phrases added one after another to characterize the house and add description and qualification. One exception is an example of inverted syntax—“Deep in the red wall waits the front door”—a phrase that underscores the menace of the entranceway. These sentences acquaint the reader with the house—and suggest something about the character of its owner, Mr. Marblehall. Through the eye of the speaker, we become wary of this place and its occupant.

**ACTIVITY**

Below is the conclusion to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*. At the end of the novel, its narrator, Nick Carraway, remembers Jay Gatsby as a person with a great “capacity for wonder.” Read the passage carefully. Then analyze how the style conveys this sense of Gatsby.

*From The Great Gatsby*

_F. Scott Fitzgerald_

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’
eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning——

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

1925

Special Considerations for Reading Poetry Closely

Reading poetry and fiction closely requires the same careful attention to language, but when you read poetry closely, you will look at some additional elements of style and structure.

Rhyme

As you know, some poems rhyme and some—those written in free verse—do not. Rhyme at the end of a line is called end rhyme, while rhyme within a line of poetry is called internal rhyme. Eye (or sight) rhymes should be considered in addition to the rhymes you can hear. When an author uses poetic license to rhyme words that do not sound quite the same, it is called near rhyme. Rhyme is usually notated using letters of the alphabet. For instance, a simple quatrains or four-line stanza might rhyme abab, or be arranged as couplets that rhyme aabb. The pattern of rhyme for an entire poem is called its rhyme scheme. It can be useful to consider the effects of rhyme in a poem by charting its rhyme scheme; reading a rhyming poem out loud is also helpful.

Meter

The lines in structured poems often follow a regular pattern of rhythm called a meter. Literally, meter counts the measure of a line, referring to the pattern of stressed or unstressed syllables, combinations of which we call feet. Iambic meter is by far the most common in English. An iamb is a poetic foot of two syllables with the stress, or accent, on
the second, as in the word “again,” or the phrase “by far.” The two most common metric patterns are **iambic pentameter**, in which a line consists of five iambic feet, and **iambic tetrameter**, which measures four iambic feet. Notice how “To an Athlete Dying Young,” the Housman poem that you read, is in iambic tetrameter. Each of its lines follows a rhythm of four beats, each one an iambic foot with the emphasis on the second syllable:

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The time | you won | your town | the race
We chaired | you through | the market | place.
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Notice how odd it would sound if you were to emphasize the first syllable:

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The time | you won | your town | the race.
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Shakespeare often uses **blank verse**—that is, unrhymed iambic pentameter. For example, in *Hamlet* (p. 720) the ghost speaks chiefly in blank verse. The same blank verse may be spoken in ten words of one syllable each, as in “To prick and sting her. Fare thee well at once,” or in as few as three words: “Unhouseled, disappointed, unanealed.”

**Form**

Poetry is sometimes written in conventional forms that can give you hints about how the structure relates to the meaning of the poem. When you recognize a traditional form, consider whether it maintains the conventions or defies them. When you look at the structure of a poem that is not in a traditional form, try to figure out how it is organized. Is it a narrative, in which the action dictates the structure? Are the stanzas chronological, cause and effect, or question and answer? Look for word or sentence patterns or patterns of imagery that might reveal the relationships among the stanzas. Ultimately, what you should be on the lookout for is how the structure reinforces the meaning of the poem.

Although poems have many specialized forms, the most common is the **sonnet**. Traditionally written as love poems, the sonnet form has been used for a wide variety of purposes, including war poems, protest poems, and parodies. Sonnets generally consist of fourteen lines, usually in iambic pentameter, as you may observe in the opening lines of the Shakespearean sonnet you will read in this chapter (p. 36):

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When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes
I all alone beweep my outcast state.
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There are two classic types of sonnet. The **Italian**, or Petrarchan, **sonnet** is divided into an octave (eight lines) rhyming *abba, abba* and a sestet (six lines) with a variety of different rhyme schemes: *cdcdcd, cdecde, or cdcdcd*. Traditionally, the octave raises an issue or expresses a doubt, and the sestet resolves the issue or doubt. The shift from the first to the second section is called the “turn.” The **English**, or **Shakespearean, sonnet** consists of three four-line stanzas and a couplet at the end. This type of sonnet rhymes *abab, cdcd, efe, gg*. The third stanza usually provides the turn, and the last two lines often close the sonnet with a witty remark.
Other common traditional forms include:

- **Elegy.** A contemplative poem, usually for someone who has died.
- **Lyric.** A short poem expressing the personal thoughts or feelings of a first-person speaker.
- **Ode.** A form of poetry used to meditate on or address a single object or condition. It originally followed strict rules of rhythm and rhyme, but by the Romantic period it was more flexible.
- **Villanelle.** A form of poetry in which five tercets, or three-line stanzas (rhyme scheme abaa), are followed by a quatrain (rhyme scheme abaa). At the end of tercets two and four, the first line of tercet one is repeated. At the end of tercets three and five, the last line of tercet one is repeated. These two repeated lines, called refrain lines, are repeated again to conclude the quatrain. Much of the power of this form lies in its repeated lines and their subtly shifting sense or meaning over the course of the poem.

**Poetic Syntax**

In addition to looking at the principles of syntax already discussed, when analyzing poetry you will want to be on the lookout for enjambment (also called a run-on line, when one line ends without a pause and must continue into the next line to complete its meaning) and caesura (a pause within a line of poetry, sometimes punctuated, sometimes not). Consider also line length: are the poem’s lines long or short? Do the poem’s lines create a visual pattern?

**Sound**

Sound is the musical quality of poetry. It can be created through some of the techniques we’ve already mentioned, such as rhyme, enjambment, and caesura. It can also be created by word choice, especially through alliteration (the repetition of initial consonant sounds in a sequence of words), assonance (the repetition of vowel sounds in a sequence of words), and onomatopoeia (use of a word that refers to a noise and whose pronunciation mimics that noise). Sound can also be created by rhythm and cadence (similar to rhythm, but related to the rise and fall of the voice). Like all of the elements of style, the key to analysis is to connect the sound of the poem to its meaning.


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so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
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In only sixteen words, this poem demonstrates how form and sound can not only reinforce an image but can actually create meaning. In this piece, Williams creates a visual image, analogous to a still-life painting. Instead of treating the text as a sentence, he breaks it up into four couplets that guide the way we experience the language, and thus the ideas.

The poem is written in free verse with no capitalization or internal punctuation, so we approach it word by word. The use of enjambment stops us at each interval as if Williams is asking us to consider carefully as we go along. He begins, “so much depends,” stressing the verb and reinforcing how much is at stake by pausing there before continuing to the next line. By giving the preposition “upon” its own line, he seems to be withholding the central image of the poem, thus making it even starker when, in the second stanza, we encounter “a red wheel / barrow.” The monosyllables in the third line give us a closer perspective and break the image down into its parts. Even the word “wheelbarrow” is divided, perhaps to remind us that it is a compound—and crafted—word, just as the wheelbarrow itself is a well-crafted tool (a wheel + a barrow).

In the next stanza, Williams vividly develops the image: the red wheelbarrow is “glazed with rain / water,” giving us a clearer sense of its texture and appearance. The fourth couplet adds a contrast of color and movement when the position of the wheelbarrow is described as “beside the white / chickens”—static red juxtaposed with moving white.

The sounds reinforce the sensuous image being created. Williams unifies the first and second stanzas with the long o sounds present in the words “so” and “barrow.” The alliteration of r in “red” and “rain” links the second and third stanzas, as does the assonance of “glazed” with “rain” and “beside” with “white.” The ch of “much” in the opening line echoes in the final line’s “chickens,” bringing the poem full circle.

Thus, even a modern poem—one that does not have the formality or strict rules of a villanelle or sonnet—illustrates the importance of form and sound. By arranging a series of very simple words, carefully chosen and placed, Williams turns a straightforward declarative sentence into a vivid image full of subtle shades of meaning.

Now that you have some familiarity with the elements of style specific to poetry, you can use them when reading poetry closely. Here are some questions you can ask of any text:

**Rhyme**

- Does the poem have a regular rhyme scheme? If so, what is it?
- What other types of rhymes does the poem include, such as internal rhymes, sight rhymes, or near rhymes?
- How does the rhyme scheme affect the poem’s sound, tone, or meaning?
CHAPTER 2  •  CLOSE READING

Meter
• Does the poem have a regular meter? If so, what is it?
• Read the poem aloud. How does the meter affect the tone of the poem? For instance, does the meter make the poem seem formal, informal, singsongy, celebratory, somber?

Form
• Does the poem follow a traditional form? If so, which?
• If the poem follows a traditional form, but has untraditional content, what might be the poet's purpose in subverting the traditional form?
• If the poem does not follow a traditional form, what sort of logic structures the poem? For instance, why are the stanzas broken as they are? What is the relationship among the stanzas?

Poetic Syntax
• What examples of enjambment can you find? How does the enjambment affect the sound and meaning of the line?
• What examples of caesura can you find? What is the impact of the caesura?
• If the poem has sentences, are they long or short or a combination of the two? How does the length of the sentences relate to the meaning of the poem?

Sound
• How does the poem use rhyme, meter, form, and poetic syntax to create sound?
• How does the poem use repetition, such as alliteration and assonance, to create sound?
• How do the sounds created in the poem connect to the meaning of the poem?

• ACTIVITY •

Use the following sonnet by John Keats to answer the questions above.

Bright Star, would I were stedfast as thou art—
JOHN KEATS

Bright Star, would I were stedfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night,
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature’s patient, sleepless Eremite,¹
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth’s human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen masque
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—

¹Hermit, particularly one under a religious vow.—Eds.
A Sample Close Analysis

Now that we’ve considered some of the specific techniques poets use to convey their message, let’s look at a poem by Robert Herrick, “Delight in Disorder,” in which he describes the appeal of dressing in a way that is careless—or seemingly so.

A sweet disorder in the dress
Kindles in clothes a wantonness.
A lawn¹ about the shoulders thrown
Into a fine distraction;
An erring lace, which here and there
Enthralls the crimson stomacher,²
A cuff neglectful, and thereby
Ribbons to flow confusedly;
A winning wave, deserving note,
In the tempestuous petticoat;
A careless shoestring, in whose tie
I see a wild civility;
Do more bewitch me than when art
Is too precise in every part.

This is a great poem for practicing close reading. Written over 350 years ago, it may seem difficult at first; after a few readings, though, its meaning becomes clear, and it offers some obvious examples of how style and structure create deeper meaning and nuance.

First, be sure you understand what Herrick is talking about. The speaker describes in detail a woman’s clothing—style, color, and fabric. Some of the vocabulary is unfamiliar to readers today, such as lawn and stomacher. Other words, such as petticoat, may be archaic, but you have probably come across them before. As always, if you don’t know what something means, you should look it up.

As you read the poem, you might have noticed the personification. The speaker notes the “fine distraction” of the scarf thrown over the woman’s shoulders, a “cuff”

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¹Linen scarf. — Eds.
²A piece of stiff, embroidered cloth worn over the stomach. — Eds.
that is “neglectful,” ribbons that “flow confusedly,” and a “tempestuous petticoat.” The personification suggests that the clothes reflect qualities of the person wearing them. Similarly, the “erring lace” “[e]nthralls the crimson stomacher,” as if a mere decoration could take such deliberate action. Two oxymorons (paradoxes made up of two seemingly contradictory words) support the possibility that something is going on other than the literal description of clothing. The opening line refers to a “sweet disorder,” but most would consider disorder unsettling, hardly “sweet”; later, the speaker sees a “wild civility,” another seeming contradiction, because how can “civility”—or courteous behavior—be “wild”? Now that you’re aware of the personification and the oxymorons in this poem, reread it to see if you can pick up on what they suggest.

Note the words suggesting passion: Kindles, wantonness, crimson, tempestuous, and bewitch. Is this poem actually about seduction? If so, its indirect manner is not overtly sexual or vulgar but flirtatious, sly, even mischievous. Alliteration adds a teasing singsong quality: “Delight . . . Disorder,” “winning wave,” and “precise . . . part.” Further, the symmetry of the alliteration brings a bit of order into the description of disorder—but only a bit.

We might look to the structure of the poem for further evidence of the playful tone. The structure seems regular and predictable. The fourteen lines are presented in seven rhymed pairs, or couplets, most having eight syllables. The opening and closing couplets have exactly rhyming final syllables (“dress” / “wantonness” and “art” / “part”). Notice the neatly repeating parallel structure of lines 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11. However, there are inconsistencies within the poem. Some of the rhymes are only near rhymes (e.g., ll. 11 and 12: “tie” does not rhyme with “civility”). The poem’s lines are in iambic tetrameter, but the rhythm is not always even. The evenness of the opening line, for instance (“A sweet disorder in the dress”) is violated by line 10 (“In the tempestuous petticoat”). It seems Herrick’s contention that “disorder” can be “sweet” is reflected in the structure of the poem.

Or, put in more thematic terms, Herrick might be reminding us that appearances can be deceiving, that perfection may not be as appealing as charming imperfections. Or, given the cultural mores of his time dictating strict outward propriety, he might be telling his readers that passion lurks just beneath the veneer of polite society.

**ACTIVITY**

Spend some time reading the following poem by Simon Ortiz closely. Analyze how the poem’s style and structure help the reader understand why the speaker needs his father’s song and what that song might be.

**My Father’s Song**  
**SIMON ORTIZ**

Wanting to say things,  
I miss my father tonight.  
His voice, the slight catch,
the depth from his thin chest,
the tremble of emotion
in something he has just said
to his son, his song:

We planted corn one Spring at Acu—
we planted several times
but this one particular time
I remember the soft damp sand
in my hand.

My father had stopped at one point
to show me an overturned furrow;
the plowshare had unearthed
the burrow nest of a mouse
in the soft moist sand.

Very gently, he scooped tiny pink animals
into the palm of his hand
and told me to touch them.

We took them to the edge
of the field and put them in the shade
of a sand moist clod.

I remember the very softness
of cool and warm sand and tiny alive mice
and my father saying things.

[1977]

Talking with the Text

To become a more careful reader, the most important and helpful thing you can do is read, read, and reread, but there are some techniques that can make your reading more active. The most important point to keep in mind is that your goal is not simply to identify and list literary elements—although that’s a first step—but to analyze their effect. In other words, how do the choices the writer makes help to deliver the work’s message or meaning? We’ll discuss several strategies to help you become a more active reader, a reader who goes beyond summary to analysis and interpretation.

Think Aloud

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the first step to close reading is to start asking questions. These can be simple ones (such as the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary) or more complex ones (such as the meaning suggested by figurative language). Since the goal is to “talk with the text,” a good place to start is by talking to one another.
Pair up with a classmate and take turns reading and thinking out loud; that is, read a line or a sentence, then stop and comment. See what your partner has to say. Then let him or her read the next line or sentence, and repeat the process until you’ve finished the text. Although your comments can go in a number of directions, here are a few suggestions:

- Pose questions about something that confuses you or about a possible interpretation
- Identify unfamiliar vocabulary or allusions
- Note specific stylistic elements and their effect
- Rephrase inverted lines
- Make connections within the poem, or passage of fiction, noting any repetitions, patterns, or contrasts

Once you’ve gone through the text carefully by reading, talking, questioning, and analyzing, you have a strong foundation to either contribute to a discussion in a larger group or prepare to write about the piece.

• ACTIVITY •

Think aloud with a partner on the following poem by Christina Georgina Rossetti. Keep in mind that the title reflects an old English proverb: “Promises are like pie-crust, made to be broken.”

**Promises like Pie-Crust**  
CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI

Promise me no promises,  
So will I not promise you;  
Keep we both our liberties,  
Never false and never true:

Let us hold the die uncast,  
Free to come as free to go;  
For I cannot know your past,  
And of mine what can you know?

You, so warm, may once have been  
Warmer towards another one;  
I, so cold, may once have seen  
Sunlight, once have felt the sun:

Who shall show us if it was  
Thus indeed in time of old?  
Fades the image from the glass  
And the fortune is not told.
If you promised, you might grieve
For lost liberty again;
If I promised, I believe
I should fret to break the chain:
Let us be the friends we were,
Nothing more but nothing less;
Many thrive on frugal fare
Who would perish of excess.

[1861]

Annotation

Annotation is simply noting on the page words that strike you, phrases that confuse or thrill you, or places where you want to talk back to the speaker or narrator. Your goal is to record ideas and impressions for later analysis. If you are not allowed to write in your book, make your annotations on sticky notes attached to the outside margins of the pages. Why bother to do this? Here’s what well-known scholar and avid reader Mortimer Adler says:

Why is marking up a book indispensable to reading? First, it keeps you awake. (And I don’t mean merely conscious; I mean awake.) In the second place, reading, if it is active, is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The marked book is usually the thought-through book. Finally, writing helps you remember the thought you had, or the thoughts the author expressed. (How to Read a Book)

So whether you use sticky notes, highlight passages, or write comments directly in the margins, annotation helps you become a better reader. There are no hard-and-fast rules for annotating properly, but the following approach is a good way to get started.

On your first reading, circle or highlight words or phrases that are interesting or unfamiliar, as well as any elements of style. Note in the margins or on a sticky note why you are circling or highlighting these words. If you just circle, or just highlight, you will soon forget why you did so. Don’t worry if you can’t remember the literary term for what you find; just describe it. Note words that stand out for their beauty or oddity as well as words you need to look up. Don’t hesitate to make an educated guess at their meaning.

On your second reading, move from investigating individual words and phrases to making larger-scale observations. If you see patterns, words, or ideas that seem to connect to one another or are repeated, circle those words or ideas and use lines to connect them. Note shifts in tone or viewpoint. Underline lines or passages that you think are important for understanding the meaning of the poem or passage. Look for themes in the piece. Pose questions. You might want to use colored pencils to differentiate your first-reading annotations from your second-reading annotations. Think of this as a work in progress, an emerging interpretation. You may change your mind later, but annotating will record how your thinking develops.
After the third reading, write for three to five minutes about the work. Paraphrase it, and then react to it as a whole and to its parts. Respond to the work in any way you like. Informal, exploratory writing can help you begin to understand what you read.

Here is an example of annotation, using William Shakespeare's Sonnet 29:

**First Reading**

When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least,
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

More personification

Personification

? Look up

Multiple meanings

Odd use of this word

Sounds like "Happily"

Long simile

**Second Reading**

When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least,
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

More personification

Personification

? Look up

Contrast: cries vs. sings

Repeated references to wealth... but of hope of friends

Multiple meanings

Odd use of this word

Sounds like "Happily"

Long simile

Key! They're poor, but they have each other

Juxtaposing heaven & earth. Earthly things (wealth) not as important as love.

Repetition of "state"

Dual meaning?
Exploratory Writing

In this Shakespearean sonnet, the speaker seems miserable at first. He’s crying about being an outcast. I’m not sure about those “bootless cries.” He says he’s jealous of people who have it better than he has it. He envies people with hope, with talent, with friends, and with scope (not sure what that means, but maybe more open-minded?). He seems to also just wish he had more money. He uses words related to fortune and wealth a few times in the poem, once in the first line, again in line 5, and finally in the second-to-last line, but the meaning is a little different each time. Something happens around line 9, with the word “Yet.” Just when he hates himself the most (“almost despising”), he thinks of someone (his beloved?) and the whole tone of the poem changes. Suddenly birds are singing “hymns at heaven’s gate.” And they’re larks—morning birds, if I remember from Romeo & Juliet—which suggests they’re pretty optimistic. By the last line the speaker has decided that he wouldn’t trade places with a king. It seems as though the speaker is reflecting on how we often get down on ourselves when we are criticized or when things don’t go our way. When the speaker is most depressed, he has only to think of how he is loved, and his optimism returns. He no longer wishes to trade places with those who seem more fortunate (like kings) because somebody loves him. Lucky guy.

Graphic Organizer

Another approach to close reading is to use a graphic organizer, which helps break the poem or passage of fiction down into specific areas for commentary. Your teacher may divide the text for you, or you may discover the divisions as you begin your analysis. For poetry, you can always use the line or stanza divisions as natural breaking points. The graphic organizer on pages 38–39 asks you first to paraphrase what the poem is saying, then to identify a literary element by name or description, and finally to consider its effect. Setting up the close reading in such a structured way guides you through an analysis that does not stop with simple restatement or even identification of elements of style but links them to effect and meaning.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LINES</th>
<th>PARAPHRASE [PUT IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR SUMMARIZE]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When, in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes,</td>
<td>When things are bad, he cries about it by himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I all alone beweep my outcast state,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,</td>
<td>God doesn’t listen to speaker; he is miserable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And look upon myself and curse my fate,</td>
<td>and self-pitying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,</td>
<td>List of anonymous people the speaker envies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desiring this man’s art, and that man’s scope,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With what I most enjoy contented least,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,</td>
<td>When he’s just about hating himself, by chance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haply I think on thee, and then my state,</td>
<td>he thinks of his beloved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like to the lark at break of day arising</td>
<td>Compares state of mind to lark, singing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate;</td>
<td>heavenly music.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings</td>
<td>His beloved makes him feel so wealthy that he</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That then I scorn to change my state with kings.</td>
<td>wouldn’t trade places with a king.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELEMENT OF STYLE</td>
<td>EFFECT OR FUNCTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Fortune” refers to both wealth and luck. Inversion “all alone” before “beweep” “outcast state.”</td>
<td>First reference to words connected to money or riches. Inversion sounds more formal, mournful, sadder. First appearance of three “states.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures of speech “bootless cries” “deaf heaven.”</td>
<td>“Bootless” means “useless” but more pathetic — suggests bare feet. He’s so pathetic that heaven offers no comfort; he can only look inward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The word “like” is repeated. Second word related to wealth: “rich.” Quatrain ends with “contented least”; line also has unconventional word order.</td>
<td>The speaker wants so badly to be someone else that he says it twice; there is no “I” in these lines, just those more fortunate than he is. A person with hope seems “rich” to the speaker. Quatrain ends on a negative note.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift — “Yet” Diction — “Haply” Repetition — second “state”</td>
<td>Tone shifts with “Yet.” “Haply” means “by chance” but sounds like happily. “State” a little better this time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simile — his state is like a lark. “hymns” and “heaven”</td>
<td>The lark — associated with morning — suggests awakening. Word choices change the sonnet’s mood and tone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition — third “state”; third reference to wealth. Word order is straightforward in last line.</td>
<td>The poem ends with a direct, clear statement of what makes the speaker feel fortunate, rich, and wealthy — and it’s not money. He’s content with the “state” he’s in. Word order is traditional: subject, verb, object. Order is restored.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following passage is from the opening of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter*. Annotate the passage using the three-step process we have described.

**From The Scarlet Letter**
**NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE**

A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule, it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house, somewhere in the vicinity of Cornhill, almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on Isaac Johnson’s lot, and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchres in the old church-yard of King’s Chapel. Certain it is, that, some fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front. The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door looked more antique than any thing else in the new world. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.

This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history; but whether it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally overshadowed it,—or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door,—we shall not take upon us to determine. Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from that inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader. It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.

[1850]
From Analysis to Essay: Writing a Close Analysis Essay

It should be clear by now that the closer we examine a piece of writing on the word and sentence level, the closer we come to understanding its deeper level of meaning. When we write about literature, it is those deeper levels that we are interested in; otherwise, we run the risk of summarizing a work rather than analyzing it.

Let's do a close reading of “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” by Yusef Komunyakaa. Begin by reading the piece and formulating some first-impression questions and observations.

Fast breaks. Lay ups. With Mercury’s
Insignia on our sneakers,
We outmaneuvered the footwork
Of bad angels. Nothing but a hot
Swish of strings like silk
Ten feet out. In the roundhouse
Labyrinth our bodies
Created, we could almost
Last forever, poised in midair
Like storybook sea monsters.
A high note hung there
A long second. Off
The rim. We’d corkscrew
Up & dunk balls that exploded
The skullcap of hope & good
Intention. Bug-eyed, lanky,
All hands & feet . . . sprung rhythm.
We were metaphysical when girls
Cheered on the sidelines.
Tangled up in a falling,
Muscles were a bright motor
Double-flashing to the metal hoop
Nailed to our oak.
When Sonny Boy’s mama died
He played nonstop all day, so hard
Our backboard splintered.
Glistening with sweat, we jibed
& rolled the ball off our
Fingertips. Trouble
Was there slapping a blackjack
Against an open palm.
Dribble, drive to the inside, feint,
& glide like a sparrow hawk.
Lay ups. Fast breaks.
We had moves we didn’t know
We had. Our bodies spun
On swivels of bone & faith,
Through a lyric slipknot
Of joy, & we knew we were
Beautiful & dangerous.

[1992]

Analyzing

Sometimes it’s helpful to start by summarizing the work in one sentence, just so you’re sure what’s going on.

In “Slam, Dunk, & Hook,” the speaker expresses how basketball provided an escape from his life’s troubles.

Clearly, even this initial statement engages in a certain level of interpretation — not only does it state that the poem is about basketball, but it also draws the inference that the speaker’s life was troubled and that basketball was his means of escape. The next step is examining what makes the poem more complex than this brief summary. How does Komunyakaa convey a sense of exuberance? of joy? of danger? How does he make the situation something we feel rather than just read about?

Let’s begin our analysis by thinking a bit about the poem’s title. It’s all about action, about moves. But a “slam dunk” is just one move, so why is there a comma between “Slam” and “Dunk”? Does this construction anticipate the rhythm in the poem itself? Our next consideration could be the speaker, who is evidently reflecting on a time in his youth when he played basketball with his friends. The speaker describes the “metal hoop” that was “Nailed to [their] oak” and a backboard “splintered” by hard use. We’re not in the world of professional sports or even in the school gym. You will probably notice some things about the poem as a whole, such as its short lines, strong verbs, and vivid images. Keep those things in mind as you take a look at the following annotation, where we examine the way specific elements of style and structure add layers of meaning to Komunyakaa’s poem. We’ll use the three-step annotation process introduced on pages 35–37.

Slam, Dunk, & Hook
YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

Begins with
matter-of-fact
tone

Fast breaks. Lay ups. With Mercury’s
Insignia on our sneakers,
We outmaneuvered the footwork
Of bad angels. Nothing but a hot
Swish of strings like silk
Ten feet out. In the roundhouse
Labyrinth our bodies
Created, we could almost
Last forever, poised in midair
Like storybook sea monsters.
A high note hung there
A long second. Off
The rim. We’d corkscrew.

Allusion: Greek god
Strong visual and
tactile imagery.
Alliteration

Another allusion. All
to things that are
mythical, and possibly
dangerous
Powerful image: Up & dunk balls that exploded. The skullcap of hope & good Intention. Bug-eyed, lanky. All hands & feet . . . sprung rhythm. We were metaphysical when girls Cheered on the sidelines. Tangled up in a falling, Muscles were a bright motor Double-flashing to the metal hoop Nailed to our oak.

Contrast between their powerful play and awkward bodies

Good description

Refers to tree, but oak is strong. Is basketball the player's "oak"?

Returns to vivid description, but tone is reverent, not boastful

Personification

Look up

Inversion of first line

When Sonny Boy's mama died He played nonstop all day, so hard Our backboard splintered. Glistening with sweat, we jibed & rolled the ball off our Fingertips. Trouble

Was there slapping a blackjack Against an open palm. Dribble, drive to the inside, feint, & glide like a sparrow hawk.

Lay ups. Fast breaks.

Realizing potential

We had moves we didn’t know We had. Our bodies spun On swivels of bone & faith, Through a lyric slipknot Of joy, & we knew we were Beautiful & dangerous.

Inversion of first line

[1992]

Exploratory Writing

A "slam dunk" is a type of shot in basketball—a skillful play, and a little victory in itself, so you say about something you did really well, "It was a slam dunk." But Komunyakaa separates the two words as if "slam" and "dunk"—and "hook"—are separate. Maybe there are connoisseurs of the game who know the difference between a slam and a dunk? But the commas create a sense of jerky movement, abruptness. The title is fragmented, just like the images in the poem—lines break up sentences, some sentences aren't full sentences, lots of strong verbs are used ("outmaneuvered," "poised," "corkscrew," "exploded," "tangled up," "rolled," "dribble," "glide"). Maybe the poet has pent-up emotion or maybe he is signifying that the players do. All the motion and movement gets played out in the game, but even the basketball court can't contain it. There's energy but also anger. The speaker (Komunyakaa?) is remembering, so the images might be fragmented the way memory is often thought to be. Still, even with the fragmentation, these guys are beautiful, almost majestic in the way they fly and spin in the air and take control of the ball.
Playing basketball’s a release for some, like the way Sonny Boy tries to forget the pain of his mother’s death when he’s on the court. He plays until the “backboard splintered,” just like his emotions are splintered. I think these young black men— their race isn’t actually mentioned, but you get a sense that they’re African American like Komunyakaa—are overflowing with potential to defy their hard lives and racial oppression. They take out their anger on the basketball court. Those references to “Mercury” and “sea monsters” are about gods, mythical creatures who are superhuman. That’s how the players feel on the court, where being young and strong means everything. But off the court—it’s a different world.

There is no denying that doing a detailed annotation like this one takes time. But understanding a text with layers of meaning requires time and attention to detail, especially if you are preparing to write about it. Plus, once you have examined the work so closely, you’ll have already found ideas and evidence to use in your essay.

Developing a Thesis Statement

When it comes time to write a close analysis essay, the first thing to do is formulate a thesis statement. You may end up changing it as you go, but having some idea of your argument will help you stay focused. Your teacher will likely have provided you with a prompt or an assignment, and if you’ve done a thorough job of reading and taking notes in the form of annotation or a graphic organizer, you will probably have more ideas than you can actually use in the essay. For example, your reading may have revealed the intense and vivid imagery that Komunyakaa develops. You may have also noticed mythic allusions to Mercury and sea monsters, and underlying themes—like the transformative power of the game. You might also have noticed the feeling that trouble always seems to be looming nearby, but never seems to touch the players while they’re playing. You may have noted the poem’s syntax, with lines that alternate between sentences and fragments. Does this pattern suggest the quick movements of the game? There are several ways to approach this poem and many possible interpretations.

Let’s say your teacher has assigned you the following prompt:

Write an essay in which you discuss how the style and structure of Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” convey the speaker’s attitude toward the game of basketball.

Remember, your thesis must be an interpretation: an argument about the meaning of the poem that you will support with evidence from the text. You should avoid creating a thesis statement that is so broad that it just restates the prompt or assignment, such as the following:

Yusef Komunyakaa uses style and structure to convey the speaker’s attitude toward the game of basketball in his poem “Slam, Dunk, & Hook.”

Not only does this thesis fail to mention which specific elements the writer plans to discuss, but it also fails to identify the speaker’s attitude. The thesis needs to focus
on specific characteristics of the poem’s style and structure, so that in the body of the essay you can analyze how they help convey your interpretation of the speaker’s attitude toward the game of basketball.

On the other hand, it is important not to narrow your thesis so much that there is nothing to say about it, such as the following:

In “Slam, Dunk, & Hook,” Yusef Komunyakaa uses classical allusions.

Although this thesis isolates a style element—classical allusions—it does not interpret the speaker’s attitude, nor does it recognize the complexity of the poem. You could not discuss a thesis like this for long before running out of things to say. A good thesis should be expressed clearly and should inform the reader of the essay’s purpose. It is the backbone of your essay, and everything in the essay will connect to it.

Working with the prompt above, let’s consider the poem’s style and structure. Looking back at what we’ve noted about “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” in the annotations, we see many vivid images of action, grace, beauty, and the players’ “sprung rhythm.” We also find danger: the danger of a “roundhouse / Labyrinth,” and “Trouble . . . slapping a blackjack / Against an open palm.” The players are also “Beautiful & dangerous,” and when they are on the court they are able to outmaneuver the “bad angels” in their lives. The game seems to help the players both escape the world, and transcend it. They are not just playing basketball with a rickety hoop nailed to an oak tree; they are gods like “Mercury,” they are “sea monsters,” they are “metaphysical.” Remembering that it is always important to address a work’s complexity, we might develop the following thesis—though this is only one possibility—for an essay that examines the way the style and structure of “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” conveys the speaker’s attitude.

In “Slam, Dunk, & Hook,” Yusef Komunyakaa uses vivid images, classical allusions, and metaphors to characterize the game that offers both escape and transcendence for its players.

Organizing a Close Analysis Essay

Once you have an idea for a thesis statement—and, remember, it can change as you plan and write—think about the way you will support it. Look back at the text and at your notes. Think about the ideas that inspired your thesis. Your essay might be organized around the style elements, with a paragraph each on vivid images, classical allusions, and metaphor, in the case of our sample thesis statement. Or you could approach it a different way: you might group your ideas according to the different attitudes the speaker has about basketball, with one paragraph on the beauty of the game, another on how it serves as escape from the troubles of everyday life, and another on how basketball helps the players transcend themselves, becoming mythical, metaphysical.
You’ve probably noticed that the thesis we developed is likely to lead to a five-paragraph essay. Perhaps you’ve been warned to stay away from this organization because it is formulaic or prescriptive. We agree: stay away from the formulaic or prescriptive. However, the five-paragraph essay may or may not fall into that category. There’s no rule that says that every question or topic will fit neatly into an introduction, three body (or developmental) paragraphs, and a conclusion. Yet if you happen to have three points to make, you’ll end up with five paragraphs that could form a cogent and insightful essay.

**Integrating Quotations**

The following essay uses brief quotes from the poem as textual evidence, a word or two woven into the writer’s own sentence. For longer quotations, a forward slash mark indicates a line break. You will notice that each of the examples is explained. In fact, it’s a good idea to aim for a sentence or two of explanation, sometimes called commentary or analysis, for each of your examples. If you need more help with integrating quotations smoothly into your own sentences, see page 152 in Chapter 4.

**Documenting Sources**

In a close analysis essay, you are likely only writing about one text, so you won’t need a formal Works Cited page. Your teacher may ask you to use line numbers to identify where your quotations can be found, but with a short poem or passage of fiction it may be unnecessary. If you do add line numbers, they should go in parentheses after the quotation mark and before your punctuation, like this:

Described as a “roundhouse / Labyrinth” (ll. 6–7), the activity on the court . . .

**A Sample Close Analysis Essay**

Read the sample essay here, and respond to the questions at the end.

The Beauty and Danger of Basketball

Carlton Curtis

In “Slam, Dunk, & Hook,” African American poet Yusef Komunyakaa moves from a description of the physicality of basketball to a philosophical reflection on the lives of the players. Written in terse lines, this poem embodies the energy of young athletes on the court, set against the stark backdrop of the society they live in. Vivid images, classical allusions, and metaphors characterize the game that is both escape and transcendence for its players.
“Slam, Dunk, & Hook” is an exaltation of the sport of basketball and the force of the rhythm, power, and grace it inspires in its players. The beginning lines describe the motion of shots in basketball as swift and beautiful, ballet-like maneuvers, yet the short lines pulse with their own energy, conveying the steady beat of a basketball being dribbled down the court or maybe even a drum beat. By using a fragment such as “Nothing but a hot / Swish of strings like silk / Ten feet out,” Komunyakaa lets an image replace the measured thought of a full sentence. That image captures the quick movement and vitality of the players as they take their best shots. Enjambment, such as “A high note hung there / A long second,” suspends the moment in time, making the reader part of the “long second.” In fact, Komunyakaa ends several lines in midair, as it were, giving a feeling of the players being in flight. They “could almost / Last forever, poised in midair,” they “corkscrew / Up,” and they “feint, / & glide.” Even the ampersand that replaces the word “and” suggests motion and speed.

The poem flows with exuberant motion, captured in verbs such as “corkscrew,” “exploded,” “tangled,” “splintered,” and “Double-flashing.” Komunyakaa emphasizes the sheer physicality with images such as “the roundhouse / Labyrinth our bodies / Created.” These players are “All hands & feet . . . sprung rhythm”; they sweat and dribble. The comparisons created by similes and metaphors emphasize their power. They “glide like a sparrow hawk,” their “Muscles were a bright motor / Double-flashing,” and their “bodies spun / On swivels of bone & faith.” That last image, combining both concrete and abstract words, is a reminder that this game is more than just basketball to them.

The classical allusions to Mercury, a labyrinth, and sea monsters suggest that these players become more than just kids on the street. Although the reference to Mercury—the Roman messenger of the gods—starts as an actual insignia on a player’s sneakers, the symbol also associates the players’ movement with speed, flight, and purpose. They are imbued with a mythical power, an epic sensibility, and are frozen in time with their youthful beauty intact: “we could almost / Last forever, poised in midair / Like storybook sea monsters.” They become so swift that they can “outmaneuver[ed] the footwork / Of bad angels.” The speaker sums up the mythical power of the players on the court when he says, “We were metaphysical when girls / Cheered on the sidelines.” They transcend their physical and perceived limitations and play as the chorus of fans lifts them to a higher state of being. They may not be gods, but they have mythic possibilities.

Yet they are not all grace and beauty. The struggle on the basketball court develops as a metaphor for the lives of these players, trying to “outmaneuver[ed] the footwork / Of bad angels.” The description of muscle and movement gives way in the second half of the poem to a passage about the
death of Sonny Boy's mother, a loss he copes with by escaping to the court: "He played nonstop all day, so hard / Our backboard splintered." Sonny Boy's crisis, the speaker seems to be saying, is not the exception because "Trouble / Was there slapping a blackjack / Against an open palm." Trouble is part of the lives of these young men, who play with a powerful intent in their hearts, the intent to defy the limitations of their bodies and the limitations of their fortunes as young black men in America. They vent their frustrations on the steel rims and backboards of street ball courts and dream of breaking whatever boundaries that personified "Trouble" brings.

The game of basketball is a release for the players in the poem, whether from the perceived limitations of their youth or perhaps racial or economic barriers. The young men lose themselves on the court, wishing to manipulate their lives as effortlessly as they do the ball. They know they must fight to soar and excel beyond their station of second-class citizens. In the end, the game is not just an escape but an exercise in transcendence, where the stakes are control, freedom, and possibility. The intensity and concentration of losing themselves in basketball becomes a "lyric slipknot / Of joy." These young men are not only confident but also menacing in the knowledge that they are both "Beautiful & dangerous."

Questions

1. Examine the relationship between the thesis and the topic sentences. Do you think the basic structure of the essay is effective or ineffective? Why?
2. Paragraphs 2 and 3 discuss vivid imagery, but the second paragraph focuses on how syntax conveys those images. Should syntax have been specified in the thesis? Explain.
3. How does the essay support its argument with evidence from the text? Cite a paragraph that you find especially effective and explain why.
4. The student writer argues that the basketball players are using the sport to overcome racial and economic challenges. To what extent do you think that the textual evidence supports this interpretation?
5. What is another argument you might make based on a close reading of “Slam, Dunk, & Hook”? It does not have to contradict this student’s interpretation entirely but rather offer another way to read the poem or a different conclusion than the one drawn in this sample essay.

• ACTIVITY •

Read the following poem by Edward Hirsch. Then use one of the close reading techniques you’ve learned to generate ideas for a thesis statement and several topic sentences for a close analysis essay.
Fast Break

EDWARD HIRSCH

(In Memory of Dennis Turner, 1946–1984)

A hook shot kisses the rim and hangs there, helplessly, but doesn't drop and for once our gangly starting center boxes out his man and times his jump perfectly, gathering the orange leather from the air like a cherished possession and spinning around to throw a strike to the outlet who is already shoveling an underhand pass toward the other guard scissoring past a flat-footed defender who looks stunned and nailed to the floor in the wrong direction, turning to catch sight of a high, gliding dribble and a man letting the play develop in front of him in slow motion, almost exactly like a coach's drawing on the blackboard, both forwards racing down the court the way that forwards should, fanning out and filling the lanes in tandem, moving together as brothers passing the ball between them without a dribble, without a single bounce hitting the hardwood until the guard finally lunges out and commits to the wrong man while the power-forward explodes past them in a fury, taking the ball into the air by himself now and laying it gently against the glass for a layup, but losing his balance in the process, inexplicably falling, hitting the floor with a wild, headlong motion for the game he loved like a country and swiveling back to see an orange blur floating perfectly through the net.

[1985]
You have probably written comparison and contrast essays in English or other classes. Essay questions that ask you to compare and contrast two poems or prose passages are common in the classroom as well as on standardized tests. They require close reading, of course, but as you read you will also be looking for elements that the two works have in common—or that set them apart. The prompt will frequently give you an idea of what connects the two texts on the surface—often the subjects are the same—but your task is to develop an argument that goes beyond those surface similarities or differences.

Since you have already worked with two poems that are about basketball, let’s consider what else “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” and “Fast Break” have in common and what makes them different. As you plan a comparison and contrast essay, you might want to make a graphic organizer, such as the one below, that will help you generate ideas about the similarities and differences in situation, speaker, imagery, or tone, to name a few.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>“Slam, Dunk, &amp; Hook”</th>
<th>“Fast Break”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SITUATION</td>
<td>Playing pick-up basketball outdoors</td>
<td>Playing organized basketball in a gym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPEAKER (POINT OF VIEW)</td>
<td>First person. The speaker recollects a time when he played basketball with friends.</td>
<td>Also first person, as indicated by “our,” line 3. The speaker describes a particular play, a “fast break” in a game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMAGERY</td>
<td>Vivid and powerful: “hot / Swish of strings like silk,” “the roundhouse / Labyrinth,” “corkscrew / Up &amp; dunk balls that exploded,” “All hands &amp; feet . . . sprung rhythm,” “so hard / Our backboard splintered,” “slapping a blackjack / Against an open palm,” “feint, / &amp; glide like a sparrow hawk”</td>
<td>Graceful and picturesque: “A hook shot kisses the rim,” “gathering the orange leather / from the air,” “who looks stunned and nailed to the floor,” “fanning out / and filling the lanes in tandem,” “for the game he loved like a country,” “an orange blur / floating perfectly through the net”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SYNTAX</td>
<td>Combination of fragments (“Fast breaks. Lay ups,” “Nothing but a hot / Swish of strings like silk / Ten feet out”) with the enjambment of complete sentences throughout (“We were metaphysical when girls / Cheered on the sidelines,” “We had moves we didn’t know / We had”)</td>
<td>The entire poem is one long sentence broken up by enjambment. It feels run-on but actually is not. The syntax evokes the graceful flow of a fast break. The poem describes, in its seventeen couplets, one play, the “fast break” of the title.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**ACTIVITY**

After rereading “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” and “Fast Break,” continue to fill in the chart with your own observations about some of the poems’ other similarities and differences. In continuing to fill out this graphic organizer, you might add rows for theme, rhythm, allusion, figurative language, or other characteristics that you find significant.

### Developing a Thesis Statement

Developing your thesis depends in large measure on the question you’re asked. If your assignment is simply to compare and contrast these two poems, it’s up to you to determine if you want to focus primarily on differences or similarities and then decide which areas or literary elements you will analyze. Keep in mind that the purpose of putting two works (or ideas) next to each other is usually to emphasize something that is not immediately obvious. For instance, the fact that both of these poems are about basketball is pretty obvious; there’s probably not much point in contrasting a dunk with a fast break. However, if you examine how the game affects the players in these poems, you’ll discover more interesting issues, such as how one poem recalls past experience while the other presents the action as if it’s happening now. One presents memories and reflections; the other observes and reports. One is jerky, with a “sprung rhythm,” while the other is more fluid.

If you are given a prompt, you’ll have clearer direction, but it is still up to you to determine the specifics of your analysis. Suppose you are given the following prompt:

> Basketball figures prominently in both Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” and Edward Hirsch’s “Fast Break.” In an essay, compare and contrast the two poems, analyzing the literary devices each writer uses to explore the speaker’s attitude toward the game of basketball.

Even though this prompt is pretty specific, it leaves many questions and decisions up to you. First, it directs you to analyze the literary devices, but it does not indicate which ones. Whether the prompt asks for “literary devices,” “stylistic devices,” “literary techniques,” “resources of language,” “literary elements,” or “formal elements,” you’re being asked to consider the writer’s language. Second, it asks that you “explore the speaker’s attitude toward the game of basketball,” but it doesn’t indicate what that attitude is. So before you can craft a thesis, you need to analyze the poems carefully and think about the themes. How is the relationship between the game and the players in each poem similar or different? Usually you want to begin by finding the common ground, and then note the differences. For instance, you could claim that in both of these poems the speaker attempts to communicate the beauty and excitement of playing basketball. The presentations are, however, quite different. In the Komunyakaa poem, the speaker reflects, identifying memories through imagery, while the speaker in the Hirsch poem observes and reports.

Remember that your thesis should not be too broad:

> Basketball is central to both poems, but the poets use it in different ways.
Your thesis should not focus too narrowly on the meaning of the poem without specifying which resources of language you intend to discuss:

In both poems, the game of basketball is the means the poets use to dramatize the way the speaker is involved with the sport; however, each speaker's involvement is different.

Nor should your thesis focus too narrowly on the resources of language and ignore the theme:

In these two poems, the point of view, images, and rhythmic structure of the two poems are different.

If we balance the two components—attention to the resources of language and attention to meaning—we’ll come up with a working thesis:

In both poems, the game of basketball is the means the poets use to dramatize an intense experience; however, the point of view, imagery, and rhythm of the two poems convey very different experiences.

This is only a working thesis, a draft to be used as a starting point—you can tell by the awkward language and repetition. It identifies the specific resources of language the writer will discuss and begins to develop an interpretation of how the poets are using those resources. The following revised thesis statement attempts, in a succinct fashion, to narrow our scope of interpretation while maintaining focus on the resources of language that the poems share:

In these two poems, the point of view, imagery, and rhythm reveal the relationship between the players and the sport they love, but a world of difference separates the experience of basketball for each of the speakers.

Organizing a Comparison and Contrast Essay

After you have created a thesis statement for your comparison and contrast essay, you need to consider how to organize your essay. In general, you have two alternatives:

Text-by-Text Organization

One way to organize a comparison and contrast essay about two literary works is to divide it into a discussion of the works one by one. In the first developmental paragraphs, you could, for instance, discuss literary elements in “Slam, Dunk, & Hook,” and then in the next paragraphs, discuss how those same elements are used similarly or differently in “Fast Break.” If you are under time constraints, you might write only one paragraph for each poem, but be careful that you don’t try to include too much in a single paragraph. Instead, be sure that your paragraphs are clearly focused and supported and that you draw connections between the two texts.

Let’s consider an outline for an essay responding to the prompt about “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” and “Fast Break.”
Although both Komunyakaa and Hirsch depict basketball as a transformative experience, the rhythm and imagery in the poems show just how different those experiences are.

**Topic Sentence 1**

In “Slam, Dunk, & Hook,” the prevalent images of struggle alongside the fragmented rhythm of the verse suggest that life is a battleground both on and off the court for the players.

**Topic Sentence 2**

In “Fast Break,” the fluid structure and positive connotations of the words in the poem suggest that the players are achieving a singular moment of grace on the court, which is intended to be appreciated as fine art.

If you are faced with time constraints or a restricted length, you might find this text-by-text approach especially useful. An essay developed from this outline, for instance, addresses the prompt and, with the inclusion of strong textual support, could result in an insightful reading of the two poems. Its structure is essentially two sections—one poem, then the next. This logical pattern can be effective as long as the introduction and conclusion emphasize the connections between the two poems that are analyzed in the body paragraphs.

**Element-by-Element Organization**

The alternative is to organize the paragraphs around the literary elements you want to discuss. In the case of the thesis we’re working with here, you could analyze the speaker in both poems, then the imagery in both poems, then the rhythmic structure in both poems. Should each paragraph refer to both works? In most instances, yes, but there are no hard and fast rules. If you have a lot to say about one of the literary elements you’re analyzing, then break the discussion into two paragraphs, one on each poem. As always, form follows function when you are organizing an essay. Rather than a template, your own ideas and the material should guide your decisions about the best way to present an analysis.

The chief advantage of this element-by-element organization is that you are comparing and contrasting as you go, rather than waiting until the end. After a topic sentence that focuses on the point you want to make, you would offer evidence from both poems, reminding the reader of the impact of the difference or similarity.

Consider this outline for an essay organized according to literary elements:

**Thesis**

In these two poems, the point of view, images, and rhythmic structure reveal the relationship between the players and the sport they love, but a world of difference separates the experience of basketball for each of the speakers.
Though both poems are told from a first-person point of view, the speakers are connected to the game in different ways.

While the two poets use syntax in a different manner, in both cases it establishes a rhythm that reflects the pace of the game.

The diction and imagery reflect the meaning of the game of basketball to each speaker.

Because you must juggle two works in a comparison and contrast essay, it is especially important that your transitions are effective. Here are some words and phrases you might use to help keep your work and its intentions clear:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPARISON TRANSITIONS</th>
<th>CONTRAST TRANSITIONS</th>
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<tr>
<td>in comparison</td>
<td>in contrast</td>
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<td>similar to</td>
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<td>while</td>
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Documenting Sources

In a comparison and contrast essay, you will have two sources, so while you probably won’t need a formal Works Cited page, you might be asked to use parenthetical citations in which you identify the work by the writer’s name and line number:

Described as a “roundhouse / Labyrinth” (Komunyakaa ll. 6–7), the basketball court . . .

Described as an “orange blur” (Hirsch l. 33), the descending basketball . . .

If the author of the work is introduced in the sentence, just use the line number:

Komunyakaa describes the players’ movement as “spun . . . Through a lyric slipknot / Of joy” (ll. 38–39) . . .

A Sample Comparison and Contrast Essay

Following is a sample essay that follows the element-by-element form of comparison. Read it, and then discuss the questions that follow.

**One Game, Two Lives**

Talat Rubin

There are many different types of streets in our world, some paved with gold and others with potholes. In the poems “Fast Break” by Edward Hirsch and “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” by Yusef Komunyakaa, each poet captures the essence of the game of basketball and its meaning to the players they depict. While the only piece of equipment needed is a hoop and a ball, the manner and tone of each game differs from community to community. Indeed, the manner of playing in the community of each poet is quite different. I fear that the players in Komunyakaa’s “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” would make mincemeat out of Hirsch’s players in “Fast Break.” In these two poems, the point of view, images, and rhythmic structure reveal the relationship between the players and the sport they love, but a world of difference separates the experience of basketball for each of the speakers.

Though both poems are told from a first-person point of view, the speakers are connected to the game in different ways. Hirsch’s speaker seems to be observing as a reporter, a member of the audience. Yet the description of “our gangly starting center” makes it sound as if the speaker is on the team himself and right in the action. Told in the present tense and described moment-by-moment, this perspective adds excitement to the poem because we feel that we’re with the speaker, watching the action unfold. In contrast, Komunyakaa’s poem is written as the memory of past events. “We outmaneuvered,” he recalls; “we could almost / Last forever,” he reflects, and “we knew we were / Beautiful & dangerous.” The speaker’s tone indicates an experience that he has considered and examined. The
fact that he remembers so vividly and intensely emphasizes the lasting importance the game had (or has) for him.

While the two poets use syntax in a different manner, in both cases it establishes a rhythm that reflects the pace of the game. In Komunyakaa’s poem, sentence fragments along with the abundant use of periods and commas within sentences emphasize the poem’s truncated beat, which could be the beat of a basketball bouncing off the court, or the heartbeat of the players in excited motion. The abrupt and short lines suggest a combative and harsh pace. In contrast, Hirsch’s poem is one long sentence divided into couplets through enjambment, creating a fluid rhythm to express the grace in this one continuous play. The long sentence, consisting of multiple clauses and descriptive phrases, suggests that this poem, like the play, is a team effort dependent on many small parts. The different syntax of these poems defines the rhythm of two different games.

The diction and imagery reflect the meaning of the game of basketball to each speaker. Hirsch’s words have positive connotations: “kisses,” “cherished possession,” and “together” demonstrate his sense of companionship that is fostered in the sport. They are not mere fellow team members, but “brothers” who share a common purpose. This point is made explicit when the speaker refers to the forward who is playing “the game he loved like a country.” Komunyakaa’s word choice reflects the energy and anger expended during the game. The players are not merely young men—they are almost god-like, with “Mercy’s / Insignia on [their] sneakers.” Komunyakaa evokes the shattering of a young man’s emotional core when the “backboard splintered” in his attempt to forget about the loss of his mother. The language expresses the aggressive manner in which they play, as well as the society they come from. It is an aggressive game where even their graceful motions have violent undertones—they “glide” not like sparrows, but like “sparrow hawk[s].” Yet while Komunyakaa’s basketball is a more physical demonstration of the game than Hirsch’s, the same vitality of spirit can be found in each poem. Like Komunyakaa’s players who “rolled the ball off [their] / Fingertips,” Hirsch’s lay the ball “gently / against the glass.”

These two poets create different visions of their world and game by the imagery they employ. Hirsch creates a gentler, more tender image as a “hook shot kisses the rim.” In contrast, Komunyakaa uses imagery of war, power, and brute force: the players are alternately “storybook sea monsters,” birds of prey, and boys with god-like speed. Basketball was not merely a game to the speaker in “Slam, Dunk, & Hook,” but a battle, similar, we can assume, to the one he waged outside the court.

In their poems, Edward Hirsch and Yusef Komunyakaa describe the physical dimensions of the sport of basketball. In doing so, they not only articulate the meaning of a moment of time in their players’ lives, but also expose the world in which they live. Komunyakaa’s game has its origin on the streets, and his diction demonstrates the roughness of those streets, while Hirsch’s graceful depiction of the sport demonstrates a more benign view of the world. For Hirsch, the game is a
beautiful complement to life. For Komunyakaa, it is the battle that is life. It is clear that the poets come from different neighborhoods, different communities, and most likely different time periods. But what is even clearer is the manner in which this simple game, with a round ball, touched and shaped their lives.

Questions

1. Is the introduction effective? Explain why or why not. If you believe it is not effective, how could it be improved?
2. Why are there two separate paragraphs for the analysis of imagery? Explain whether you think that dividing the analysis into two paragraphs was a good decision.
3. In what ways are transitions used within this essay to emphasize the similarities and differences between the poems?
4. Do you agree with the essay’s argument? Explain why or why not. Which parts of the interpretation do you find most persuasive? questionable?
5. What other literary elements might you have used to make a similar argument?
6. What suggestions can you offer for polishing the essay?

• ACTIVITY •

Read “Traveling through the Dark” by William Stafford and “Woodchucks” by Maxine Kumin, two poems in which a speaker considers the death of animals. Plan and write a comparison and contrast essay in which you analyze the resources of language Stafford and Kumin use to reveal the relationship between the speakers and the animals.

Traveling through the Dark
WILLIAM STAFFORD

Traveling through the dark I found a deer dead on the edge of the Wilson River road. It is usually best to roll them into the canyon: that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing; she had stiffened already, almost cold. I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting, alive, still, never to be born.

Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights; under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red; around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—, then pushed her over the edge into the river.

[1962]

Woodchucks
MAXINE KUMIN

Gassing the woodchucks didn’t turn out right.
The knockout bomb from the Feed and Grain Exchange was featured as merciful, quick at the bone and the case we had against them was airtight, both exits shoehorned shut with puddingstone, but they had a sub-sub-basement out of range.

Next morning they turned up again, no worse for the cyanide than we for our cigarettes and state-store Scotch, all of us up to scratch.
They brought down the marigolds as a matter of course and then took over the vegetable patch nipping the broccoli shoots, beheading the carrots.

The food from our mouths, I said, righteously thrilling to the feel of the .22, the bullets’ neat noses.
I, a lapsed pacifist fallen from grace puffed with Darwinian pieties for killing, now drew a bead on the littlest woodchuck’s face.
He died down in the everbearing roses.

Ten minutes later I dropped the mother. She flipflopped in the air and fell, her needle teeth still hooked in a leaf of early Swiss chard.
Another baby next. O one-two-three the murderer inside me rose up hard, the hawkeye killer came on stage forthwith.

There’s one chuck left. Old wily fellow, he keeps me cocked and ready day after day after day.
All night I hunt his humped-up form. I dream I sight along the barrel in my sleep.
If only they’d all consented to die unseen gassed underground the quiet Nazi way.

[1972]