How to Do Things With Words: Or, How to Do a Close Reading[1]

"It was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it can do either truly or falsely." – J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words

"Now, the word communication, which nothing initially authorizes us to overlook as a word, and to impoverish as a polysemic word, opens a semantic field…"– Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," Limited Inc (emphasis added)

We start with a quotation from the contemporary literary theorists/philosophers J. L. Austin and Jacques Derrida because together they remind us of what we are working with when we analyze works of literature: namely, words. Austin's quote reminds us that statements, which are comprised of word(s), do not, in fact, describe some "state" or "fact." Words do more—and less—than that. When Derrida wrote the above "statement" in his seminal essay "Signature Event Context," he did so in the *context* of responding to Austin's above *words*. (For words never operate outside their context.) Derrida's quote reminds us that words are not windows through which readers peer unto some "meaning." Words, for Derrida and for our purposes in this class, point *toward* a meaning (or meanings); they never *equal* the meaning. Words can only ever *point*.

When we read even a simple word—such as "word," "communication," "impoverish," or "polysemic"—we have to do *work* to arrive at meaning (if ever we do). The most obvious work is to weigh the various "meanings" (which of course we don't always know, which is why we need dictionaries; in fact, I just looked up the word "meaning"). In close readings, rather than overlooking words as words, we remind ourselves continuously that words are words, and that literary texts are made up of these things called words. In close readings, we take the time to look at words for what they *are* by observing what they *do*: namely, they "open" up a "field" of possibilities.

My hope, or rather my intention, in writing this is that the paragraphs that follow, made up of statements made up of words, will point *toward how* (this) idea is instrumental for "successful"—err, "effective"—**close** reading.

"Close reading" *can* "mean" literary analysis. An analysis breaks down the structure of something to describe its component parts and thereby to see how it works. Close reading explores not *what* but *how;* not *what* a passage "says" but *how* a passage says it.

Now we are (or should be) ready for this list of the basic principles of close reading:

1. Do not just discuss what the passage says; discuss how it works.

2. Do not just discuss what the passage says; discuss how it says it.
3. Instead of asking, "what does this passage say?" ask "what does the passage do" or "how does the passage do what it does?"
4. Instead of looking everywhere but the words themselves for the "meaning" of the passage, do not go outside of, but instead delve deeper into, the passage.

Students often think that literary analysis is a matter of looking for "hidden meanings," which lie beneath the words on the page. No. (See Derrida above.) Words are the surface of the ocean (a metaphor). To comprehend the ocean, you would not leave the ocean and start pulling specimens from the nearby land. Instead, you would stay in or on the ocean; observe the surface ripples; swim around and dive deeper in it; maybe take some water back with you and look in the microscope. In close reading, you will immerse yourself in the passage.

Immersing yourself requires staying in/with the passage at hand. Do not stray from the passage.

1. Avoid writing any variants of the word "meaning"
2. Avoid interpreting texts as though they are some cryptic puzzle
3. Avoid thinking of texts as a problem to solve
4. Avoid needlessly restating what the passage says to excess
5. Avoid pulling in "evidence" from outside the text (such as history or biography)

When one avoids the perilous risks above, one discovers the "true meaning" of close reading: when you write about *how* a passage works, that *is* the passage's meaning. A close reading is both verb and noun; it is a process, as well as a product; it is a product of the process. In close reading, you look not *for* meaning but at the ways in which meaning is made.

Here are some questions that jump-start the close-reading process. First, notice your observations. Before you *analyze* how something works, you must first *understand* how it works (see Bloom's Taxonomy of learning below). Observations are the building blocks of analysis. Remember, though, that the kinds of observations you will be making are not about discovering any hidden "meaning." So instead of making definitive statements, ask questions. Such as:

1. **What kinds of sentences are they?** Short? Long? Simple? Complex? What is their grammatical structure? What about the syntax? The order of words? The grammatical elements of the sentence?
2. **What kind of language is it?** (This may be the best question you can ask). Is it literal or figurative (i.e., metaphor, puns, wordplay)? Is there any imagery? Any odd or unexpected words? What difference would it make if ordinary words were substituted for odd or unexpected ones? In what area of life (i.e., religion, economics, philosophy, politics, and so forth) is the language typically found? Are there words that seem to be used in ways that are not ordinary or expected?

3. **What do the words do?** In other words, what are the connotations of the words that are used? What do they suggest or evoke? Do they have multiple, even competing meanings? This is a great opportunity to use the Oxford English Dictionary (OED).
4. **Do you see any patterns?** Patterns might include repetition (of words or images or grammatical constructions); contradictory or opposed elements; rhyme and/or rhythms; and many other things.

These questions generate a surplus of information, which I hope you will be pleasantly surprised and excited to work with. After you gather this evidence, you are ready to write "statements" about, and with, it. You are ready to try to make some connections, and to give shape to your thoughts, questions and epiphanies you might now harbor regarding the passage **and** its *context*. Now you may begin to think about how these elements work to shape the passage and its "meaning." (Remember: textual elements can work for *and* against one another.)
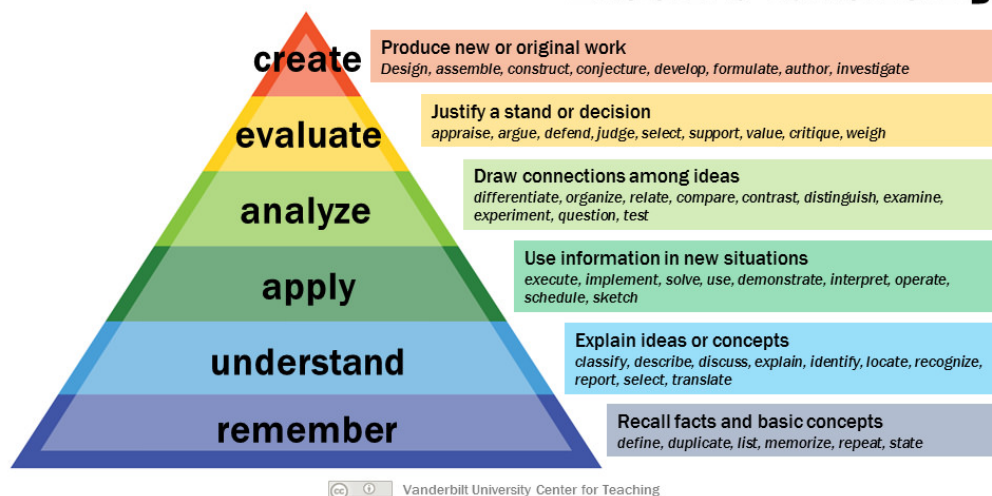
At this point, you will move from *understanding* the text into the close-reading realm: textual *analysis*. (Note: close readings should not move past analysis to evaluating, aka judging). At this point, you are working with not only the *content* (what it says) but also the *form* (how it says it). You will have moved beyond the "philosophers" who Austin stated "assumed" that "statements" had "business" and that that "business" was to "describe" "true" or "false" states of "affairs." You will have moved beyond the business/worldly realm into the close-reading realm. You will have pushed beyond those who "overlook" "communication" as a "word" and who "impoverish," or take away the freedom that it offers in the "semantic field" through which to explore.

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1 This essay is adapted from the close-reading explanation I received as an undergraduate. Ever since, this Derrida quote has stuck with me and helped me to think about multiple communication types and how to analyze and break them down, how to see them for what they do rather than divorce myself from how they do it. I hope that it serves you as well as it has me.