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# THE IDEAS REPORT

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AN ATLANTIC SPECIAL SECTION ON THE THEMES THAT SHAPE OUR TIMES

## Stop Close

### Reading

Jul 1 2010, 8:00 AM ET

HEATHER HORN

Recommend

For a while now, middle school and high school English classes throughout the nation have been teaching something called "close reading" --with varying degrees of success. "Close reading" is about taking a chapter, a page, a paragraph, or even a single sentence, and picking it apart to extract meaning or see what the author is doing. It's a vehicle for teaching students about cadence and imagery, hopefully leading youthful minds to appreciate the complexity of authors' thoughts.

We should end it. Students almost universally hate close reading, and they rarely wind up understanding it anyway. Forced to pick out meaning in passages they don't fully grasp to begin with, they begin to get the idea that English class is about simply making things up (Ah yes--the tree mentioned once on page 89 and then never again stands for weakness and loss!) and constructing increasingly circuitous arguments by way of support. (It's because it's an elm, and when you think elm, you think Dutch elm disease, and elms are dying out--sort of like their relationship, see?)

So what would happen if we ditched this sacred teaching technique? For starters, we could help students read more. Close reading has been behind the trend of reading fewer books, but reading them more slowly. What the attentive reading proponents ignore is that many students are in danger of failing to see the literary forest for the trees. Speeding things up might make it easier to grasp--and appreciate--the overall arc of a book, while allowing the opportunity for real connection with the characters and plot. You can't do that at the pace of a chapter a week.

Furthermore, aiming for fifteen books a year, rather than five, might expose the students to more good literature (immersion in quality prose being one of the best ways of learning writing) and increase their chances of finding a book they like. There would still be plenty of opportunity to point out metaphors and similes. We'd also have more time for grammar, rhetoric, and composition--the building blocks of the language we're supposed to be teaching. If the goal of an English class is to improve students' grasp of language, introduce them to great literature, and--hopefully--get students excited, then there's really no downside to this approach. With 12th grade reading ability in depressing straits nationwide, we've certainly little to lose.

If a few students really want to do close reading, they can do it as an elective or jump in head first in college. Otherwise, let's chuck the concept. We gain nothing by teaching kids to hate books--and hate them s-l-o-w-l-y.

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**James Hannaham** 7 months ago

Perhaps students should start with "Comprehending Anything," then "Reading At All," move through "Bluffing When You Haven't Read the Assignment," to "Comprehending Stuff You've Actually Read." Then they can work their way up to "Literal Reading," "Near Distance Reading," and "Close But No Cigar" before they get to "Close Reading."

28 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Brenda Horrigan** 7 months ago

If my son weren't such an avid reader already by the time he went to his new h.s. (junior year) he might hate books after a year of this technique. Now he's simply enduring until college...where he swears he'll avoid any English classes.

3 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**darnish** 7 months ago in reply to Brenda Horrigan

My son felt exactly the same way. Read and loved Moby Dick (even the parts about whaling), Huckleberry Finn (and every single other thing Twain published, including his travel books), all of Edgar Allen Poe, George Orwell, Lord of the Flies, Heart of Darkness, etc etc etc on his own and loved them; hated every single book he read in class, even books I know he would have loved if he'd read them on his own (based on his personal reading preferences), all because of "close reading."

2 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Dennis Jerz** 7 months ago

I scanned your essay and the gist I get is that people should read more, not deeply. Maybe that's not what you meant to say, but I can't be bothered to look beyond my gut-level reaction and see whether the words you wrote actually support my initial understanding of your point. Oh, look... A link mentioning Xanadu. (click)

39 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Charles** 7 months ago

Gasp! An Atlantic article with which I agree! :P

I would agree with the argument even more if it also applied itself to poetry. I've never found any real use for diagramming stressed and unstressed iambs, or classifying rhymes as masculine or feminine, at least when it comes to appreciating poetry (indeed, being required to do these things actively discouraged any enthusiasm I had for reading poetry). I'm sure they're useful when writing poetry, but if you're spending all your time diagramming, say, Pope's Essay on Man, you're not spending that time appreciating and understanding what the poem itself is actually saying, and you are consequently missing the entire point. There is (or at least there should be) much more to a poem than its structure.

3 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**berger** 7 months ago

This is evil and almost self-refuting. The reason the examples used here are funny is because they are so transparently wrong, not because they look like tenable readings of a text. In trying to show that close reading allows for more tendentious interpretations you end up implying the opposite.

I agree that a chapter a week is too slow, but I don't believe there are a lot of people doing that. Close reading is an exercise designed to bet students to pay attention to the fact that there's more going on in a text than just narration that leads to some final "point." Close reading shows that previously boring texts have more going in on (hopefully) and makes reading more interesting.

More to the point, it's important to be able to really pay attention to something. It may be hard, and you may dislike it, but the patience to do it is invaluable. Further, as a higher ed teacher, I can tell you that there's just as much of a danger in giving them too much to read. There has to be balance.

13 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Halifax Humanities** 7 months ago in reply to berger

Why do we use the image of "pick apart" to talk about literature. Why can't we approach literature with humility and allow great works to "master" us rather than we wrestling meaning from them? To "understand" may not be to "analyze and pick apart" but rather "to stand under". I think of great books as great friends to converse with as they slowly and surely allow me to see their depths.

2 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Lucy Rowles-Springer** 7 months ago

tl;dr

14 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**gretacargo** 7 months ago

The intent of the exercise is still good, perhaps the teaching method isn't. Your article feels like the slippery slope against teaching critical thinking. There are far too many school districts who have dropped it. What then of our future generations? What do you propose as a rigorous alternative so that critical thinking curricula isn't lost? We need students to question everything and anything and keep their mental muscles working. Too much is already spoon-fed.

9 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**hshorn** 7 months ago in reply to gretacargo

At the risk of starting a brawl, here, I think this is a point worth clarifying.

I couldn't agree with you more. Critical thinking is--no argument--very important to teach. The problem, unfortunately, is that critical thinking is \*not\* being applied to close reading in most cases. Instead of being taught how to think critically, students are learning how to B.S.

8 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**gretacargo** 7 months ago in reply to hshorn

Thank you for your clarification. Have you done any research on successful alternatives to this pedagogy? Your criticism is good; what can readers do to remedy the situation in their communities? Surely something exists. I encourage Atlantic editors to continue exploring this subject matter with you, Ms. Horn.

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**moronuki** 7 months ago in reply to gretacargo

Also at the risk of starting a brawl, I would like to say that close reading should be an exercise not only in critical thinking but in understanding and caring about literature. The problem, I think, is that it has been mixed with the self-esteem-boosting aspects of teaching that seem to be popular now so that you \*can\* BS your way through it. A good teacher would say, "That tree was only mentioned once and your thinking is circuitous to the point of losing any connection to the story. Think about what you're saying instead of making shi\*t up." Maybe without the expletive. It can happen. My teachers in high school didn't teach this way, but I was a lit major for a while in college, and many of those profs did teach this way, and then I quit lit not only because it was taking all the fun out of it, but also because endless class hours were taken up by complete drivel of the elm-->Dutch elm disease-->futility of it all! type, and I couldn't stand it. I then found out that there were at least 2 professors who didn't put up with that kind of thing. I took a class from each of them and learned more about literature in those 2 classes than I had in all the ones that preceded. I think what helped them keep the class discussion under control is that they had specific perspectives on literature. I don't mean political ideologies they wanted us to adhere to, but they were asking us to look for very specific things. The more open-ended the teacher lets the discussion be, the more BS you're going to hear in it.

Close reading is also something that if you do it a lot and get good at it, it doesn't have to slow down your reading. It greatly enriches my pleasure in literature to see not only what the overall arc of the story is but how the story is working, so to speak, i.e., how the author is creating certain imagery and ideas. But maybe it's just because I'm one of those people who likes to know the ideas behind things and how things work.

8 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Molly** 7 months ago in reply to gretacargo

Teachers College's Reading and Writing Workshop offers excellent alternatives to the approach discussed in the article. I've seen it in action in middle schools, and students are far more engaged with their respective books. I think the approach should be applied to high schools as well, albeit altered to suit the needs of older adolescents. A valuable issue to explore, and I'm happy people are talking about it!

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Dennis Jerz** 7 months ago in reply to hshorn

Heather, when you say "in most cases," what informs that judgment? Who counted the number of cases, judged each case, and came up with the finding that more than 50% are BS? Who defines BS?

Are you drawing on a national survey, a study in which researchers sat in on and rated the quality of close-reading classroom instructions in representative sessions in a specific school district, a study that evaluated a single teacher's close-reading instruction over the course of a year, or a study that examines test scores as a proxy for evaluating close-reading instruction? Does the socioeconomic status of the students, the experience of the teachers, or the nature of the books (young adult bestsellers, or classics) have any effect on the outcome? Did your research turn up any studies suggesting the problem is getting worse, or getting better?

Or are you, perhaps, relying on personal experiences and a handful of anecdotes?

6 people liked this.



**David G. Schultz** 7 months ago

Here's how it's supposed to work: you take a detail, and you magnify it, examine it in context, draw inferences, look at the way it relates to the larger work. From this you gain a sense of the larger picture--the profound world of the novel behind the what seems apparent at first glance. Then, as you learn how to do it more often, you get faster at it, so that when you read faster, you see that deeper world vividly and quickly. The experience of literature is thereby enlarged.

What Horn is decrying may be true: students may hate it, and it may not accrue any benefit. What I'd like to ponder is this: is disdain and angst a result of the deficiencies inherent to teaching close reading, or to other factors which would manifest themselves with any reading curriculum? Correlation is not causation, remember. It may turn out that the alternative, of zooming through 15 books a year, may produce students who have touched lots more literature very lightly, hating it, and the study of literature all the same.

4 people liked this.



**Derek Poore** 7 months ago

You can pick apart just about anything, from works of art to the policies of NASA in the 1990s. If authors want people to read more, critically examining their work isn't one of them.

1 person liked this.



**egiblink** 7 months ago

I agree with the author that educators and parents should take a serious look at why young people are bored by reading. The buzz-killer might be the one-size-fits all algorithm for "getting the point." Why go with only one pedagogy?

Speed-reading might a good place to begin with 12-15 year olds. They like to get through stuff, boring stuff specifically. Then have them keep a reflection journal and, again with timer in hand, speed-write for 10 minutes after zipping through a reading assignment. I'm sure interesting ideas/conversation would follow, even if they didn't have a lot to do with the complex meaning/argument of the reading. I'm sure Montaigne, who read a lot, didn't read everything carefully. In fact, I remember that he would have 4 or 5 books open while he wrote, dipping into this one and that one, like people now sometimes do with 10 tabs open.

4 people liked this.



**Uskglass** 7 months ago

Good essay. I "close reading" you rightly mock is symptomatic of the larger movement in the teaching of American literature, which can be summarized as, "Take ALL the fun out of story."

I love a well-told story. I actually enjoy what I'm reading - I "get" the subtext and symbolism, to whatever extent it's there, but the story is the point. Almost every English class I ever took in high school and college ignored the pleasure of reading the story in favor of ANALYZING the subtext and symbolism. Blegh! It's like we want our kids to hate reading. I remember one 10th-grade English teacher who recommended that we read the Cliff Notes "before\* we read the book, "So we'd make sure we understood everything." Agh!

If you look back at the non-fictions writings of, say, C.S. Lewis or J.R.R. Tolkien, and the way they studied (and taught) literature, they had first-and-foremost a visceral reaction to the story and characters. "Analyzing" a story for symbolism comes after appreciating the power of a well-told story. That's something we've lost in American literature classes.

8 people liked this.



**Charles** 7 months ago in reply to Uskglass

I think you are exactly right. Maybe we should have courses in literature appreciation before we move on to analytic reading (much as we look at appreciating music before we move deeply into music theory). In most cases, an engaging piece of good writing will invite and encourage a closer reading just by being

good and engaging, without the need for a scholastic mandate. It's useful, I think, to be able to do a close reading, but it shouldn't be our default way of approaching literature.

I had too many high-school and university classes in which close-reading was the only way literature was approached, and they turned me off to literature for some time, before I was able to discover the joys of reading good books without analyzing them line by line, sentence by sentence on my first reading.

5 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**darnish** 7 months ago in reply to Charles

Yes. Agreed.

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**darnish** 7 months ago in reply to Uskglass

Exactly. Which is why I start with great stories when I teach my students. And most great books have great plots.

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**marvelmomma** 7 months ago

I think you close read passages of significance. You don't read whole chapters, but you let kids pick a few places where they think there's a significant turning point or significant revealed information. A good teacher would show kids how to do that in the first chapter, guide them through a second chapter and then let them work in groups after. And let them explain how it's important. Teachers can provide suggestion sheets and let kids think things over. Even if they haven't reached all the right conclusions, they're thinking!

I think close reading has a place, but it is overdone. I think to chuck it altogether would be premature. Children are exposed to so much electronic media that the urge to read has all but vacated the premises. If you can plant a kid in front of a computer, it's a lot easier than dragging them through a library on a weekly basis. Computers provide instant gratification on a variety of levels for several of the parties involved. Books are more work. I think there are ways of making them responsible for it or to make them care about it, so that it works. During required reading time (some states require it by law) with students, I gave them option at a high school level to do Dr. Seuss books. We sometimes read them aloud together, laughing the whole time. Reading \*can\* be a joyful experience, but teachers need to rekindle that spark, over and over and over. Don't be afraid to let them read graphic novels, comic books, magazines, newspapers, or even pokemon cards. If they're reading it, mission accomplished!

I think many teachers choose lazy ways out rather than put the onus back on the students to identify what's important in the story, what language and imagery contributed to that conclusion and make them think it out because that takes time and because they're trying to get kids to pass tests to keep their jobs. With the recent economic changes, many elementary teachers are teaching 30+ student classes, which leaves our children behind. During this time, it would be more helpful to perhaps volunteer at the schools and support the teachers in providing your children with the best reading opportunities.

Many children seem to lack basic logic skills and I think close reading should help them logic out meaning. I'm often stunned at the stuff kids miss and don't logic out, as well as adults. Close reading can help with that. I think you need to use everything in moderation, though. To dismiss something completely because it's been overused is silly. If so, I can think of many really comfortable chairs that would be sent to goodwill, in our house.

5 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Molly** 7 months ago

Close reading can help students find evidence for supporting claims/ opinions about the text. The problem with teaching close reading is that it often results in teachers clarifying what the author was "trying" to say or what the "hidden meaning" is, without students understanding how teachers reach these conclusions. As teachers, we need to make the process more transparent and show students how readers can read closely to help derive meaning from a text. We also need to let them read closely, make arguments, and support those arguments using text. Learning how to form an argument based on evidence is important in almost every discipline.

I agree, however, that it is important that students read more and that the books they're reading suit their respective reading levels. High school students have varying reading levels, and yet we often assign the same book to all students. Not all students will be able to comprehend a text, and they may tune out. We must engage students with reading by providing them with books that interest them, suit their reading level, and challenge them appropriately. Teachers College's Readers and Writers workshop offers helpful technique for teachers interested in helping students become better readers-- not simply close readers.

7 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Dennis Jerz** 7 months ago in reply to Molly

Banish phrases like "the author meant to say" and questions like "is this interpretation correct," and focus instead on whether the text supports a given interpretation. So, if someone says Emily Dickinson had a chip on her shoulder, and uses "The Soul selects her own Society" as evidence, we can point out that the poem doesn't contain enough information to support a conclusion about the flesh-and-blood historical woman Emily Dickinson, but that the poem does offer insights about the personified soul of the speaker of the poem.

This speaker was created by, but is not the same as, Dickinson, and the speaker is not the same thing as the soul mentioned in the poem. Yes, that's nuanced, complex stuff, but I'm sure Horn, who has posted other essays on food, can recognize the level of attention required to review a gourmet meal, and can recognize that simply listing what was in each course and listing whether the reviewer was interested in or bored by each item does not demonstrate an understanding of fine cuisine. While it would not be necessary to do a chemical analysis of every ingredient in every dish, some level of detail is required if you hope to convince your readers what they should expect if they go to restaurant A, and how to appreciate the unusual foods served at restaurant B, etc. We don't ask our students to review books, so the metaphor is imprecise, but my point is to demonstrate that close reading is our way of getting students to analyze their initial emotional responses to a work, so that they can learn from the different strategies authors use in order to create that emotional effect.

A cursory dismissal of anything -- a work of literature, a pedagogical technique, the intellectual capacity of our students -- is likely to omit something. I hope Horn will look into the issue more closely.

I agree that invoking this level of detail on every chapter of a novel would be excessive, but the author of the essay called for banishing the process, not moderating it.

(Edited by author 7 months ago)

3 people liked this.



**Molly** 7 months ago in reply to Dennis Jerz

I agree completely. I'm in graduate school training to be a secondary school Language Arts teacher, and I conceive of the importance of close reading in a similar vein. Well said!

1 person liked this.



**A. Leahy** 7 months ago

This piece seems to confuse "close reading" with reading closely to establish theme, using an outdated definition tied to the New Critics of yesteryear. Perhaps, if close reading in high school and middle school were more often tied to writing (a writer made those sentences!), students might understand that they not only learn about a topic or theme as readers, but also can become more powerful writers themselves by understanding how sentences can work. If a student can see how iambic meter shapes meaning, they too can build in subliminal messaging in their own writing (as well as see how they've been swayed). How can students be "picking it [a sentence or chapter] apart to extract meaning or see what the author is doing" and not be paying attention to "grammar, rhetoric, and composition--the building blocks of the language we're supposed to be teaching"? If that's the case, close reading isn't being done well, but becomes a silly exercise to serve a preconceived theme.

I recommend Francine Prose's Reading Like a Writer for a great example of effective ways to do close reading that focus on the very things Heather Horn thinks are missing. The opening chapter alone could give Horn just the approach she's looking for, without the silliness students resort to. It's a terrible shame that close reading isn't done well in high schools and that many students are turned off from literature altogether. Close reading can be fascinating and self-empowering, and the guidance is available! Forget theme! Forget secret and deep meaning! Close reading is about language!

8 people liked this.



**darnish** 7 months ago in reply to A. Leahy

I agree. Close reading to show how well or beautifully a sentence or passage is written, as an example of good writing students should aspire to, or simply for appreciation of the quality is a better reason than convoluted twisted over-analysis of the "deeper" meaning.

I love to examine selected lines from Shakespeare in detail just to show the awesomeness of his construction and to teach my students an appreciation of his use of language and fun, so that they can realize that Shakespeare wasn't a fuddy duddy who wrote in impossible high-falutin language, but so they can appreciate how clever and fun and earthy he was. But I don't do close readings of the whole play because meaning is lost. I want my students to appreciate Shakespeare and the stories, not get into some detailed analysis of every single passage to the point where they lose sight of what the story is about and how fun the language can be. Because if I do focus on close reading of passage after passage, I can guarantee that by the end of it, they will hate Shakespeare.

3 people liked this.



**hshorn** 7 months ago in reply to darnish

Very good points. A good analysis of a few lines of Shakespeare is a joy.

2 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**darnish** 7 months ago

As a high school English teacher, I agree with this post/proposal.

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Dennis Jerz** 7 months ago in reply to darnish

As a college English teacher, I worry for your students, darnish.

Close reading short poems and key passages from prose works is vital to developing student understanding of how authors use literary techniques to achieve emotional effects, but the chapter-by-chapter evisceration of a novel sounds like a parody of the technique as I understand it. Perhaps walking students through a short story in a single class session, then moving on to having them do the same thing for homework, then having them analyze a novella in groups, might be enough to get them started. Then, have them choose key passages from a full-length novel, so that they don't feel they are wasting time on unimportant passages on a novel. Short stories are more tightly packed anyway, and you can be more certain that every detail in a short story or one-act play is there to support the plot, while some details in a novel may only be there to support a subplot, with only the vaguest of impact on the overall theme. But to dismiss close reading entirely? I find that extreme. Of course, I don't know whether perhaps your school board has mandated an excessive amount of spoon-feeding canonical interpretations that can be tested in multiple-choice memory-recall scenarios. I'd find that equally extreme.

(Edited by author 7 months ago)

4 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**darnish** 7 months ago in reply to Dennis Jerz

You didn't need to tell me you're a college professor -- your pedantic, condescending tone does. I wrote one sentence. You know absolutely nothing about me, the reasons why I agree with this post, or how or what kinds of literature I teach. Don't presume I'm an idiot who doesn't know what I'm doing. And don't presume you know how or what high school teachers should teach. I don't need your ignorant, self-important advice.

3 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Dennis Jerz** 7 months ago in reply to darnish

So, tell me more about yourself, and deepen the discussion, so that I can more fully understand your position. Wouldn't that be more productive than calling me names?

Aren't we all on the same side, and can't we have a productive conversation about our differences?

1 person liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**darnish** 7 months ago in reply to Dennis Jerz

I'd rather not. You can read the rest of my posts if you're interested, which will illuminate how I feel about the whole thing. I'm sorry if I was rude. I felt it was presumptuous of you to be worried about my students from one sentence I wrote. As was your assumption (as indicated by your teaching advice -- jeez, you sound like you're giving gentle advice to an education major who hasn't taught yet) that I don't know how or what to teach.

I take issue with close readings/over analysis of literature because I think it kills the joy of the literature for most kids. I didn't become an English teacher to turn my students off to reading and I happen to think there is more lifelong benefit to loving literature than being able to analyze it in scholarly fashion. Readers can improve their critical thinking abilities by virtue of reading a lot. If they don't read a lot because they friggen hate it thanks to being tortured by endless pretentious close readings, they aren't really learning how to think critically, they're learning how to mimic it.

I'm not against all close readings ever (read my other comments here) but I am against only reading three books in an entire school year in the service of close readings and over-analysis. I hate it, my students hate it and in the end, really, I don't see how it gives them any benefit as scholars, critical thinkers, or readers.

We also have to deal with the reality that kids don't have the attention spans we had -- the internet, remote controls, texting, etc., have shortened attention spans. Therefore, much of teaching is--to a greater degree than ever before -- entertainment (this is a reality I'm not happy about, but I work with what I have). We have to give kids an immediate hook and keep the momentum going.

As a college professor, you have the luxury of teaching students who chose to be in your class. My students didn't make that choice and most of them aren't going to even go to college.

2 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Dennis Jerz** 7 months ago in reply to darnish

Apology accepted. It sounds like you and I agree that spending a week on a chapter is ridiculous. We also agree that teaching analytical and critical thinking skills are important. I disagree that all close reading is over analysis, but that's a matter of scale. The article calls for more reading, and I agree with that.

In the comment that upset you, I suggested that perhaps asking students to close read short stories, or parts of novels, would be a good compromise, as opposed to chucking it altogether, as the article proposes. I acknowledged that my discussion of how I do close reading does not account for the pressures you might be facing from your school board. So please take that altogether as an invitation for you to explain, rather than some attempt for me to close the discussion by telling you what to do.

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**darnish** 7 months ago in reply to Dennis Jerz

I don't think all close reading is bad at all. I think close reading at the expense of wide reading is bad and I think too much close reading of one text is bad. Not to mention, besides the point.

And I don't think all close reading is over-analysis either.

Perhaps the author is being hyperbolic, but I agree with the spirit and the point. And I think our education system's over-attention to the development of critical thinking skills has the opposite effect. When I went to school (and admittedly, I had a private school education), I never heard one iota about developing my critical thinking skills. But they got developed. Wide reading on its own, without over-guidance from adults, develops critical thinking skills. The responsibility of teachers is to nurture those skills, not stifle them. Sometimes that's what I think public education does these days, for all its NCLB emphasis on "critical" and "analytical" thinking skills. I want my students to see that. I want my students to write interesting, thoughtful papers that they're invested in, not plagiarize papers in the exceedingly dull five paragraph format (frankly, I've never read a professional critical paper that stuck to that format, have you? So why do we require our students to? It's so stultifying of original writing) because they were never invested in or understood (because the forest was lost for the trees) the literature the esoteric topic is about and are certainly not invested in the paper topic itself.

2 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Timothy\_A** 7 months ago

I recall close reading William Golding's "Lord of the Flies" in grade 11, a book full of symbolism, imagery and hidden meaning. The teacher tore every sentence, paragraph and page apart, and for every single page of the book we had 2 to 3 pages of notes and it took over 3 months to get through all 176 pages. Every single word had some sort of hidden meaning, symbolism, or foreshadowed something to come. I highly doubt that Golding intended his work to be analyzed like that, and it wasn't until I re-read the book 10 years later that I realized that we had missed the entire point of the story. Unfortunately all three levels of my high school English courses focused on this approach, and this taught me that reading was boring and tedious, and I could do well by writing fluff-filled BS papers even if I had missed the entire point of the piece of literature.

It wasn't until after college that I rediscovered my love for reading and began to read recreationally again, and I wonder how many millions of other people never recover after taking classes like this.

4 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**invecepero** 7 months ago

"Besides, we are friends of the lento, I and my book. I have not been a philologist in vain — perhaps I am one yet: a teacher of slow reading. I even come to write slowly. At present it is not only my habit, but even my taste — a perverted taste, maybe — to write nothing but what will drive to despair every one who is 'in a hurry.' For philology is that venerable art which exacts from its followers one thing above all — to step to one side, to leave themselves spare moments, to grow silent, to become slow — the leisurely art of the goldsmith applied to language: an art which must carry out slow, fine work, and attains nothing if not lento. Thus philology is now more desirable than ever before; thus it is the highest attraction and incitement in an age of 'work': that is, of haste, of unseemly and immoderate hurry-skurry, which is so eager to 'get things done' at once, even every book, whether old or new. Philology itself, perhaps, will not so hurriedly 'get things done.' It

teaches how to read well, that is, slowly, profoundly, attentively, prudently, with inner thoughts, with the mental doors ajar, with delicate fingers and eyes. My patient friends, this book appeals only to perfect readers and philologists: learn to read me well!"

Nietzsche

2 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Ch Pa** 7 months ago

Yes, i always felt that my teachers were finding meaning in anything. It was silly and made english teachers look like moronic airheads, to the students at least. I can understand their approach now that i'm in college, but for about 10 years of schooling i felt it was a quality english teachers shared: the mastery of BS.

and to complicate things further, no two teachers ever brought up the same points when discussing the same book. at some points, they were conflicting.

how's a kid not supposed to feel like novels are overanalyzed and a waste of time?

1 person liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Anthony B** 7 months ago

This is mostly just semantics. You cannot know how to solve an English class by merely making up what happens in one.

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**BorrachoDelToro** 7 months ago

STOP LETTER GRADING. Retarding students is hatefully low. A close reading of life reveals that yes, we make it all up. Grading 12th grade reading is a depressing straight. If the idea is to get your point across then the idea is unenlightened. A close reading of words reveals persistent dissonance and undiminished complexity in the universe. With what could you use to decipher a single letter? Nothing. Yes all meaning is relative. Close reading a sentence can allow the reader to better understand the relational matrix of meaning the author/artist arbitrarily assigns to words if you can develop an ear for it. Grading a reader is like grading another's visual perception of reality: it shouldn't be done. Figure out instead how to add dimensions to perspective instead. A blind man must accept scientific truth on faith. Helen Keller probably had inner arguments of smell informed and resolved by touch. A tulip shaped lamp inside a train turns on, and a man sees himself as himself for the first time, as a reflection centered within the looking glass through which he viewed the evening sky.

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**judmarc** 7 months ago

This reminds me of a (long-ago) high school English class where we had to write book reports on "Moby-Dick." I had odd reading tastes for a high schooler, and actually read the whole thing and loved it. It seemed to me that much of the criticism I read to prepare for writing the report was over-complicated to the point of absurdity, full of talk about all sorts of symbolism and missing the excitement of the plot. So I decided to write the report as a contrarian disagreeing with my secondary sources.

I said Moby was white primarily for the simple purpose of identification. After all, "Thar she blows - the white whale!" is a helluva lot more dramatic than "Can yer bring 'er in closer, Cap'n, I can't quite make 'er out." The rest of the report went along in a similar vein.

My teacher was amused enough to ask me to read the report to the class. He thought I'd written it as a satire, but I was actually quite serious.

I still think authors write primarily to entertain and/or inform; that those who self-consciously try to communicate through symbolism are deadly dull; and that therefore, in books that become popular enough to be considered classics, authors are most often attempting to communicate with readers quite directly, rather than by complex, circuitous means.

5 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Dennis Jerz** 7 months ago in reply to judmarc

Some exciting and entertaining books with great plots also withstand extensive critical analysis. Some exciting books don't. Ishmael was a philosopher and scholar, whose bookish insights prepared bookish armchair adventurers to enjoy and understand the events in the plot. Reducing a work to a list of symbols really does suck the life out of it, but if you were able to back up your contrarian claims with textual evidence, then good for you. Your teacher recognized that he/she was not simply imparting facts for you to memorize and spit back, rather but rather to give you the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills.

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)

**Uskglass** 7 months ago in reply to Dennis Jerz

"...if you were able to back up your contrarian claims with textual evidence, then good for you. Your teacher recognized...."

Really? "Good for you" to a poster likely as old as you are, if not older? I realize you're an associate English professor, making you a kind of authority on this subject. But combined with your "I worry for your students" comment above followed by "Apology accepted," as if you're the aggrieved party, not to mention the the non-responsive comment which is the first comment on this thread, you can come across as just a bit patronizing.

(Edited by author 7 months ago)

LIKE REPLY



**Dennis Jerz** 7 months ago in reply to Uskglass

Since the detail I responded to was something that happened when judmarc was a student, I guess I did draw on a phrase I might have used if I were marking that paper. It's an occupational hazard... I identified with the teacher in that story. I can see your point, CS. No offense to judmarc (or to you) intended.

After reading these threads, I am surprised to hear that teachers are having students close read on their first and only read. I've always understood close reading as re-reading, and I don't ever remember my own English teachers encouraging or permitting the kind of random associations Horn mentions in her Dutch elm example.

I see close reading as a good thing, and close reading \*to excess\* or \*irrationally\* (without textual evidence from the words on the page) as the problem. I'd rather not dismiss the entire concept just because it \*can\* be misused or parodied.

LIKE REPLY



**min6char** 7 months ago in reply to Dennis Jerz

I don't think anyone's arguing that we should dismiss the entire concept. It seems pretty clear to us, however, that it should be removed from the standard curriculum. Horn specifies that it has a place in electives and in College. In a "close reading" English class, however, students are dragged through what passes for literary criticism by teachers who don't have any experience with literary criticism. That's dumb. If someone on your faculty has literary criticism experience, have them teach an elective on it. The required English course should have less fancy but broader goals.

1 person liked this. LIKE REPLY



**Dennis Jerz** 7 months ago in reply to min6char

I hope nobody sees me as defending the practice of robotically dragging students through every line of a novel. Close reading is the term I most often hear my peers use when talking about the skill students need to demonstrate in order to write a textually-supported argument, whether for the AP English exams, for a literature or history or freshman comp or science class.

I don't see that core skill -- whatever we choose to call it -- as something to save for a literary criticism class. One specific kind of lit crit (New Criticism) does champion microscopic, internally focused close reading as the best way to find meaning in a work. The excesses of that approach make a little more sense in the context of the excesses of what went before it, but we don't have to be New Critics in order to read closely.

What would you call the skill that students draw on, when they return to a text they have already read, looking for specific quotations that they can use to make sound judgments about what interpretations are, or are not, supported by the words on the page? Is this a skill that only college-bound future English majors need? Is there a difference between that skill and Horn's example of Dutch elm BS?

LIKE REPLY



**min6char** 7 months ago in reply to Dennis Jerz

Towards the first concern: don't worry, I don't think that for a second. I meant to imply, however, with due respect, that perhaps you didn't know just what a circus it is in high school English classes that claim to be championing the discipline. Your peers use the term close reading correctly, to refer to the skill which is the cornerstone of academic thought. High school teachers don't use the term correctly, which is why I'm careful to embed it in scare quotes when referring to the curriculum which they call by its name.

And no, in some regard, its definitely not a skill only needed for English degrees. You're right there. And there is a difference between that skill and BS. But only the best teachers of a "close reading" curriculum actually manage to give the kids any shred of that skill. The ones that don't cite "close reading" as their course's sole divine goal whenever they smell the hounds of accountability, while in reality they only spend the class time having the students practice the ancient art of spouting convincing-sounding drivel. I don't know whether they're incompetent or lazy, but either way, their courses are being billed as a miniature version of the courses in Literature conducted at colleges such as your own by professors such as yourself and the product is in no slightest sense delivering.

But what if it were? What if "close reading" English courses actually taught close reading (no quotes)? Is that all they should teach? Recall that, according to the teachers' own statements, that is indeed all they teach. Do we really need years and years of nothing but close reading, to no particular end?

I understand your initial offense at the article. You reacted reasonably, much as a math professor would react to an article suggesting we should remove proofs from the high school curriculum. But what if we lived in a world where high school math classes contained only the theory of proofs themselves, and they were taught by people who weren't any good at proofs?

That's the world of "close reading" (in quotes)

(Edited by author 7 months ago)

2 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Dennis Jerz** 7 months ago in reply to min6char

Well said, min6char.

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**darnish** 7 months ago in reply to judmarc

I agree. Which is why so much that is written as "high minded" literature these days is so awfully bad.

I think so many authors who are considered great would have laughed their asses off at such close readings of their work.

Which is not to say that poetry and profundity and symbolism don't exist and aren't important; they are. But I think detailed, close readings and over-analysis rob great literature of these things.

Close readings and over-analysis are like the expression "can't see the forest for the trees."

1 person liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Uskglass** 7 months ago in reply to judmarc

Excellent post, judmarc. You and darnish are absolutely right. Some works deserve close reading (Shakespeare's plays). Some works don't. Many works really aren't written with it in mind, and scholars (in my humble opinion!) simply make up interpretations to suit their own views.

Again, I'm reminded of Tolkien's writings... In his letters and other non-fiction work, he writes about how it drove him mad when literature teachers hypothesized, "The Ring is a symbol for the atomic bomb!", etc.

This isn't to say that interpretation has no place at all. Plenty of great writers have said things like, "Some of the meanings in my story are obvious. But if you think that character A represents concept X, then who am I to disagree? Once you read it, the story becomes your own." Encouraging students to form their own (reasoned) opinions, especially insightful ones such as, "The whale is white for simple storytelling reasons, not deep, mystical ones," is only a good thing.

1 person liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Michael James Keane** 7 months ago

Reading "more" instead of reading "better" is the intellectual equivalent of eating at McDonald's instead of taking home ingredients from the market and cooking a healthy meal. Just because McDonald's is easier, faster, and more pleasant for children does not make it a healthy alternative to good nutrition--same goes for books. This article is way off the mark.

6 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**darnish** 7 months ago in reply to Michael James Keane

My first two years in high school, the approach to teaching literature was as described above by the author of this post, and as detailed in some of the comments. It was painfully tedious. The only thing I remember learning from those years is how to use a thesaurus. And even though I was an avid reader in my personal life, I hated "good" literature. The last two years of high school, I went to a school where we read where we read approximately a book a week. Our class discussions were amazing and lively and fun. I fell in love with good literature. And I learned to read closely and critically on my own.

When books are taken apart with such detail, kids lose attention. Especially when the story gets lost in the kind of pretentious analysis that most kids just don't give a fig about and will never use or need in their real lives.

I don't think analysis should be thrown out. But a good book can be read in a week or two or three and still appreciated and learned from.

3 people liked this.



**hshorn** 7 months ago in reply to Michael James Keane

A good analogy. Let's explore this one. In one regard, I'm in complete agreement: speeding up to the point past wholeness definitely isn't a good idea (no McDonald's). But similarly, artificially slowing down, though it has its merits, also has its downsides--if a student is so into a book he/she can't wait to read the next chapter, that's a good thing; yet it seems instead of harnessing that excitement, the close reading approach occasionally dampens it. Things get worse when it turns out that close reading is being taught poorly, and students are being slowed down to examine things that aren't there. I'm all for rigorous textual analysis--in the hands of a good professor, it can be an absolute revelation. But close reading fundamentalism, particularly in the hands of a bad instructor, can be absolutely lethal to a student's love of books.

As a further point, I'd say it's more a question of reading "more" versus reading "slower." We're not talking about subbing in *Twilight* for *The Scarlet Letter*, here--rather reading *The Scarlet Letter* \*and\* adding in *Hamlet*, *Vanity Fair*, *Arcadia*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Let's get these kids excited.

2 people liked this.



**darnish** 7 months ago in reply to hshorn

Exactly.



**Guest** 7 months ago in reply to darnish

Actually, this is in reply to hshorn's post:

"I'm all for rigorous textual analysis--in the hands of a good professor, it can be an absolute revelation. But close reading fundamentalism, particularly in the hands of a bad instructor, can be absolutely lethal to a student's love of books."

In that case, this valid point was stated in the article in a misleading and irresponsible way. The proposed solution was, "We should end it," and "... let's chuck the concept." But the actual villains of the piece (which we all agree are unqualified or untrained literature teachers and their desperate fundamentalism) are only implied through the free indirect speech of the "elm tree" raver. The real problem is never actually declared in the article as explicitly as the claim that textual analysis itself is worthless, easily lampooned, and just plain beyond the grasp of the average high school student ... which we all agree is just not true.



**najdorf** 7 months ago

A lot of the complaints about close reading here are targeted not at close reading, but its opposite: making sh\*t up. Most English classes do very little close reading because it's demanding and you can't just make sh\*t up the way you can when you get to make expansive comments about "I think the author always does X" (with no textual support). James Hannaham got it mostly right in the first comment, but I'll add that I don't think the answer is assigning more pages and then analyzing them less carefully. I've taught and taken a lot of English classes at several levels with students possessing a wide array of IQ levels and backgrounds, and I have not met very many real students who consistently had the ability to read a piece of text and understand what it definitely states, might imply, and definitely does not state. I tutored the SAT. I personally know dozens of high-graded high school students from successful families with a bit of personal cleverness in some realms who can take ten minutes to read a few paragraphs and then find themselves unable to answer accurately, even with prompting or discussion, questions in the form of:

- "What did sentence 10 say?"
- A. The opposite of what sentence 10 said.
  - B. Something unrelated to the entire passage.
  - C. Something that inherently makes no sense.

- D. Something that uses some of the same words as sentence 10 but is not accurate.
- E. A paraphrase of sentence 10.

Given the common traits of most English classes - too much lecturing, too much reading, not enough interactive work, not enough close attention to detail, too much tolerance of nonsensical statements by all parties, and not enough student investment in the mission of understanding their native language and its practical and artistic uses - I'm not surprised that we regularly turn out students with countless hours of coursework in English who are incapable of accurately reading a single sentence or producing a coherent written sentence of their own. If you think assigning more of the #1 hated task of many students' high school and college careers ("we have to read how many pages?") and reducing the already low level of attention we currently are able to give to accurate, detailed reading of small pieces of text will produce students who are capable of at least "Comprehending Stuff You've Actually Read", count me skeptical, but I wish you the best of luck.

2 people liked this.



**min6char** 7 months ago in reply to najdorf

Hang on. Back up. You lost me. Our students have horrible reading comprehension and making them try to read more WON'T HELP? No one here is suggesting we ask students to regurgitate CliffsNotes. Obviously students have to understand nuances. That's not what the "close reading" fad pushes. It pushes a "baby's first literary analysis" approach to understanding the nuances. We're talking read a whopping total of three books a year and play Jacques Derrida for the remaining hours (I am not joking here; my senior year we read literally three books). Now I realize that there are some schools which represent the pitiable opposite extreme, so I understand where you're coming from, but must we choose between two flavours of tripe?

2 people liked this.



**segads** 7 months ago in reply to min6char

Close reading is hardly a "fad." It's been around for about 80 years!  
 It's too bad you only read 3 books in your senior year. That truly isn't enough -- and even I couldn't stand playing Derrida for the rest of the time!  
 What else did you do in class? Unlike college courses, my state standards require teaching presentation skills, writing for different purposes and audiences, reading several genres (imaginative and nonfiction), and research, just to name the basics. We also have to differentiate for different student abilities, assess regularly, report and analyze data and prepare students for standardized tests. Given all that, reading 3 books, if short stories, poetry and some nonfiction are included with the novels and plays, isn't so bad!



**min6char** 7 months ago in reply to segads

I'm sorry for not being clear. "Read a whopping total of three books and play Jacques Derrida for the remaining hours" was meant as an exhaustive curriculum list, not a figure of speech. It's not entirely fair I suppose; we also read four or five poems. But other than that, that pretty much covers it. And of course we talked (presentation skills) and wrote, but the talking and writing was of an ilk that leads me to file it under the second heading on that list.

And I realize that close reading is not a fad. But the "close reading" fad does not teach what a legitimate literary critic would call close reading (see post way above).

I'm not sure how to parse this sentence: "We also have to differentiate for different student abilities, assess regularly, report and analyze data.." Are you saying you have to grade? I assume most English teachers have to grade. I must be misunderstanding you.

To some extent there's a necessary disconnect here, as I'm probably talking about a much smaller class size than you are. In my classes, every student had an opportunity to speak and indeed was required to speak each class in the course of the discussion, so the notion of a presentation would have been sort of silly.

My criticism of what I view to be the English curriculum of most High schools may be completely erroneous, as my knowledge of how things are actually done is only from my own anecdotes and the anecdotes of my acquaintances at the time from neighboring schools. It's possible that the usual experience at an American high school is nothing like that of my friends and me. You would certainly know better than I.

1 person liked this.



**segads** 7 months ago in reply to min6char

To clarify my sentence: The tasks I mentioned involve much more than grading. Determination of teacher quality (and school excellence) now depends entirely upon the collection of data. By law, we must provide supports for students of widely varying abilities (and be able to explain why we chose a particular strategy), create formative and summative assessments that test particular skills in order to measure growth, prepare students for standardized tests (many of which involve blind reading and analysis of passages), and disaggregate that all of that data for administrators who

generally file it somewhere.  
 Then we get to grade and give meaningful feedback to students.  
 Yes, we also have to teach presentation skills and collaborative group strategies. It goes well beyond class participation.  
 It may be a surprise to many readers here that not all English teachers were English majors. To be "highly qualified" means 24 hours of classes that were in the English Dept. of some college. They could be all creative writing and basic survey courses. Naturally, some teachers would not understand how to teach close reading well. Many of them can't do it themselves!

1 person liked this. LIKE REPLY



**Jacquelyn Ottomeyer** 7 months ago

Reading for enjoyment and understanding is not truly reading. It is decoding, skimming, pure thoughtlessness in action. Our students are getting enough of this in their digital lives...the last bastion for careful reading is the schools, and that makes it even more essential. For the record, my students absolutely loved close reading this year...it consistently made the "most enjoyable" and "most valuable" class activities sections on my course evaluations. I teach students from the College Prep (medium level of ability) to AP (highest level of ability) and they all talked about how much they loved close reading. I don't know where the evidence is that students hate it.

Speaking for myself as a high schooler 15 years ago, I thought marking text, breaking it down, and analyzing it were all a waste of time when what I really wanted was to sink into a book and enjoy it. I was an avid reader and it was like pulling teeth to get me to slow down and textually analyze, but my teachers made me do it, and I enjoy reading now 100 times more than I did then. Learning new things is often uncomfortable...that's the entire point.

3 people liked this. LIKE REPLY



**JoAnne Clark** 7 months ago in reply to Jacquelyn Ottomeyer

I'm not sure upon what you base your statement that "reading for enjoyment and understanding is not truly reading...it is decoding" but I believe you are misguided. I can decode Spanish pretty well for a white chick whose native language is English, but past the pre-primer vocabulary level I probably won't understand -- and definitely won't enjoy -- most of it. If your lowest students are at the college-prep level, the idea of reading for pleasure probably is NOT alien to them. If a student has never (or rarely) experienced the "flow" of being lost in a book they love, analyzing the craft of an author is going to be difficult if not impossible. It will most assuredly be unpleasant. Further, it's been my experience that the only people who need (or want) to "interpret and evaluate the use of ambiguities, subtleties, contradictions, ironies, and incongruities in a text" or to "explain how voice, persona, and the choice of a narrator affect characterization and the tone, plot, and credibility of a text" are English majors. Certainly not the freshmen and sophomores the state of California ought to have had in mind when they wrote that standard.

1 person liked this. LIKE REPLY



**ThomasApolis** 7 months ago

I do not agree with Horn's argument at all. My response is too lengthy to state in full here, but essentially hinges on the quality of literature and the quality of student minds Horn wants to encourage in the American education system. [www.thomasapolis.com/2010/07/0.../](http://www.thomasapolis.com/2010/07/0.../)

LIKE REPLY



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1 person liked this. LIKE REPLY



**min6char** 7 months ago in reply to ThomasApolis

Good close reading of the article. Add some reasoning next time. Some good pages to tighten up your logic, at the right level for you.  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S...> (this will fix most of it)  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A...> (for the last paragraph)

1 person liked this. LIKE REPLY



**segads** 7 months ago

Imagine! Students learning college-level skills in high school! What could be more ridiculous. They might

even be ... prepared.

Close reading, when properly taught, does not "overanalyze" -- it simply teaches good analysis. I teach AP Lit, along with other levels of high school English. We read about 4-5 books per semester, but they're expected to be able to handle the basics (plot, character, subjects) on their own. Class discussion looks at key passages, movement and development of theme, overall use of symbols, style, patterns and structures. I'd never focus on a single tree in one chapter -- neither would any decent lit teacher.

It's not really my job to get them to read more, but to read better. Learning to read attentively is a slow process, but as a student improves, she becomes more fluent. If you don't think understanding subtext and tone are important, just read these posts!

Speed reading is for nonfiction, informational pieces. I teach them how to "gut" books and articles, too. In non-AP classes, Creative Writing, for example, I still teach careful reading. I show them how smart authors are -- it's not just "inspiration," but "perspiration" that leads to great literature.

I'm not sure if the author has taught in high school, but reading 5 books a year actually leaves more room for grammar, rhetoric and composition than does 15 (which would be 1 book every 2 weeks or so). No teacher I know has the luxury (or the desire) to spend a week per chapter. We have far too many of those compositions to grade.

2 people liked this.



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4 people liked this.



**min6char** 7 months ago in reply to segads

AP lit is a different matter. Students have elected and have been selected to take it, and it's very purpose is to imitate college level English, so obviously it has to have college-style close reading. The last sentence of the article would seem to imply that Horn is okay with it in that context.



**segads** 7 months ago in reply to min6char

True -- although there is a push to open up AP to more and more students. Newsweek's "Best High Schools" list is based upon the number of AP tests taken (not passed, mind you). My school does have an open enrollment policy.

Also, with the national push to get all students to college, shouldn't at least most students be able to close read? It's not only English that uses this strategy -- history, art history (same technique applied to visual arts), classics, etc. Any course that is based in primary documents engages in some degree of close reading.

However, I still use the methods of close reading in my core-level courses (including creative writing). Good readers make for better writers, too.



**min6char** 7 months ago in reply to segads

Towards your question, my answer would be "not really." Most colleges have a required freshman year course wherein students are taught how to close read anyway, so high school courses that focus only on close reading (which of course your course doesn't as you said) are at best redundant. At worst, they amount to a session in which the teacher uses whatever tenuous evidence they can find to push their own pet theories about the text, and then turns around and has the students do the same. I think the real issue with "close reading" in high schools is that it is used as an excuse to do nothing in particular in English class. You don't seem to have that problem.

You say above that many high school teacher probably can't do it themselves very well. And that's really my point. My point is that the English courses I'm talking about are billed as being wall-to-wall close reading, and literally nothing else, when the actual close reading employed by the teachers is like the rubbish described by Horn in the article.

But even if you can do it effectively, many, if not most, of the kids in a standard English class don't even like literature, so doing close reading with them is trying to make the horse drink. Do we really have so little faith in literature that we think that kids won't see it's great unless we paint their faces in it?

Here, a metaphor: If I'm in an art gallery, I don't need to look closely at a Monet to see it's great. "Ah," I'll cry "the colors, the light, the textures! So lifelike, and yet somehow even more vibrant than life." "Look closer" you'll say, and then I will. "Ah ha!" I'll cry, "Now I understand! He achieves those textures and that sense of real light with hundreds of splotchy strokes that add up to the hazy glow that seems to surround brightly lit objects in real life!" But, if you'd never let me look at the painting first, and instead dragged me through the art gallery, holding me by the back of my head and pressing my face against all the Monets and never letting me back up, I won't cry "Ah ha! Now I understand!" I'll yell "Who the hell are you? Let go of my head! What's this blurry stuff? Painting sucks!"

My point is that close reading, when taught well, works well for kids who already see how good the books are, but it teaches the kids who hate the books to hate them more. When taught poorly, it teaches everyone to hate the books, because either they don't like the books and they're having the force-fed Monet reaction, or they like the books and they're horrified to hear them being warped into idiotic theories for the sake of the teacher's own self-gratification.

2 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**segads** 7 months ago

Sorry for the duplicate posts -- just getting used to this system!

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**MRP18** 7 months ago

Is 'more' always better? I have taught English for seven years and emphasize close reading because otherwise there is no reading. Forcing students to slow down and focus is the only way to have any comprehension of the more dense texts, let alone an appreciation for that very density. The end of close reading would be yet another symptom of our need to rush through things and still somehow call the experiences meaningful. Why? Because they were on our precious terms? Because there was no - God forbid - effort involved? Because I have nothing to gain from having to stop and think? Appreciating the 'overall arc' of a book is what they use Sparks Notes for - so that they don't have to bother getting the point as a whole on their own. My only weapon is to utilize the text - slowly - in class so that they actually open the book let alone grasp that there was a point to immersing yourself in the author's words in the first place. The main barrier to learning for these students is language. It is hard, unfamiliar and distancing. Close reading removes that barrier and helps them become better readers, writers and thinkers. What does fast reading help them with?

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Brandon Carbaugh** 7 months ago

Amen. It's like trying to teach someone the subtleties of a Fellini film's technique by repeatedly striking them in the face with the reel case.

3 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Chris Feroz** 7 months ago

I could not agree more. READING comes first, "close reading" comes later if/when the reader feels it is worthwhile. This approach is far better suited to today's information age necessary parsing skill set

3 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Halifax Humanities** 7 months ago

I am the director of a program that brings "great books" to people in poverty. We throw our students into the deep end of the literature pool and while they occasionally gasp for air, they come to love much of what they read and become increasingly insightful and careful readers. We never teach critical theory or literary technique. We just get immersed in books.

2 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Elles** 7 months ago

As a high school junior going into my senior year, I personally agree with this article. I took an English class freshman year and was so fed up with this method that I didn't continue on the normal English track and took college composition for my credits. On occasion I mourn that I may have missed out on a few books

here and there when schoolmates bring up English class material in other classes, but I'm glad that English didn't kill my love for reading as I still expose myself to literature for pleasure. I've even found by reading outside of English class that I'm a huge fan of Vladimir Nabokov, an author that would not have been in the curriculum had I continued the normal English track.

My faith, however, has still not been restored in literary analysis being more than just a study where you make stuff up.

And of course, that's just me talking. More research should be done into the actual effects.

1 person liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**solarcat** 7 months ago

Agreed. Oh so very much in agreement, here. I am and always have been a voracious reader, but by the time I hit AP English class in high school, I was close to wanting to throw every book I saw into a lake. I vividly remember the month--MONTH--we spent reading "A Doll's House" line-by-line in class, and the number of times I got in trouble for "reading ahead". Any affection I may have had for the play was well and truly beaten out of me after that.

I love books, and I think reading is absolutely fundamental to our ability to think, to reason, to express ourselves as human beings. It absolutely killed me to watch my classmates, over the years, decide that they "hated" reading, all because of this close reading idiocy. And the worst part is, now that I'm writing fiction myself, I see all the ways that ideas and themes develop in my work, without ANY intent on my part. I've written things, only to have themes and symbols pointed out to me that I never even noticed were there!

Analyzing literature is wonderful, and valuable, but spending a whole day of class time forcing high school students to discuss the symbolism of this or that, that the author may well have put in just because they wanted it there and not for ANY particular reason whatsoever, is a colossal waste of time, and is killing any enthusiasm kids may have had for the wonderful world of books.

2 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**segads** 7 months ago in reply to solarcat

I wonder if anyone complains about having to learn all those darned equations and formulas in science. Shouldn't we just have fun watching stuff change color? Can't we just say, "It exploded"? How about pretty stars that twinkle?

The study of any discipline gets more rigorous and more specialized as you get into more advanced levels. Very often, it's that senior year that helps students decide what direction they want to take in college. Not everyone is cut out to be an English major -- or chemistry or history...

Perhaps your teacher took too long on each line of Doll's House. Maybe it wasn't as "fun" as it could have been. But each line is important when analyzing. Heck, I tell my students I could easily spend a year on Hamlet alone! I don't -- it would get too tedious and my class sizes would be suspiciously small.

And, by the way, no author worth his/her salt puts something into their work just 'cuz. They are artists and craftsmen. They revise and reconsider their choices of words, images, symbols, etc. That's a good part of what close reading should teach: art doesn't appear in pure inspiration from above. It's hard work and deserves the time it takes to really understand it.

It's too bad your fellow students decided they hated reading because of advanced reading techniques. I still love keeping up with astronomy, even though I don't remember the formula for determining the colors of stars.

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**Peg Keller** 7 months ago

I think the problem is that the choice of close reading material is not up to the students. If you let the kids pick out classics they want to explore more, and no, not Twilight-- then they may understand the point of close reading, and enjoy it. To just read three times as many books without discussing why a particular passage is important is pointless. But then, I was an English major once upon a time, so...

2 people liked this. [LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)



**readwritechef** 7 months ago

I'm not entirely sure if i agree with your comments. Close reading in and of itself is not the problem, its supposed to show students the deeper meaning behind stories and get them to think not just brush over the pages. The problem might be with how this technique is used in the classroom not the technique itself. Who really read a chapter a week in the classroom? And speeding things up doesn't help if no one understands what's happening in the book...hence the need for close reading at times. Maybe what should be done is to get children to read from earlier stages in life so when they reach school it doesn't feel like a chore and their minds are more open to learning about books.

[LIKE](#) [REPLY](#)

**Idril** 7 months ago

My idea on this matter is that close reading is that painful in the first place because we don't get what it means, why do it, and why it had to exist in the first place, and that's how we end up bullshitting our way through and getting decent grades even when you haven't understood anything about seeing depth in a text. I was a very studious, a straight A student, and read lots on my free time, but I always hated close reading. "Why should they tediously crypt information for us to tediously decypher later? why not tell us right away? what a waste of time!" I thought, as we surgically cut apart the books.

But what changed it for me were two things: writing, and falling in love with books. I think two things could make close reading more meaningful: 1) going from the process of writing and why such figures are used, through short creative writing exercises 2) encourage free readings and base close reading on parts of books students particularly loved. Maybe it's just naive of me, but I think it could be motivating, at least to some. just my humble opinion

LIKE REPLY

**Paul A** 7 months ago

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way-- in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only." - Charles Dickens

It's the French Revolution, it's the late 20th-/early 21st-century secondary educational milieu. [I'm sure I'm in way over my head already...thank goodness for internet anonymity.]

Twenty-two years removed from high school, what I remember most vividly about my literature courses is numerous assignments dissecting the "classics" that I completed with the aid of Cliffs Notes along with many books, plays, essays, etc., being either browsed or quickly-read instead of actually absorbed. But I also can recall some instances of pure enjoyment and true learning: a rather expansive discussion for 13 year old students about American history, racism, offensive language, and book-banning while reading *Huckleberry Finn* in 8th grade (including watching a Nightline episode focused on the novel's pervasive use of "nigger"); a similar discussion on racism in 7th(?) grade along with *To Kill A Mockingbird* (and probably a discussion about foreshadowing, but that memory is much less vivid); falling about a week-and-a-half behind the assigned reading schedule for *Wuthering Heights*, trying to get caught up on an otherwise light-homework weeknight, and then reading the whole book straight through, dissecting the "author's intentions" or "Heathcliff's motivations" be damned, simply because it was such a compelling story. I had a similar experience when I picked up "War and Peace" purely for my personal enjoyment during my freshman year at college (except the epilogue...still haven't gotten through that).

I wish that my experiences echoed what Dennis Jerz wrote ("I've always understood close reading as re-reading..."), but much of it instead approached the depiction stated in the second paragraph of the original essay. Personally, I'd advocate engaging students in the stories first, then broadening into an examination of a work's literary structure and significance along with its relevance to the human condition; in other words, a middle-of-the-road approach -- I'd like to think Dickens would concur.

4 people liked this. LIKE REPLY

**Susan** 7 months ago

Where is the evidence and research to support these allegations? I don't find that my students dislike close reading-I think they enjoy discussing compelling passages as a group and coming up with their own insights. And I enjoy listening to the students, who have the most amazing ideas. Of course, "close reading" is not the end-all and be-all of an English curriculum-there are many other activities and focuses to be explored in the subject of English. A good teacher keeps the classwork varied, so, yes, a year of just close reading would be very boring. But who is to say that close reading cannot be one of many activities that we use to promote higher level thinking skills-the skills that will be most needed in the coming century. At any rate, the underlying assumption that we should use close reading or "end it" is what we would call in my AP English class a false dilemma or false binary. Why not use close reading (done well and based on the text-NOT making things up) as part of a much larger repertoire of techniques to help students become deeper thinkers?

2 people liked this. LIKE REPLY

**GPolnac** 7 months ago

This editorial certainly did not require any close reading skills. There is no substance to analyze. LOL. I plan to use this in my classes of an "attempt at an argument" that fails.

2 people liked this. LIKE REPLY

**ayah** 7 months ago

Dude, I am sooooo down with this. I mean, students have to take all these stupid math classes, but they never understand math ANYWAY, so let's just chuck it! Genius.

1 person liked this. LIKE REPLY



**Igacsad** 7 months ago

Actually, this is in reply to hshorn's post:

"I'm all for rigorous textual analysis--in the hands of a good professor, it can be an absolute revelation. But close reading fundamentalism, particularly in the hands of a bad instructor, can be absolutely lethal to a student's love of books."

In that case, this valid point was stated in the article in a misleading and irresponsible way. The proposed solution was, "We should end it," and "... let's chuck the concept." But the actual villains of the piece (which we all agree are unqualified literature teachers and their desperate fundamentalism) are only implied through the free indirect speech of the "elm tree" raver. The real problem is never actually declared in the article as explicitly as the claim that textual analysis itself is worthless, easily lampooned, and just plain beyond the grasp of the average high school student.

1 person liked this.

LIKE

REPLY

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