SUGGESTED CLOSE READING CHECKLIST As stated above, close reading is a necessary skill that will be very useful to you no matter your discipline or your eventual profession. Your classes, your work, your government, and even your pastimes will require you to read or evaluate something difficult, to find hand- and footholds in the material, and make sense of it. In general, "close reading" simply means analyzing a text—be it a photograph, a short story, a poem, a scholarly essay, an operation manual, a tax form, a television commercial—very carefully, crystallizing main ideas, and then drawing conclusions or making decisions based on your analysis.

In other words, close reading means reading a text closely: looking at the details and discussing how those details lead you to make conclusions about the text. The idea is to look at the little pieces and see how they connect to the whole. Close reading is a writing strategy meant to help you gain a better understanding of your reading of a text and to provide you will the necessary textual evidence to support that reading. The goal of any close reading is the following:

- an ability to **understand** the general content of a text even when you don't understand every word or concept in it.
- an ability to spot **techniques** that writers use to get their ideas and feelings across and to **explain** how they work.
- an ability to **judge** whether techniques the writer has used succeed or fail and an ability to **compare and contrast** the successes and failures of different writers' techniques.

Remember—when doing a close reading, the goal is to **closely analyze** the material and explain why details are significant. Therefore, close reading does not try to summarize the author's main points, rather, it focuses on "picking apart" and closely looking at the what the author makes his/her argument, why is it interesting, etc..

The suggested checklist below will help you effectively develop and organize your ideas and produce a close reading. Your approach will vary, depending on if you are just doing a general close reading, or whether you are adapting the instructions below to accommodate an assignment.

HOW DO I DO IT?

1. **First, gather data**. By this, I mean identify the details (the little pieces) that you want to analyze. Keep your focus narrow. Either look at a small section of the text (a few sentences or a paragraph or two) or look at a single repeating detail (a term or stylistic choice that occurs a number of times in different places). If you are choosing to look at a specific detail, then scan back through the text and make sure that you have noticed all the instances in which it takes place. Reread the sections you are working with at least four or five times, so you don't miss anything. It may help to list the details—the data—on a separate page so you can see clearly what you are working with. Suggestions include:

    a. *Follow the suggestions* listed on pages 1-3 of this document.
    b. *Read difficult passages several times*. Read them out loud, slowly, deliberately. Difficult parts will be easier the second or third time through.
    c. *Annotate the text*. This is sometimes called "active reading." Annotating involves underlining important words, writing notes or questions in the margins, highlighting, bracketing important passages, taking reading notes, and so on. Write down key ideas, pages to return to, terms, and quotes that may be helpful in your own understanding and argument.
    d. *Look up difficult terms or concepts or names and keep a running list.* Also try to discover the meaning of key words and concepts from the reading. Some terms have specialized definitions that you will learn only from context. Two good places to look online: www.dictionary.com and www.wikipedia.com.
    e. Pay close attention to the *rhetorical features of the text, the figures of speech, repetitions, imagery, and word choices*. How does the language itself work in the text?
    f. *Consider the historical and cultural context of the text*. For whom was it written? By whom? Why? Has it been well received?

2. **Next, look for ways that the data is connected**. Look for patterns. See if there are parallel structures or ideas. Note the structure of the passage and see if the structure is related to the content in any way. Do you see anything being compared or contrasted? Do these pieces fit together in any meaningful ways? What theme(s) does the work develop? Why is the text or passage or statement important? What are its overall claims? Remember to focus on the "how" and "why"—don't just summarize what the text does—*analyze* the text and figure out and explain how the language is down what it's doing.

3. **Finally, report your findings**. This is when you communicate the conclusions you have made. You will always need to refer to your data to illustrate, support, and explain your findings. That means paraphrasing or using quotes

from the original text. Along with explanations of why those details are important to your discussion. A good rule of thumb is “introduce, quote, explain” when using others’ words in an essay. First, introduce the quote and give it some context, then quote the essential part of the passage, and then explain how that quote ties into your conclusions. Remember, your goal is to show how these small details contribute to the overall meaning of the text.

How to Begin:

1. *Read with a pencil in hand, and annotate the text.*

"Annotating" means underlining or highlighting key words and phrases—anything that strikes you as **surprising** or **significant**, or that **raises questions**—as well as making notes in the margins. When we respond to a text in this way, we not only force ourselves to pay close attention, but **we also begin to think with the author about the evidence**—the first step in moving from reader to writer.

Here's a sample passage by anthropologist Loren Eiseley. It's from his essay called "The Hidden Teacher."

. . . I once received an unexpected lesson from a spider. It happened far away on a rainy morning in the West. I had come up a long gulch looking for fossils, and there, just at eye level, lurked a huge yellow-and-black orb spider, whose web was moored to the tall spears of buffalo grass at the edge of the arroyo. It was her universe, and her senses did not extend beyond the lines and spokes of the great wheel she inhabited. Her extended claws could feel every vibration throughout that delicate structure. She knew the tug of wind, the fall of a raindrop, the flutter of a trapped moth's wing. Down one spoke of the web ran a stout ribbon of gossamer on which she could hurry out to investigate her prey.

Curious, I took a pencil from my pocket and touched a strand of the web. Immediately there was a response. The web, plucked by its menacing occupant, began to vibrate until it was a blur. Anything that had brushed claw or wing against that amazing snare would be thoroughly entrapped. As the vibrations slowed, I could see the owner fingering her guidelines for signs of struggle. A pencil point was an intrusion into this universe for which no precedent existed. Spider was circumscribed by spider ideas; its universe was spider universe. All outside was irrational, extraneous, at best raw material for spider. As I proceeded on my way along the gully, like a vast impossible shadow, I realized that in the world of spider I did not exist.

2. *Look for patterns in the things you've noticed about the text—repetitions, contradictions, similarities.*

What do we notice in the previous passage? First, Eiseley tells us that the orb **spider taught him a lesson**, thus inviting us to consider what that lesson might be. But we'll let that larger question go for now and focus on particulars. In Eiseley's next sentence, we find that this encounter "happened far away on a rainy morning in the West." This opening locates us in another time, another place, and has echoes of the traditional fairy tale opening: "Once upon a time . . .". What does this mean? Why would Eiseley want to remind us of tales and myth? We don't know yet, but it's curious. We make a note of it.

Details of language convince us of our location "in the West"—*gulch, arroyo,* and *buffalo grass.* Beyond that, though, Eiseley calls the spider's web "her universe" and "the great wheel she inhabited," as in the great wheel of the heavens, the galaxies. By metaphor, then, **the web becomes the universe, "spider universe."** And the spider, "she," whose "senses did not extend beyond" her universe, knows "the flutter of a trapped moth's wing" and hurries "to investigate her prey." Eiseley says he could see her "fingering her guidelines for signs of struggle." These details of language, and others, characterize the "owner" of the web as thinking, feeling, striving—a creature much like ourselves. But so what?

3. *Ask questions about the patterns you've noticed—especially how and why.*

To answer some of our own questions, we have to look back at the text and see what else is going on. For instance, when Eiseley touches the web with his pencil point—an event "for which no precedent existed"—the spider, naturally, can make no sense of the pencil phenomenon: "Spider was circumscribed [restricted] by spider ideas." Of course, spiders don't have ideas, but we do. And if we start seeing this passage in human terms, seeing the spider's situation in "her universe" as equal to our situation in our universe (which we think of as *the* universe), then we may decide that Eiseley is suggesting that our universe (*the* universe) is also finite [limited], that *our* ideas are circumscribed, and that beyond the limits of our universe there might be phenomena as fully beyond our ken as Eiseley himself—that "vast impossible shadow"—was beyond the understanding of the spider.

But why vast and impossible, why a shadow? Does Eiseley mean God, extra-terrestrials? Or something else, something we cannot name or even imagine? Is this the lesson? Now we see that the sense of tale telling or myth at the start of the passage, plus this reference to something vast and unseen, weighs against a simple E.T. sort of interpretation. And though the spider can't explain, or even apprehend, Eiseley's pencil point, that pencil point *is* explainable—rational after all. So maybe not God. **We need more evidence**, so we go back to the text—the whole essay now, not just this one passage—and look for additional clues. And as we proceed in this way, **paying close attention to the evidence**, asking questions, we engage in a process that is central to essay writing and to the whole academic enterprise: in other words, we reason toward our own ideas.

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