

# A Crash Course in Critical Reading

For AP English Language and Composition, you will be required to give a close reading to (nearly) every text we read this year.

What is a close reading? In essence, it means having a dialogue with the text (a conversation between you and the author).

**Having a conversation with the text is very much like having a conversation with a person. You should:**

- **Ask questions** (probing questions that make YOU think and that should make the author think, if he were sitting across from you)
- **Summarize/paraphrase passages to make sure you understood them** (we do this in normal conversation too; pay attention next time and notice how we repeat back information to each other when speaking)
- **Relate the material to your own ideas, experiences, and beliefs**
- **Challenge/argue with the author and his ideas** (make sure to give reasons why you disagree)
- **Agree with the author and his ideas... and add some thoughts of your own to keep the “conversation” moving forward**
- **Comment on things that make you go “Wow!” or that surprise you** (“I really liked that! It made me see things in a new way!”)

**In addition to the things you would do in a real conversation, a close reading means you should also:**

- **Make predictions** about what’s coming next/what the next idea will be
- **Look up words** you don’t know and write down the definitions
- **Identify and comment on craft** and writing style that is particularly effective (or vice versa... style that is NOT effective)
- **Notice words and their connotations** (make notes about connotation in the margins)
- **Notice literary techniques** (figurative language, symbolism, allegory, irony, imagery, etc.)
- **Notice syntax, sound, and rhythm and analyze their effectiveness**
- **Notice patterns and repetitions**, asking “Why is the author doing this?”
- **Keep track of** motifs, important details, characters, settings, plot details, etc.

- **Comment** on things that surprise, frustrate, delight, and “punch you in the gut.” **Analyze why these things affected you.**
- Identify and analyze the **point of the view (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> limited, 3<sup>rd</sup> omniscient)**
- Identify and analyze the **purpose of the piece**
- Identify and analyze the **intended audience**
- Identify and analyze the **tone**
- Identify and analyze **how it’s organized**
- **Look at structure** and make notes about its **effectiveness**
- Move beyond surface reading and ask the questions **WHY...? HOW COME...? WHAT’S THE IMPORTANCE OF...?**

## The Mechanics of a Close Reading:

1. Write your initial notes in the margins of the text or use sticky notes/slips of paper. (You may always transfer these notes to a notebook later, but for the first reading, keep the notes next to the text – it makes it easier to discuss the text and your thoughts when text/notes are side-by-side.)
2. Write in pencil. (You might change your mind about something or want to revise based on comments from others.)
3. Mark the text in whatever method works best for you (underlining, circling, boxing words/phrases, putting stars or asterisks, LOLs, smiley faces, shorthand abbreviations such as e.g. – use whatever combination of markings you like best). **WARNING: You should also include some kind of writing/words in addition to symbols.** If all you do is underline stuff without writing anything in the margins, you won’t remember why you underlined.
4. Keep your mind engaged and attentive (this is easier to do when you have a pencil in your hand and you’re writing in the margins).
5. Don’t just accept what the author says at face value. Challenge, question, pose your own ideas.
6. Read when you are wide awake (not falling asleep at night). Read in a quiet place away from distractions.
7. Reread passages if you need to. Work to understand what you read; don’t wait for the teacher to give you “the answers.”

Below is an example of what a close reading looks like on the page:

Leo/"Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall . . ." 387

*1* \*The poet may insist that beauty is in the eye of the beholder; the historian might argue that societies create the image of female perfection that they want. There has always been plenty of evidence to support both views. Martin Luther thought long, beautiful hair was essential. Edmund Burke recommended delicate, fragile women. Goethe insisted on "the proper breadth of the pelvis and the necessary fullness of the breasts." Hottentot men look for sharply projecting buttocks. Rubens favored a full posterior, and Papuans require a big nose. The Manguaians of Polynesia care nothing of fat or thin and never seem to notice face, breasts or buttocks. To the tribesmen, the only standard of sexiness is well-shaped female genitals. — ends w/ gross example/shocking

*2* An anthropologized world now knows that notions of what is most attractive do vary with each age and culture. One era's flower is another's frump. Primitive man, understandably concerned with fertility, idealized ample women. One of the earliest surviving sculptures, the Stone Age Venus of Willendorf, depicts a squat woman whose vital statistics—in inches—would amount to 96–89–96. This adipose standard stubbornly recurs in later eras. A 14th-century treatise on beauty calls for "narrow shoulders, small breasts, large belly, broad hips, fat thighs, short legs and a small head." Some Oriental cultures today are turned on by what Simone de Beauvoir calls the "unnecessary, gratuitous blooming" of wrap-around fat. fat sometimes equaled beauty

*3* The Greeks were so concerned with working out precise proportions for beauty that the sculptor Praxiteles insisted that the female navel be exactly midway between the breasts and genitals. The dark-haired Greeks considered fair-haired women exotic, perhaps the start of the notion that blondes have more fun. They also offered early evidence of the rewards that go to magnificent mammaries. When Phryne, Praxiteles' famous model and mistress, was on trial for treason, the orator defending her pulled aside her veil, baring her legendary breasts. The awed judges acquitted her on the spot. (oh men...)

Romans favored more independent, articulate women than the Greeks. Still, there were limits. Juvenal complains of ladies who "discourse on poets and poetry, comparing Vergil with Homer . . . Wives shouldn't read all the classics—there ought to be some things women don't understand."

*5* In ancient Egypt, women spent hours primping, fixing hair, applying lipstick, eye shadow and fingernail polish, grinding away body and genital hair with pumice stones. It worked: Nefertiti could make the cover of Vogue any month she wanted. For Cleopatra, the most famous bombshell of the ancient world, eroticism was plain hard work. Not a natural beauty, she labored diligently to learn coquettishness and flattery and reportedly polished her amatory techniques by practicing on slaves.

*6* If Cleopatra had to work so hard at being desirable, can the average woman do less? Apparently not. In the long history of images of beauty, one staple is the male tendency to spot new flaws in women, and the female tendency to work and suffer to remedy them. In the Middle Ages, large women rubbed themselves with cow dung dissolved in wine. When whiter skin was demanded, women applied leeches to take the red out. Breasts have been strapped down,

*Handwritten notes:*

- Study of nature (zoology)*
- parallel*
- philosophers and theologians*
- artists*
- tribesmen*
- parallel/word choice*
- humor*
- LOL!*
- serious*
- of course (Greeks!)*
- comical*
- mocking*
- Is this about beauty?*
- humor via word choice*
- men*
- (or something else...)*
- obvious LOL*
- modern word choice, slangy*
- more examples of women suffering for beauty*
- \* essay is really about men (and women) judging women*

**Options for what to do after you mark-up the text with your annotations:**

- Create an Excerpt Journal
- Write a Reading Journal of your personal response to the text
- Create a Double-Entry Journal
- Create Discussion Questions for a Socratic Circle

See below for details on how to complete these critical reading assignments.

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## **Excerpt Journals**

Choose SIX to EIGHT excerpts from the text that illustrate important ideas, powerful writing style, or something you feel is important to discuss.

FORMAT: Each excerpt should be a paragraph in length. Make sure to include page number notation. After each passage, discuss why you feel the excerpt is important. Each written discussion should be at least 150 words in length.

### WHAT EXCERPTS SHOULD YOU CHOOSE?

- Something that seems important to you
- Something that caused you to have an epiphany
- Something that caused you to learn a new idea or think about an old idea in a new way
- Something you disagree/agree with
- Something that's powerfully written and memorable
- Something that uses heavily connotative language, is particularly strong in tone

## **Reading Journal (personal response)**

This journal can be done after reading the entire book or after reading each chapter. Make sure to include the title of the book/chapter, the name of the author, and any relevant page numbers. Your goal is to fill out at least two **FULL** pages (typed) of your personal response to the book (or one full page per chapter, depending on what the teacher assigns). Below are some prompts to get you started on your personal response:

1. I wonder what \_\_\_\_\_ means...
2. I really don't understand this part because...
3. I really like or dislike this book because...

4. This person, \_\_\_\_\_, reminds me of somebody I know because...
5. This person, \_\_\_\_\_, reminds me of myself because...
6. This person, \_\_\_\_\_, is like \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_ because...
7. This scene/part reminds me of a similar scene/part in \_\_\_\_\_ because...
8. This part is very realistic or unrealistic because...
9. I like or dislike this style of writing because...
10. This section makes me think about \_\_\_\_\_ because...
11. This section is particularly effective because...
12. I think the relationship between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ is interesting because...
13. The ideas here remind me of the ideas in \_\_\_\_\_ because...
14. I like or dislike this person, \_\_\_\_\_, because...
15. This situation reminds me of a similar situation in my own life when...

***Avoid merely summarizing the text.*** Explore your thoughts, feelings, reactions, questions. Take some risks. Write about what you like or dislike, what seems confusing or unusual to you. Tell what you think something means. Make connections between the text and other things you've read. Make connections to your own personal experiences as well as the outside world. Give your opinion on style and language. Challenge the text.

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## **Dialectical Journal**

When you're reading a text, you're always interacting with it (and with yourself!).

A dialectical journal is a running dialogue between you and the text. This is done by recording notes in the form of quotations or paraphrases and then commenting upon what you have recorded.

How do you record the information?

- Quotation/passage on the left side of the page and your reflection on the right side.

What to record?

Quotation (page #)	Reaction/Response
<p>Sentence, line, phrase, or paraphrase that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. May hit with some force</li> <li>2. May remind you of something</li> <li>3. May make you think or questions</li> <li>4. May be an example of pleasing or disturbing writing</li> </ol>	<p>Explanation of why you chose the quotation/passage:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <u>Question/Predict</u>: Ask questions while you read and try to predict</li> <li>● <u>Connect</u>: to personal experiences or the outside world</li> <li>● <u>Analyze/Evaluate</u>: Form opinions both while you're reading and after you've finished. Develop your own ideas</li> <li>● <u>Interpret</u>: determine the meaning of what you've read</li> <li>● <u>Reflect</u>: what does the quote say about all people and humanity?</li> </ul>

Dialectical Journal Response Ideas (i.e.: what could go in the right hand column):

- Explanation: Explain why you chose the quotation/passage. Why is it important? Why did it stand out to you?
- Question/Prediction: Ask questions while you read and try to predict what will come next.
- Connect: To personal experiences – relate to your own life, someone you know, another text, or the world in general.
- Analyze/Evaluate: Form opinions both while you're reading and after you've finished. Develop your own judgments about the text and your own ideas about the content.
- Interpret: Determine the meaning of what you've read and why it is important to the rest of the text (i.e.: to purpose, audience, message, main point, theme, etc.)
- Reflect: What does the quote say about all people and about humanity in general? Can most people relate to what is in the text? Can you?

To receive full credit for a dialectical journal:

1. The required number of entries (this should be set by your teacher, or use your best judgment)
2. Neatly printed or typed
3. Quotations/paraphrases must include page number (and/or Act, scene, line, stanza, etc. depending on the text)

4. Reactions/responses must reveal that you were truly interacting with your reading both personally and intellectually
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## Discussion Questions for Socratic Circle

A Socratic Circle is a discussion in which everything is student-led (the teacher sits outside of the circle and observes but does not ask questions or get involved in the discussion). The purpose of a Socratic Circle is for students to actively engage in conversation about complex topics without aid from a teacher or other “expert.” All the topics, questions, and arguments are made by the students.

Many Socratic Circles have two circles: **The Inner and the Outer.**

### The Inner Circle

- Serves as the discussion panel for student-generated questions and topics
- Students may take notes, but not required
- Each member should provide at least **two (2) quality** responses **fully supported by textual evidence**
- No moderator; no hands raised – listen and “jump in” respectfully
- Follow rules of courteous discussion
- May ask questions of each other only
- No “yes” or “no” questions allowed
- No interactions with Outer Circle or teacher

### The Outer Circle

- Listen/take notes
- Write down everything your Target (person you are responsible for documenting) says
- No interaction with Inner Circle or teacher
- May not respond to the Inner Circle discussion

### Ways to engage the Outer Circle:

1. Write down your favorite question from the discussion and explain what you liked about it.
2. Describe the answer that you thought was most balanced between evidence and commentary.
3. Write an answer that you would have liked to discuss if you had been part of the Inner Circle.
4. Write a better answer to one of the discussion questions that you felt was not discussed enough.

In order to participate in the Socratic Circle, students must bring an “**Admissions Ticket.**” This Ticket includes the following:

1. Annotated text from the reading
2. TWO questions at each of the following question levels: Factual/Literal, Interpretive/Inferential, Experiential/Connecting

Literal/Factual questions can be answered by using facts in the text or easily accessible information in other texts. They are fact-based. Good answers lead to an accurate and complete summary of the text.

Interpretive/Inferential questions are textually implicit, requiring analyzing or interpreting specific parts of the text. They are inference-based. You must “read between the lines” for the answers. Good answers lead to an identification of the significant patterns in the text.

Experiential/Connecting questions are open-ended and go beyond the text. Bring your own personal experience into the discussion in addition to evidence from the text. These questions will provoke discussion of an abstract idea or issue. Good answers lead to an appreciation of the text and further discussion.

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**\*\*SUMMER READING EXPECTATIONS\*\***

For your summer reading you are expected to **annotate each text** (using a pencil, writing in the margins or using sticky notes/bookmark slips). These annotations will be checked and graded on the first day of class.

**You must also complete the following close reading activities for each text by the first day of class:**

*Zen in the Art of Writing* by Ray Bradbury: Dialectical Journal (minimum 6 entries per chapter) + Reading Journal/Personal Response essay (2 pages minimum)

*How to Think* by Alan Jacobs: Excerpt Journal (6 to 8 entries for the entire book) + Reading Journal/Personal Response essay (2 pages minimum)

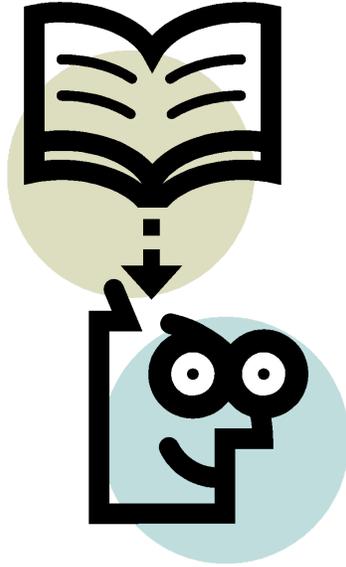
*Steal Like an Artist* by Austin Kleon: Dialectical Journal (minimum 3 entries per chapter) + Reading Journal/Personal Response essay (2 pages minimum)

*As you read each text, think about purpose, audience, style, tone, and the central argument the author is making. Always ask yourself: “What is the argument?”*

Remember: “Everything's an argument.”

**Please email me with any questions you may have about these summer assignments:**

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A final parting word before you embark on your adventures in critical reading...

**Some books are to be tasted; others swallowed; and some to be chewed and digested.** – Francis Bacon

(Bon appetit!)

Reading exercises adapted from *College Board: Pre-AP Literature and Language Advanced Placement Summer Institute*. PDF. Sandra Effinger. <http://mseffie.com>.