

**“Sometimes text is just text”:  
Engaging students in meaning making in English language arts**

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*Abstract:*

*This paper explores the teaching of close reading and theme in a high school literature class, analyzing student and teacher evidence to reflect on how best to help students engage in different dimensions of meaning making with literary text. The author reflects on the close reading experience she created for students, and ultimately re-conceptualizes the concept of close reading to promote more a full, holistic, and exploratory experience with text.*

## Chapter 1: Framing a dilemma

Students file into the classroom, dumping their backpacks by their desks and turning to look at the image projected on the screen. It is a text message conversation, and as students realize this, they start talking animatedly, reading it and wondering aloud why it is there. The image is:



Their eyes move to the question on the board beside the screen: *Is Jared romantically interested in Megan? How do you know?* The bell rings, and their eyes turn to me, excited.

“This,” I say, gesturing to the screen, is a conversation that my friend Megan had with a guy she is interested in, Jared (green is Megan; gray is Jared). She called me last night and told

me she couldn't tell if he was interested or not, so I told her I had a class of experts and that I would ask you."

Gleeful faces fill the room. One student raises her hand excitedly and says, "He's definitely not interested." Other students shake their heads in agreement.

"Yeah it sounds like she's really interested, but he's not," another student calls out.

"Why?" I say, pushing back. "Point to something specific in the message that tells you that—how do you know?!"

"*Because*," she says emphatically, "he doesn't use *any* smiley faces. And she uses two."

"Okay," I say, but "so what? He says he would love to see her!"

"Yeah," another student chimes in, "but even though he *says* that on the outside, his punctuation doesn't really show that, and he uses vague phrases like 'ya for sure' and won't commit to hanging out with her another time."

"And he doesn't really ask her any questions, except for when he has to because she asked how he was," another student notes.

"Yeah! And look! It's 8:21 PM! Is he *really* going to bed?" one student asks skeptically. Other students chatter in agreement.

One student raises her hand patiently. "I see what everyone is saying," she says politely, "but I think you could still interpret it that he is interested. He didn't have to say that he would love to see her, and being vague is something boys do when they are tired; maybe he really *did* just have a long day at work."

Some students look thoughtful. Another says, "That's true, but if he liked her he would go anyway."

“Wow,” I say. “You guys are doing a great job of noticing and analyzing some of the individual details in the text in order to come to a bigger interpretation about its meaning.”

Students stop talking and look at me suspiciously. “Today we are going to do this with Shakespeare!” I say excitedly. Amid audible groans and we-should-have-known glares, I open a PowerPoint entitled “Close Reading.”

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When I set out to teach a short unit on close reading to my 10<sup>th</sup> grade students during student teaching, my aim was to help them discover the value in noticing, questioning, and analyzing in order to make meaning of the details of a text. I view close reading as the process of analyzing a piece of text in detail in order to better discover and interpret its bigger ideas, tensions, questions, and themes; only when we note, unpack, and examine the layers of a text can we begin to explore the dimensions of its core, its “heart,” and to construct meaning from the patterns, connections, and contradictions that we find there. I chose to do this mini-unit for several reasons:

- Close reading is one of the cognitive processes fundamental to the practice of English Language Arts.
- Close reading is one of the disciplinary skills that observant, thoughtful people employ on a regular basis, not only to read texts of various genres (fiction, newspaper and other media, film, commercials, etc), but also to read people and situations; it is a skill that spans across disciplines (critical observation, analysis of patterns, and construction of meaning from details is critical to the arts *and* sciences) and has an application that extends far beyond schooling.
- Close reading is *rewarding* to those who choose to invest in it. Diving into a piece of text through close reading is like staring into a tide pool or a piece of art, or delving into an archeological dig, or getting to know the intricacies of someone’s personality on a

deeper level; the longer you commit to exploring and noticing, the more you discover and experience.

My mini-unit focused on close reading as the pathway to theme—the premise being that when we analyze the details that make up the text, we can make stronger interpretations about its meanings and significance. My Enduring Understandings were:

- Students will understand that close reading develops and reveals a text's themes and deeper meanings.
- Students will be able to use close reading to make thoughtful, in-depth, and well-supported interpretations of theme and its significance in literary text.

I wanted students to understand the purpose and value of close reading, and to be able to engage in it meaningfully in order to better inform and enhance their interpretations and constructions of textual significance. The mini-unit fell within a larger unit on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, in which students were largely reading the text in class and doing some basic analysis of language, structure, plot, and characters. This mini-unit focused on engaging with Shakespeare's language in a deeper way; instruction emphasized small details (word choice, rhetorical strategies, etc) as the building blocks for deeper analysis, and learning experiences aimed to teach students that fine analysis of the details yields stronger interpretations about the bigger picture.

I knew this would be challenging for my students; in the context of my mentor teacher's classroom, there was significant focus on writing instruction (the district teaches Jane Schaffer writing, which employs a formula for paragraphing and focuses on making and supporting basic claims) but less focus on detailed textual analysis. Close reading would largely be a new skill for my students in English, and they would be applying it to a Shakespearean play—very rich but very complex content. Students were familiar with the general concept of theme, but were new to the practice of *re-examining* and exploring text deeply before articulating themes. Because close

reading is a mode of meaning making that I had internalized after years of practice as a reader, writer, and English major, I knew it would be a challenge to make it accessible to students and help them see its value. Because re-examining text and analyzing it extensively was not a norm in the classroom, it was difficult to help my students see the relevance of breaking the text down any further. In introducing my students to close reading, I was trying to establish a new norm of how to engage with text—a new mode of meaning making. It quickly became clear to me that in addition to being taught how to do it, students needed to be convinced of its value and applicability.

Because my students were generally more practiced in drawing messages from the text (a complex and important skill) and writing about them than they were at close analysis, they were used to making thematic claims more geared toward successful writing than toward close attention to the text. In other words, like many high school students, they were used to being presented with a question (often asking them to take a side between two options), making an interpretive claim in response to that question, and making that claim their thesis statement. They were then accustomed to selecting a few pieces of evidence in service of that thesis, and using them to argue for it in a structured essay. My students were very experienced in this practice, and their claims were effective and appropriate in that they synthesized basic elements of plot, dialogue, and character into generalizations about life—this is a critically important meaning-making strategy and is part of the essence of conceptualizing theme. However, these interpretations lacked a deeper attention to the nuances of the text; they were geared toward a quick generalization of meaning that sought out a few textual details in service of that meaning. I hoped to push my students to be more devoted to examining the subtleties of the text, and to what new meaning could be constructed from them.

I strongly believed that close reading should force us to re-examine our preliminary readings; I wanted to help students see what new meaning they could make from lingering in the text awhile—from guided, attentive, observant, and critical re-readings. Interpretations are more interesting and more arguable when they are rooted in the nuances of the text and seek to build meaning from them. I had learned, not easily, in my own high school and college education, that immersing myself in and sifting through the evidence (What do I see? What connotations underlie this word choice? Why this shift in punctuation? Why this tension between these two language patterns? What is this literary device doing? What is the effect of it on the tone?) helped me reach greater realizations about how to interpret its implications, and how to connect those implications to the world and to myself. I believe close reading is an important way for us to experience texts, and it can involve a healthy element of productive discomfort—we need to be willing to explore and get our hands dirty, allowing ourselves to be challenged by details that may not immediately fit into what we understand as the “big picture” of the text. It is challenging to explore text in this way, especially when you have been taught to engage with it differently, more oriented towards “big picture” claims in response to specific questions.

My students had little exposure to the depth of understanding that could be gained from breaking text down in this way, and were unfamiliar with what that process looked like. Realizing that they did not have a reference point for that skill, I knew I needed to highlight the role of this kind of analysis in the world, or they would see little relevance to their own lives. I also felt I need to provide very clear and specific instructions for what the process of close reading looks like. Anticipating student hesitation towards analyzing text in such meticulous detail, I acted based on two primary assumptions: 1) If I could show students how *relevant* close reading was to their lives and to the world, they would see why it was important, and 2) If I



could help them truly engage in it, they would see how *rewarding* it was and how much their capacity for meaning-making could grow. Through the text message scaffold, I tried to show students that close reading is a process we engage in all the time in the social world, and that observing and analyzing details is crucial if we want to be better interpreters and less susceptible to manipulation.

Students pointed to the tiniest details in the text to support their interpretations and got really into the (unnamed) close reading process. It could not have gone any better, but when we transitioned into the main activity of the day, close reading passages from *Julius Caesar* in groups (after naming, discussing, and practicing the skill of close reading), their passion faded, though they dutifully listened to and followed instructions. They did discuss the components of the text using the entry points I suggested, and ventured thoughtful responses when I pushed them more deeply into the word choice of their passages, but I could not understand their lack of excitement or their resistance to entering the text more deeply—hadn't I just shown them why this was important, why these skills were relevant to their lives? In this moment, my first assumption was challenged.

I still had hope, however; students had yet to truly engage in close reading on a deeper level with literary text; once they did this, I believed they would begin to see its value in challenging, stretching, extending, and substantiating preliminary readings. The primary formal assessment for this mini-unit was a “quiz” that provided students with a passage of text from *Julius Caesar* (a passage we had looked at in class) and asked them to perform a “close reading” of the passage prior to articulating a theme they saw represented in it. Students were asked to use their Close Reading Guide, a handout I created that outlined the “steps” of close reading as I taught them in class, and were provided with a sheet of definitions for unfamiliar words and

phrases in the passage itself. The quiz also included a self-reflection component, where students were asked to reflect on their progress in developing close reading and thematic meaning making skills and to share their thoughts on why close reading and thematic thinking were important skills to cultivate.

The results of the assessment reinforced my observation that many of my students were not excited about analysis, and many were still not engaging in it at the level I had hoped. Two students in particular (one who did not visibly appear to have close read the passage, and one who did so fairly skillfully) each expressed confusion about the value of close reading. Aaron\*, the student who did seem to be truly engaging in the close reading process, discovered something fascinating in the passage that I had never noticed before—a language pattern relating to body parts; he circled related words (“mouths,” “lips,” “tongue,” and “limbs”) and wrote, “body parts—why does he bring them up?” This same student, when asked to reflect on how well he had mastered close reading, wrote, “I’m confused by deconstructing. How is this helping us? In a way I find it is confusing me more than helping me.” Aaron demonstrated more skill in close reading than many other students in the class; if he did not see the value in close reading after engaging in it, I thought my second assumption must also be flawed. I was so excited to think about the textual implications of his discovery—why did Shakespeare use that language? What effect did it have? What themes might it feed? What might it say about the character speaking those lines? And yet Aaron had commented that unpacking the text in this way only confused him; was this a sign that I had not made the connection between close reading and theme clear? Or was it possible that Aaron was experiencing some of the productive discomfort I had hoped for, and that close reading was showing him new parts of the text that challenged his early assumptions and made him think more deeply about meaning?

The student whose quiz was mostly blank in the close reading section, Austin, commented in the self reflection, “I find this difficult because sometimes I don’t know what to look for. Sometimes text is just text.” This remark both excited me and challenged me; it excited me because it gave me a window into Austin’s struggles with close reading, and it challenged me because it made a claim that is fundamentally in opposition to everything I’ve been taught to believe as a student of English Language Arts. For me, for English majors, for those of us who subscribe to the disciplinary philosophy of English Language Arts, text is *never* just text. It always carries with it the questions, assumptions, values, tensions, etc. of its author, its culture(s), its history, its reader(s). How could I help Austin experience the text in a meaningful way? What might he be telling me about student conceptions of academic reading, and what insight about my own instruction might illuminate his comments?

Both Austin’s and Aaron’s self-reflections also reflected a disconnect between the concepts of theme and close reading; in fact, many students seemed to perceive them as completely unrelated processes. This pattern in student work pushed me to see more clearly the leaps in the modes of thinking I was asking students to exercise. After evaluating student work on the quiz and discovering that students did not venture as deeply into the text as I had hoped and were expressing confusion about the value of close reading and its relationship to theme, I began to reflect on my own instruction. First, I realized that my expectations for my students here were unrealistic; they had had little experience with analysis on this level, and had been taught to focus on the big picture. Elements of my instruction, like framing close reading only in terms of theme, may have even reinforced their notion that the big picture comes first. I began to realize just how much I had asked students to do. Recognizing more fully that close reading and theme are two very different approaches to meaning, I wondered if I had set students up to be

successful in navigating those approaches. Thinking back, I realized that I verbally stated the relationship between those modes of meaning making, and I modeled parts of the process for my students throughout the unit, but I had never modeled the full version of what I was asking them to do—a thorough close reading leading into an interpretation of theme. I began to wonder if this was the best way to present these concepts to my students—if I had given them the tools to successfully do what I had asked, and even if what I had asked was a reasonable or effective way to help students work through these different cognitive approaches to literature. These reflections lead me to my focus questions:

- What are the strengths and limitations of the ways in which I set up and defined close reading and theme?
- How did my presentation of these concepts influence how my students' engaged in applying them?
- How do I engage students effectively in the complex processes of analysis and abstract meaning making, and help them navigate the relationship between these different cognitive approaches to text?

In Chapter 2, I will use Judith Langer's theoretical framework of discursive and literary approaches to meaning in order to explore modes of thinking involved in constructing theme and navigating close reading. Using Langer's framework to inform my analysis, I will then reflect on elements of my own instruction and the results of student work to investigate how I asked students to engage in meaning making and how students navigated the complexities of what my instruction asked them to do.

\* All student names have been changed

## Chapter 2: Exploring evidence

### Theoretical framework: Discursive and literary modes of engaging with text

In *Envisioning literature: Literary understanding and literature instruction*, Judith Langer (2011) suggests that we operate in different modes of reading and understanding depending on whether we see our purpose as “literary” or “discursive”(26). According to Langer, “people approach meaning in essentially different ways when their reasons for reading, writing, or discussing are primarily to experience (to live through the situation in a subjective manner), as opposed to when their primary goal is discursive (to gain or share ideas or information)”(27). When engaging in what we see as a discursive reading experience, and “reading primarily for ideas or information, we try, early on, to get a sense of the topic we are reading about or the point of the argument”(33). Once we develop a sense of the main message, says Langer, “we use new ideas to clarify that sense, but rarely do we change it significantly”(33). In other words, when we see our purposes as discursive (when we believe we are reading in order to obtain information or determine a main idea or message), the ways we approach the text are governed by these purposes; we try to gain a sense of the main information or claims that we expect the text to be making. As we read in a discursive orientation, Langer suggests, we use what we see as the primary message of the text as a “point of reference”(32) and we fit new information into that message, only radically revising the message if we encounter significant counter-evidence. In discursive orientations, we therefore “move toward closure”(34), and seek to identify, understand, and encompass the primary meaning of the text.

When, however, we see our purpose as inhabiting and experiencing the text, we are governed by a literary orientation to it and approach its meaning in a different and more open way. Langer explains that “a literary orientation is essentially one of exploration, where

uncertainty, and hence open-mindedness, is a normal part of the response and newfound possibilities provoke other possibilities”(28). When we approach text to experience it in this way, we are engaging in “an act of discovery”(28). We allow ourselves to experience the world of the text and to explore new ideas, questions, and possibilities based on what we find there. In contrast to a discursive orientation, a literary orientation grants that “in literature there is no end; we cannot step closer. Instead, with each new possibility, our perspective changes and the horizon shifts, remaining elusive”(29). Langer highlights critical distinctions in the reader’s approach to meaning when engaging in a literary orientation versus a discursive one. What she does not highlight explicitly is the fact that the processes of exploration in a literary orientation, in addition to having inherent value, work in service of meaning making; in other words, while there is no end or closure to a literary experience, it is moving and working *towards* a “horizon”(29), building meaning through exploration, re-examination, and perspective.

Langer argues that both discursive and literary approaches are important modes of understanding text, but that discursive modes are often prioritized in the classroom (27-28), and that not enough attention is paid to developing literary orientations towards text. It is important to note Langer’s firm belief that while we may “shift in and out of both modes of thinking”(27), we are always ultimately guided by “whether we perceive our [primary] purposes as literary or discursive”(27). For Langer, it is impossible to be engaged fully in both modes of understanding at the same time—one always takes precedence over the other, depending on what we understand as our main purpose, which will influence what kinds of meanings we seek out in reading. Langer directly notes that she diverges from Rosenblatt here, noting that while Rosenblatt sees literary orientations “on a continuum”(42) and believes that readers can be varying degrees of both orientations at a time, Langer believes that “a person can only have one

primary orientation, based on the primary goal of the activity itself. This is because the goal determines the kinds of meaning the mind will be positioned to build. Once a primary goal is identified, the mind is set on gathering data toward fulfilling that goal.”(43). If literary and discursive orientations are mutually exclusive and thus cannot occur simultaneously, it is critical to look at what I asked my students to do related to these approaches, and how they navigated the demands of these different modes of meaning making in their approaches to text.

I agree with Langer that both these approaches to meaning are important, and that we have to be able to engage in both of these experiences when we read literature. We must develop literary orientations because we need to be able to explore the text, playing out multiple perspectives and possibilities for meaning. We must develop discursive orientations because we need to understand that the text does carry messages; navigating academic, social, professional, cultural, and personal worlds demands an ability to read (texts, people, situations), with varying perspectives, for messages that are being sent (intentionally or not, and explicitly or not). I see more of a relationship between literary and discursive approaches to meaning than Langer identifies, because the messages we build from a text in a discursive experience can be informed by our exploration of the text in a literary experience. An authentic literary experience, then, in addition to being an important goal in itself in order to foster exploration of the dimensions of the text, also seems a prerequisite if we are to further develop the strength of our discursive orientations. Our practices of exploration and observation inform the overall meaning we draw from texts. Stanley Fish (1980) aligns with Langer when he notes the limitations of “formalist readings”(3) that are oriented *only* discursively toward the text, but implies a connection in a kind of cumulative meaning that includes both discursive and literary modes: “in formalist readings meaning is identified with what a reader understands at the *end* of a unit of sense [...]

and that therefore any understandings preliminary to that one are to be disregarded as an unfortunate consequence of the fact that reading proceeds in time. The only making of sense that counts in a formalist reading is the last one”(4). The problem with this is that “everything the reader does, even if he later undoes it, is a part of the ‘meaning experience’”(Fish, 4). The processes involved in constructing meaning throughout a reading, or exploring text in a literary orientation, are valuable processes of questioning, predicting, analyzing, revising, interpreting, etc, and ultimately work toward a stronger cumulative understanding that does not discount the multiple meanings built throughout the experience of reading, and how they influence or culminate in more abstract meaning making at the “conclusion” (although, as Langer notes, no understanding of literature should be final; new possibilities for meaning always exist) of a reading experience.

In my unit on close reading and theme, it was my hope that students would engage in both literary and discursive orientations—literary as they engaged in the exploratory process of close reading, and discursive as they stepped back to articulate a more abstract message (theme) of the text. In my mind, close reading is an “act of discovery,” the way that Langer describes literary experiences; it is a way of exploring, inhabiting, and experiencing literature. I wonder, however, whether my instruction communicated that purpose to my students. Langer’s framework illuminates to me how often we approach texts discursively. It also illuminates how much of a transition there is in moving from close reading and exploration to abstract meaning making, and I wonder if I really gave students the opportunity to authentically do either. How did the ways in which I set up and defined close reading influence my students’ engagement with it? How did my instruction encode literary and discursive orientations, and what were the messages about meaning underlying what I asked students to do? The following section will briefly



analyze my enduring understandings, my primary close reading instructional material, and the assessment students took at the end of the mini-unit.

**Analytical review of teacher evidence:  
How did I ask my students to engage with literature?**

My belief that close reading informs our thematic interpretations and makes them stronger governed my Enduring Understandings for this mini-unit. As prefaced in Chapter 1, my Enduring Understandings were: “Students will understand that close reading develops and reveals a text’s themes and deeper meanings” and “Students will be able to use close reading to make thoughtful, in-depth, and well-supported interpretations of theme and its significance in literary text.” While in my mind the unit was mostly about close reading, a new look at my Enduring Understandings reveals a much larger focus on theme; close reading is framed only in terms of its value to theme. In this way, there was a tension between literary and discursive approaches embedded in my goals for students. While I do firmly believe that in depth close reading leads us to make stronger interpretations about a text’s themes, I now begin to recognize, through Langer’s lens, how different these thinking processes are. While I understood that these were different modes of approaching text, I did not fully appreciate the extent to which that was true; experiencing a text on a detailed observational, analytical, and personally connective level is a very different mental process than stepping back from it and extrapolating to construct more abstract meaning. My instruction tried to emphasize the relationship between these approaches to meaning, but I now wonder how effectively it did so. Looking at my Enduring Understandings, it seems clear that I inadvertently limited the close reading experience by prioritizing theme; if our minds are either oriented discursively or literarily, but not both at once, the goals that governed my instruction (even while naming close reading as an important process) may have positioned students towards a more discursive approach to text.

Included at the end of this chapter is my Close Reading Guide, the material I used to name and explain close reading to students. This is a handout I designed to outline the steps involved in the close reading process, because I wanted to set students up to successfully and substantially engage in the various dimensions of close reading. The guide breaks down close reading into three larger steps: 1. *Paraphrase* (because the text is Shakespearean, a literal understanding is the first step). 2. *Deconstruct, observe, and ask why*. 3. *Interpret*. It outlines what is involved in each step, and emphasizes that the bulk of close reading happens in the second step; it also presents guiding questions for that step in relation to character and point of view, language and style, images and other literary devices, conflict and tension, etc. The guide contains the majority of the content of my close reading PowerPoint introduced in Chapter 1. Students had practiced close reading in an unnamed way at the beginning of the week, and I then used the PowerPoint to name and introduce the concept as close reading. Students practiced the close reading process with this guide on sections of *Julius Caesar* in groups, and I modeled that process briefly in multiple lessons throughout the week. I presented students with successful (clearly exhibits deep engagement with all the steps in the close reading process) and less successful (for example, merely paraphrasing the text but not moving into more detailed analysis) models of close reading, and we discussed why they were successful or not. As noted in Chapter 1, however, I now notice that what I was really asking students to do was a thorough close reading leading into an interpretation of theme. I did not model the entirety of this process for them, and I wonder if this is really an authentic way to engage those two modes of understanding. I do believe that close reading should precede strong thematic meaning making, but my instruction seemed to force this process into a short period of time with limited modeling regarding what real engagement with it might look like. It might have been better to engage students only with close

reading in this unit, and to introduce theme and build off of close reading in a different unit. As Langer notes, both approaches are important and effective readers move in and out of both; perhaps the relationship between the literary and discursive modes is more cyclical than the linear way I conceived of it.

Additionally, this Close Reading Guide contains a tremendous amount of text that may have been more overwhelming than helpful. I wanted to be especially clear and specific so students would know what to do when asked to close read, and I do believe the examples in the guide provide a scaffold to help students enter new ways of thinking about textual details. However, in reflection, my presentation of the close reading process was too prescriptive to allow students to authentically engage in a literary orientation towards exploring the text. Langer cautions against a “cookbook” approach to literary orientations, because “the very idea of recipes is antithetical to this way of thinking”(28). My presentation of close reading was very recipe-like: you take these steps, in this order, and they lead you to the final product (what I vaguely called a “larger interpretation”). I believe some focus on “ingredients” and order is necessary to scaffold the complex steps involved in analysis, and to help students develop literary discourse and understand the relationship between analysis and interpretation; this belief led me to provide such explicit steps for the close reading process. However, Langer’s warning illuminates some limitations of my approach: In what ways did I encourage students to explore different perspectives and possibilities for meaning? Certainly in many of the questioning examples (under Step 2 in the Close Reading Guide) and in some of what I verbalized to students, but these messages may have been easily lost in the mass of instructions I delivered to students about how to close read. These messages and questions were also still framed as strategies to move

towards a final, culminating meaning—pushing students toward completeness and not valuing the substance of in-process meaning making.

Students were encouraged (and required) to use their Close Reading Guides as they took the assessment at the end of the mini-unit, a “quiz” that aimed to assess their understanding and application of close reading and theme. The quiz presented students with a passage from *Julius Caesar* (one we had read in class) and asked them to do a close reading of it:

Using your Close Reading Handout as a guide, **close read this passage**. Show your thought process—I need to see all the steps in your thinking illustrated on your paper. Show me how you are paraphrasing or summarizing, what you are observing and asking, and what smaller interpretations you are making based on your observations. Your larger interpretation about the passage is the next question on the quiz and will be about theme, so right now just focus on the details, what they mean, and why they are important—that will prepare you for the next step. (10 points)

**Act 3, Scene 1 (Antony alone with Caesar’s body, after the conspirators have all departed)**

**ANTONY:**

O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,  
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!  
Thou art the ruins of the noblest man  
That ever lived in the tide of times.  
Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!  
Over thy wounds now do I prophesy,—  
Which, like dumb mouths, do ope their ruby lips,  
To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue—  
A curse shall light upon the limbs of men;  
Domestic fury and fierce civil strife  
Shall cumber all the parts of Italy

...

And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,  
With Ate by his side come hot from hell,  
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice  
Cry 'Havoc,' and let slip the dogs of war

I presented students with a list of definitions of confusing words or phrases in the passage

because I understood that I was asking them to closely analyze a complex passage with not very much time, and I did not want them to be overwhelmed by unfamiliar vocabulary. The quiz also asked students to choose from a given list of subjects (Expression and/or Silencing, Duty, Revenge, Greatness, Power, Loyalty) and articulate a theme they saw in the passage based on that subject. Students were then required to present two examples of details in the text, and explain how each piece of evidence supported their interpretation of theme. Finally, the quiz concluded with a self-reflection, where I asked students to explain how well they felt they had mastered the concepts and skills of theme and close reading, and to comment on why they thought these skills were important to learn.

Looking at the components of this assessment now, I reflect on what they asked students to do. The instructions for the close reading section of the quiz are very long. I did this because I wanted my expectations to be very clear to students; I wanted to set them up for success. However, I now recognize how overwhelming that chunk of text is, and if I felt the need to explain what I expected in this much detail, I wonder if I knew that students might not be ready to apply this skill in the way I was expecting. This indicates that I may have been subconsciously (and rightly) worried that what I asked students to do in this assessment, with the limited scaffolding and modeling I provided, was too much. Realizing more fully the essentially different natures of literary and discursive orientations, I see that I asked students to both analyze and interpret without fully helping students understand what was meant by each, and what the relationship between them was. Looking at this assessment later and with Langer's lens, I notice the tremendous amount of fluency I was asking students to demonstrate in navigating different textual demands; the quiz asked them to immerse themselves in a literary experience and then move into a discursive orientation in very little time. While I verbalized what I saw as the

connection between these orientations during the week, the format of the quiz and the nature of my learning targets (close reading always in service of theme) may have sent the message that our primary purpose with the text is discursive. My instruction throughout the week (specifically in the Close Reading Guide and the Quiz) may have thus oriented students towards the text discursively, and limited their engagement in the literary experience. I wanted student expressions of theme to derive from their explorations with close reading the passage. However, I gave them only about 30 minutes to do this, close reading was still a very new skill for them, and my presentation of specific thematic subjects made the discursive experience somewhat contrived and did not allow it to authentically derive from students' literary orientations. Additionally, themes develop throughout texts, but how meaningful is it to ask students to generalize a theme from a single passage from the middle of the text?

While I told students I cared primarily about their ability to engage with close reading, my presentation of materials and the learning targets I designed to direct my instruction emphasized the importance of close reading *only* in terms of theme, and did not accentuate or sufficiently model the exploratory nature of analysis. In doing so, I may have sent the message that the most important meaning is, as Fish says of discursive and formalist readings, the last one. If exploration strengthens discursive meaning making (and therefore the way we experience literature informs the way we engage with it discursively), but my focus on discursive meaning did not allow my students to authentically *explore* via literary experience, how were my students to engage with the text and my expectations? Because my instruction may have limited the literary experience (which might account for some of my students' lack of excitement about close reading), I may not have set my students up to have a more informed discursive experience. How did students navigate my messages about how to engage with the text? The next section

will examine how my students engaged with close analysis, how they engaged in more abstract interpretation, and how they reflected on these skills.

**Analysis of student evidence:  
How did my students engage in literary and discursive approaches to meaning?**

An analysis of student quizzes yields insight about student conceptions of analysis and interpretation. I note the ways students are engaging in the text and the demands of the quiz, the strategies students are using to make meaning, and the insights I gain from examining their understandings and gaps in understanding. In this section I review three student examples, focusing primarily on their close readings, their interpretations of theme, and their self-reflections.

**Lauren**

Lauren's close reading section displays extensive paraphrasing of the text. She is effective at translating Shakespeare's complex syntax into language that encompasses its basic meaning. She simplifies "O, pardon me, though bleeding piece of earth, / That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!" to "he [Antony] is saying he is sorry for being nice to the people who killed him [Caesar]." Here, she takes a sentence with very rich phrasing and paraphrases it, showing me that she understands Antony's literal, basic meaning. She paraphrases in this way five times total in the close reading section of the quiz. In these translations, Lauren makes important moves to comprehend a complex passage—one she would have had significant difficulty with at the beginning of our *Julius Caesar* unit. This showed me that she had made progress in her ability to develop a literal understanding of a potentially confusing passage of text. This seems to me to be a move towards entering a literary experience—she is trying to make literal meaning of what is happening in the story. However, paraphrasing is the only move

Lauren visibly makes in this section; she seems unable to move beyond it towards thorough examination, questioning, and analysis. She does not pick out specific phrasings or sections of text that she finds intriguing, but focuses instead on the literal picture. In class, I emphasized that paraphrasing is only the first step of close reading because it helps us comprehend text on a basic level; after that, I said, we move towards more complex deconstruction of literary elements and devices in an effort to construct deeper levels of meaning from what we see there. Lauren demonstrates that she has learned to paraphrase effectively, but stops short of this next level of engagement that involves noting the details of the text, questioning why they are important, and examining their impact. However, Lauren does “run” with her paraphrasing—it is possible she is working towards entering a literary experience and is ready to be pushed deeper into the layers of the text. I also wonder, looking at Lauren’s work, about the limitations of what I presented as “deconstructing.” I worry that this detracted from the holistic dimension of close reading that involves truly exploring the text and its impact.

When asked to identify a subject and articulate a theme, Lauren circles “revenge” as a thematic subject she sees in the passage, but appears unable to articulate a theme based on this subject. One possibility is that, having not moved deeper into the text than literal comprehension, Lauren might be finding it difficult to articulate a generalization about unstated meaning. Another factor could be that Lauren has just begun to engage in the early stages of a literary orientation. When asked suddenly to switch to a discursive mode and make abstract meaning of what she has read, she may be unsure of how to proceed. As noted in the previous section, asking students to articulate a theme based on a single passage of text may be an artificial way to ask them to engage with it.



It is also important to note that Lauren has some unique learning needs and receives help from an external Learning Center. She helps explain her challenges with these skills in the self-reflection portion of the quiz. When prompted to comment on her understanding of close reading, Lauren writes, “Something I find difficult about this skill is putting the things I am thinking into words.” Similarly, when asked about theme, she writes, “I’m confused on how to begin the theme. I can understand it in my head but can’t find the right words.” Here, Lauren identifies some of the challenges of close reading: it involves making complex cognitive processes *visible* on paper—showing how observations lead us to interpretations. Making our engagement with the text visible is an incredibly difficult skill, and more modeling of this process would have likely been beneficial to student understanding. Lauren twice expresses that she feels unable to articulate her thoughts; some of these challenges with expression might be influenced by her learning needs. However, they may also be indicative of the challenges of navigating two different modes of meaning making in short succession. I also note her lack of comfort with articulating meaning that is beneath the surface, and thus not explicitly stated. I wonder if more time engaging in a literary experience with the text, and more freedom to do so, might have supported her in feeling closer to the text. Her definition of theme earlier in the quiz includes the “hidden meaning of a literary work.” This concept of hidden meaning so frequently propounded in secondary English carries a conception of reading as text-centered and of a reader’s job as discursive; the text contains a single encoded meaning, and it is the reader’s job to decode, uncover, and articulate it. I described theme to my students as “underlying meaning,” and now I see how that might align with the idea of hidden meaning. I viewed underlying meaning as meaning that exists beneath the surface and becomes complete when readers interact with it and verbalize it. In a sense, theme can be hidden because it is often not immediately

apparent (especially because there can be any message or statement of meaning a reader takes from a text, not just a message proclaimed by an author), but it is not a single gift of truth from the author to be extracted by the reader. My instruction here may have reinforced notions of text-centeredness and discursive meaning making in ways I did not intend.

### **Aaron**

As discussed in Part 1, Aaron demonstrates significant skill in close reading compared to many of his classmates. He exhibits an awareness of patterns and he questions the text; he is ready to move further into analyzing and interpreting the impact of the patterns and words he notices, trying to answer: “why this? What new meaning does it bring to the passage?” Aaron has more “authentic” writing on and around his passage than other students (authentic meaning that it truly shows his thinking and real engagement with the text, and does not seem there only to fill up the page). He picks out a language pattern involving body parts, circling “mouths,” “ruby lips,” “tongue,” and “limbs,” and notes “body parts-why does he bring them up?” This is a sophisticated cognitive move. He demonstrates recognition that a choice has been made to use this specific language pattern. Asking why is an important and complex move that demonstrates a willingness to begin to get his hands dirty in the text; noting something potentially confusing and asking “why” shows me that he is allowing himself to explore the text. He is engaging in a dimension of a literary orientation towards meaning making. Aaron does not venture an answer to this question, but his observation and real interrogation of the text demonstrate a complex analytical move. Aaron seems ready to move towards thinking about the patterns he sees and what significance they might have. In other places, he begins observations that are also open to further exploration. For example, he underlines the word “butchers” and writes “killers.” Possible next steps might be to think about the impact of that particular word: What connotations

are embedded in that word choice? How does it influence his reading of the tone? What might it say about the conspirators? What might it say about Antony? Given more time to authentically engage in the text without the pressure to emerge with a theme, Aaron might move to explore the implications of his observations.

In the section on theme, it is clear to me that Aaron has switched to a discursive approach and is able to articulate an abstract generalization about revenge (“Revenge will always find its way, no matter what the deed is”). As noted earlier, students have practice drawing thematic conclusions like this one. Aaron’s theme is vague and does not appear to arise from or take real account of his close reading observations; however, it is an impressive switch to a different mode of meaning making and it is an appropriate and effective theme. As I’ve noted, the format of the quiz may not have authentically allowed for a real connection between the close reading and theme sections. Aaron successfully navigates my different demands and begins to engage in both literary and discursive approaches to text.

Aaron’s reflective comments about close reading and theme are illuminating. He says, “I’m confused by deconstructing. How is this helping us? In a way I find it is confusing me more than helping me.” Combined with his close reading, this comment suggests that Aaron is genuinely engaging with the text, “getting his hands dirty” and allowing himself to notice things that may be confusing, contradictory, and complex. It seems possible that Aaron is experiencing a productive discomfort that necessarily accompanies true engagement with complex literature; committing to analysis in this way ultimately pays off for the reader, who emerges from this interaction with a more full understanding of the layers of a text, and a more developed ability to construct meaning from them. This comment indicates that he truly is exploring the text, and not just oriented towards finding an answer. Despite some conflicting messages in my instruction,

his confusion demonstrates that he was able to start engaging in a literary mode of meaning making, and was allowing himself to notice and question evidence that was not just in service of searching for discursive meaning. His comment therefore tells me that some of my close reading instruction was effective. It also indicates, however, that I need to make the purposes of close reading more clear, that I need to more substantially model what this process looks like, and that I need to address how and when it might culminate in the more general discursive meanings students are used to developing. His conception of close reading as deconstructing again makes me reflect that perhaps my presentation of it was more limiting than freeing; it may have been too procedural to allow students to embrace it.

Aaron notes that theme “is easy for me because it helps me better get the big picture. When I read a passage I can easily grab the theme. It’s easier than deconstructing.” His reflection here indicates a greater level of ease and familiarity with discursive orientations, substantiating Langer’s claim that this is the kind of thinking we are mainly taught to do. His language, like Lauren’s, suggests a text-centered view of reading; the theme is something to be “grab[bed]” out of the text by the reader. He suggests that this process is much easier than deconstructing the text in the messy way that we have to when we invest in close reading. Aaron’s conceptions of close reading and theme as processes completely divorced from one another (“it’s easier than deconstructing”) reinforces Langer’s argument that we approach meaning in very different ways depending on our orientation; this tells me that I need to make the relationship between those modes of understanding more authentic and more clear.

### **Austin**

In his close reading, Austin underlines and seems to notice some rich sections of text, but only writes a short phrase paraphrasing the text (that Caesar “once was a noble man” next to

“thou art the ruins of the noblest man”), and no other analysis is visible. It is difficult to draw conclusions based on his close reading because little of his cognitive process is made visible to me. As I noted from Lauren’s close reading and self-reflection, better modeling of the cognitive moves involved in close reading (making them visible) might help Austin. Austin also has specific learning needs surrounding challenges with focusing; my lengthy and dense instructions for how to close read might have been a recipe for disengagement with a student like Austin. In that way, even though I provided what I am beginning to see as excessive guidance (or guidance that could have been effected more successfully), the support I provided may not have been very accessible to Austin. Without access to the instructions I gave, he may not have known where to start.

Despite his lack of visible close reading, his theme is somewhat strong: “People stop at nothing to extract revenge.” This is an appropriate reflection of both Antony’s character and Antony’s portrayal of Caesar’s character in the passage (who is depicted as seeking revenge from beyond the grave itself). Austin does not break the text down into smaller parts for analysis or investigate the meaning various elements bring to the passage (the way that Aaron begins to do), but he is able to articulate a fairly effective theme; he seems to be orienting discursively toward the text. This suggests a comfort with broad interpretation and the generalization of meaning, but less fluency with navigating the messier details of a text. In response to the complex cognitive demands and messages of the assessment, Austin seems to be operating in a discursive mode of understanding.

Austin’s self-reflection supports this evaluation. He notes that close reading is “difficult because sometimes I don’t know what to look for. Sometimes text is just text.” This comment could reflect a view that close reading is an unnecessary process of over-analysis that seeks out

meaning or creates meaning that is not there. It also suggests again that students need more modeling of the close reading process to understand where to begin; Austin suggests that he looks at text and just sees text (not specific literary choices that have impact on the meaning we make of the text). Similarly to Aaron, Austin notes that theme “is easy for me because the text sometimes shouts it out. Most authors make the theme very clear.” This comment suggests a text-centered and discursive conception of reading; Austin does not appear to see himself as a co-creator of meaning through exploration. His comment implies that authors imply a clear theme that readers pick out. His comment does not reflect an understanding that even if an author “shouts” out a particular theme, readers could find many themes in opposition to and in addition to that one, as long as they are based in a reader’s analysis and interpretation of textual evidence.

Despite Austin’s apparent lack of engagement with the close reading process, his reflection on why close reading matters appears more authentic than that of many other students, who mainly repeated disciplinary philosophies I had espoused in class. Austin makes a relevant connection, noting that these strategies “are important because in the real world, reading plays a big part, and a contract can very easily fool stupid people.” Here, Austin touches on an important function of reading: learning to navigate the manipulative messages and codes we are exposed to on a regular basis. Austin’s reflective comments suggest a view that he as a reader has little role in meaning making beyond identifying the meaning, yet he articulates an important association of close reading: critical thinking, which involves agency on the part of the reader. Austin’s challenges with close reading suggest that I do need to give students specific things to look for in text, or specific guiding questions, but that I need to present these supports in a more accessible way.

### **Preliminary insights**

These students are engaging with the differing demands of the assessment in unique ways; however, their work exemplifies certain trends in student performance on the assessment:

- Paraphrasing (possible early stage of literary orientation—trying to make meaning of what is happening in the story)
- Observation and questioning: exploration and the early stages of analysis (literary orientation)
- Possible fear of getting “messy” and reliance on “safe” interpretations (discursive orientation)
- Confusion about the process/function of close reading, but a clear level of comfort with theme (discursive orientation)
- Embedded view of reading as a mostly text-centered process with a focus on the reader as articulator of the main central meaning embedded in the text (discursive orientation)
- Confusion about the connecting link between theme and close reading

As discussed earlier, the format of the quiz may have prioritized discursive goals; this could have limited students’ literary experiences with close reading, encouraging quick and somewhat artificial generalizations of theme, and ultimately encouraging a discursive approach to understanding (that, as Langer says, does not usually involve a lot of re-examination of the text). Despite this, some students were still able to move from a literary to a discursive orientation.

The comfort with theme expressed by some of my students indicates a greater familiarity with discursive orientations. The view that close reading and theme are entirely separate (and that theme is much “easier”) pushes me to question how I am asking students to navigate those orientations, and how I am presenting the relationship between them. What does it look like when those orientations interact with one another? How can both of them together enhance our understanding of text, and how do we address the fact that we must fully immerse ourselves in

one or the other at a time? This pattern in student reflections (confusion about the process and value of close reading) makes me think about the limitations of presenting close reading as procedural “deconstructing” of the text, and about how I might present it as a way of exploring, experiencing, and re-experiencing the nuances of the text.

My analysis of student work leads me to notice and reflect on new tensions. How can I scaffold close reading and give clear instructions for how to do it (which does have some formulaic elements) without limiting students’ freedom to really explore the text? What might my Enduring Understandings be next time, based on my insights here? I will explore these reflections in Chapter 3, which will address the question: How do I engage students effectively in the complex processes of close reading and abstract meaning making, and help them navigate the relationship between these different cognitive approaches to text?



## Close Reading Guide

### What is close reading?

- When you “close read” a passage of text, you analyze it in extreme detail, like you’re looking at it through a magnifying glass. When you analyze the details that make up the passage, you can make better interpretations about its deeper meaning.
  - Unpacking the layers in even one sentence can tell us a lot about the bigger ideas, themes, and questions a passage brings up that relate to the text as a whole.
- 

### Close Reading a Passage of Text

#### **First, paraphrase.**

- Read the passage for understanding, and translate or summarize it. What is being said, in your own words?

#### **Second, deconstruct, observe, and ask why.**

- Mark words, phrases, and details that seem important, note turning points or places where the tone shifts, pay attention to literary devices, interesting punctuation, repetition, phrases that are confusing, etc.
- Write questions and comments next to the text. For example, you might ask “**why** does he use this word here?” or “**what is the effect** of repeating this word?”. Then, try to answer those questions.

### Guiding questions for this step

#### *Characters and Point of View*

- Who is speaking in the passage?
- Does the passage reveal something new about the motivations of a character?
- What is the character’s tone? How can you tell? Does the tone stay the same, or does it shift? What new meaning does the tone give to the words in the passage?
- How does the passage make us react to or think about any characters or events within the narrative?

#### *Language and Style*

- Which words do you notice first? Why? What impact do they have? How do important words seem to relate to one another?
- Look up the definitions of words that stand out to you, or that are unfamiliar. Do any words have double meanings? How might that affect the tone?
- What is the sentence rhythm like? Does it build on itself or stay at an even pace?
- How does the punctuation create and reinforce the meaning of the passage?

***Other Literary Devices***

- What images are presented? What effect do they have? How might they fit into the text as a whole?
- Is there any repetition? Does the passage grab your attention because of the repetition of a specific word, phrase, image, or action? Does it tell us something about a character, a theme, or an idea? Why would the author choose to repeat it? What is the effect?
- Do you notice any other literary or rhetorical devices being used? Metaphor? Simile? Rhetorical question?

***Conflict***

- Is there a point of tension in the passage? What conflicts are presented? How do the conflicts reinforce and build themes in the novel as a whole?
- What is left out or kept silent? Is anything implied that is not directly stated? How do you know? What might this contribute to the meaning of the passage?

**Third, interpret.**

- At this point, a larger interpretation should start to emerge out of the observations that you have made, and you should be able to explain how the details of your passage relate to the play as a whole.
  - What themes or larger questions are presented by this passage? Is the author or speaker commenting on a certain type of person or situation? What is that comment? What truths are being presented?
- 

**Final Thoughts**

- Summary: First, focus on the details. Next, question everything--after each observation, ask yourself **why and what is the effect**. This will lead you to how the details reveal the larger meaning of the passage.
- Remember: there is not one right answer, but some interpretations are stronger than others. In general, you make better interpretations when you really work to break down the text and analyze its pieces. The best interpretations are those that clearly explain how the details of the text come together to support the conclusion that you are making (and your explanation makes sense and is well-developed and reasonable).

### **Chapter 3: Implications for classroom philosophy and practice**

#### **Re-envisioning close reading**

After analyzing student and teacher evidence, it is clear to me that I may have limited my students' opportunities to explore the text in different ways, and therefore, made it less possible for the discursive experience of articulating theme to authentically build from what I wanted to be the literary experience of close reading. For me, close reading at its core is about experiencing and re-experiencing the text to build more full and holistic understandings. However, my close reading instruction may have prioritized the analytical and deconstructive dimensions of close reading over the experiential dimensions of it, and seems to have done so in service of a discursive experience with theme. I see that I may have given students mixed messages, or that my messages may not have reflected my intentions or worked in service of my expectations. In my mind, we look at the text in fragments to come to a fuller understanding of it as a whole; this philosophy governed my instruction. My analysis of student work also suggests that elements of my instruction may have helped students to enter into that dimension of the close reading process; many students did use some of the questions and processes I had taught them to begin to explore the layers of the text. However, re-examining my instruction myself and through Langer's lens, I am coming to believe that I need to re-conceptualize close reading and re-imagine some of the ways in which I might present it to students and help them build the skills to engage in it more completely. The steps, strategies, and terms that comprised my presentation of close reading were intended to be a scaffold to help students build the complex skills involved in close analysis. I wonder now how I might have framed the concept of close reading differently in order to encourage students to fully immerse themselves in a literary experience. It is important to note that reading and close reading are not the same thing—close reading is a specific

disciplinary discourse that students need to learn how to navigate. However, deconstructing text in the way I demonstrated may only be one dimension of what close reading really means.

Langer (2011) suggests that as we read we build “envisionments”(10), which are the understandings we have “at a given point in time”(10) that we are constantly revising and building upon as we read. Langer articulates five stances (or approaches) readers take towards building envisionments; these approaches may occur at various points throughout the reading experience, and not necessarily in any particular order. I will address only the stances that are directly relevant to my dilemma. Most of how I presented close reading to my students seems to be encompassed in Langer’s fourth stance, which she calls “Stepping Out and Objectifying the Experience”(20). In this approach to reading,

we distance ourselves from the envisionment we have developed and then reflect back on it. It is here that we objectify our understandings, our reading experience, and the work itself. We reflect on, analyze, and judge them and relate them to other works and experiences. It is in this stance that we can focus on the author’s craft, on the text’s structure, and on literary elements and allusions. (20)

Langer presents this stance in terms of its distance in stepping back and reflecting on the text. I view it more as a way to immerse ourselves in the text, but perhaps we are both in the text *and* stepping back to look at ourselves, as readers, in the text—analyzing certain literary choices and reflecting on their effect on ourselves as readers, or perhaps tracing our reactions as readers to particular literary and authorial choices. This seems to require us to be both within the text, attuned to our responses to it, and more outside looking into the components that incite those responses.

Langer gives some sample questions (geared toward a particular poem, but transferable) that help students navigate this fourth stance:

- What are you noticing about the form and structure of the poem? How does it affect your understanding?

- What parts of the text (phrases, images, sentences, language) were especially powerful to you? Why?
- What do you notice about the style that is effective for the poem's overall meaning?
- What other pieces does this poem remind you of? Explain.
- How can you use this poem as a model for your own poetry? (44)

The first three of the five questions align with some of the questioning strategies I presented to students in my Close Reading Guide. I told students, “Mark words, phrases, and details that seem important, note turning points or places where the tone shifts, pay attention to literary devices, interesting punctuation, repetition, phrases that are confusing, etc.” and “Write questions and comments next to the text. For example, you might ask ‘**why** does he use this word here?’ or ‘**what is the effect** of repeating this word?’. Then, try to answer those questions.” I wanted students to be perceptive to their own experiences as readers, noticing the components of the text that grabbed their attention and digging into them to discover what impact they had on the meaning of the text, and what made them so powerful. I also wanted them to push themselves to dig into components of the text they may not have noticed in a single reading. I see now that part of what I wanted students to do was to reflect on, examine, and re-examine their own reading experience in terms of specific components of the text. However, in emphasizing this element of deconstruction, I may not have ultimately encouraged students to have the reading experience I wanted them to have; I may have dictated that experience for them and limited their authentic engagement with the text as readers. They need this engagement, I am suggesting, in order to really step back and enter the process of abstract meaning making in a substantial way.

Presenting close reading only as deconstructing in service of theme may have oriented my students towards the text discursively and limited their real exploration of the text; incorporating multiple stances from Langer's framework might help me re-conceptualize close reading and re-envision how I present it to students.

Looking at the first and second stances articulated by Langer, I realize that they encompass part of what close reading is; while I asked my students to engage with text in these ways during student teaching, I did not incorporate them sufficiently into my presentation of *close reading*, and therefore may have not provided enough opportunities for students to engage them. In Langer’s first stance, “Being Outside and Stepping into an Envisionment”(17), “we [...] begin to develop envisionments by using our own knowledge and experiences, surface features of the text, and any other available clues. [...] we use this broad search in order to form initial ideas and suppositions about the characters, plot, setting, situation—and how these interrelate”(17). In this stance, we note our reactions to certain elements of the text and begin to construct meaning from them; we build understanding using cues from the text and our own experiences. I see this as a part of close reading, but it does not have the focus on re-examination that I see as so crucial to the close reading process. This stance, to me, seems to be a critical element of how we approach reading, but I am keeping in mind that close reading is a specific discourse—a certain way we need to learn how to engage with texts. This forming of initial understandings, however, might be the first stage in that process, and perhaps I need to present it that way in order to allow my students to truly enter the close reading experience. Questions

Langer presents for this stance include:

- What does the title say to you?
- What are your first impressions?
- What images ‘snag’ you as you read? (phrases, ideas, concepts)
- What are you wondering about?
- When you see the format of this poem, what are you drawn to?
- Does the poem evoke any memories in you?
- What questions does the poem raise for you? (43)

These questions, I realize, are some of the first things I want students thinking about when they read a passage of text. I want them to be actively addressing these kinds of questions because

they encourage students to enter a metacognitive experience, identifying and reflecting on their own reactions as readers to what they are reading. Looking at these questions, I see that many of my students would need support and modeling in approaching text in this open-ended way, where they have a significant amount of freedom in navigating the text. For example, when asked “what questions does this [text] raise for you?” or “what are you wondering about?”, I think it is likely that many of my students might not know where to begin. This illuminates to me that my Close Reading Guide, with its many, many examples of guiding questions, does have some benefits in providing students with guidelines if they find they are unsure of how to explore so freely. However, the presentation of that guide is very limited, and I am realizing that this might be where extensive modeling and practicing with this kind of textual engagement will likely be necessary.

Langer’s second stance, “Being Inside and Moving Through an Envisionment”(18), seems to embody a large part of how I see close reading, although the way I presented it likely did not communicate this to my students. In this stance, Langer says,

we become more immersed in developing understandings. We rely on personal knowledge, the text, and the social context of our reading to furnish ideas and spark our thinking. In this stance, we are immersed inside our text-worlds. We take new information and immediately use it to go beyond what we already understand—asking questions about motives, feelings, causes, interrelationships, and implications [...] in this stance, we call upon our knowledge—of the text, ourselves, others, life, and the world—to elaborate on and make connections among our thoughts, move understandings along, and modify our shifting sense of what the piece is about. (18)

This stance’s focus on adjusting and enhancing our understandings encompasses much of how I view close reading. Langer includes these guiding questions for this stance:

- What are you noticing about the ideas? What do they mean to you?
- What do you think about the beginning/middle/ending ideas?
- What are some different perspectives we can take?
- What images come to mind, and what do they mean?

- How are your understandings changing based on our discussion? (43-4)

I conceptualize close reading as embodying a combination of the approaches Langer lays out in stances 1, 2, and 4. I see close reading as entering the text, building understandings, and reflecting on our experiences within the text to examine and re-examine the effect and interrelationships of its particular components, and how they influence the significance of the piece and of our reading experiences. While I view the fourth stance as more entrenched in the text than Langer does, it does seem that much of my instruction was centered around that stance. While some of my materials, like my Close Reading Guide, did present students with the importance of noting our own observations and responses as readers, I did not place enough of an emphasis on this dimension of close reading. Langer notes the importance of “inviting initial understandings”(102) as a part of the process of moving beyond them; “to invite initial understandings, some teachers tell students to jot down their ideas and questions as they read or just after they finish. Other teachers may ask students to quickwrite, draw, or think about and discuss such questions as: What’s on your mind right now? What did you think when you finished the piece? Is anything bothering you?”(102) or have students come up with questions for discussion. These kinds of entry-points into the text are crucial if I am going to ask students to re-read, analyze, and reflect on the components of the text that are influencing their readings. If I see close reading as centered around re-reading, further exploration, and building understanding, it is important to encourage students’ first readings and preliminary explorations so they have something upon which to build.

It is also necessary for me to think about how I might make these entry-points accessible and meaningful to students with varying skill levels. For some of my struggling readers, some of these questions will seem too open-ended; they might be unsure of what to look for or what kind



of responses they are supposed to be having. In contrast, some of my more advanced students would have likely considered this line of questioning condescending and un-academic. As readers who are already attuned to their own reactions to a piece and are already mentally asking and answering these questions, some of them feel ready to move towards more sophisticated modes of analysis. It will need to become a norm in my classroom to verbalize our initial impressions in order to build towards the more analytical and reflective dimensions of close reading. Langer notes, “once students have begun to voice their initial impressions, teachers can help them explore and extend their envisionments by questioning and building upon their current understandings. By focusing discussion on the issues that the students have brought up, teachers can guide them as they explore and extend the possibilities within their envisionments”(102). If students are also exploring their reactions to text in terms of Langer’s first and second stances, they will be in a place to more successfully incorporate the fourth stance and examine the way certain literary elements are used to certain effect. If close reading is about experiencing the different dimensions of a piece of text, it is necessary to approach the process of close reading as one that encompasses various modes of thinking and questioning.

Langer’s conception of reading is largely more social than the way I was conceiving of close reading, as a partially private process of individual engagement with the text. I do believe readers need time “alone” with the text to inform discussion, and I also believe discussion informs individual interaction with the text. My students close read in groups and individually prior to the quiz, but I am recognizing the need for more full class and small group interaction with the more literary experience of close reading before I ask students to engage with it analytically, on their own. After they engage with it analytically and individually, I also see the need for group and class discussion to help students process the new experiences they are having

with close analysis of a text they have engaged with in other ways. In these ways, I see Langer's work with reading as a collaborative act as something I have always believed in and promoted in my classes (group work featured prominently in my student teaching), but need to incorporate more explicitly into my close reading instruction and teaching of analysis. I need to think about how to support students in doing this collectively and individually, and allowing those experiences to build from each other.

It is clear to me that I need to view close reading more experientially as a process that incorporates Langer's first, second, and fourth stances and involves significant verbal and written processing individually and collaboratively. To support students in reaching the more analytical dimensions of close reading, I need to support them in actively exploring the text—not limit them by only focusing on specific elements. My Close Reading Guide may have incorporated areas of all these stances, but its presentation was not such that it allowed students to really engage with it, and thus it did not support them in exploring text. I have focused this section around my insights about close reading; in the following section, I will address some implications I see for the teaching of theme in relation to close reading.

### **Addressing theme**

Another priority is to address the relationship between close reading and theme. As I articulated in Chapter 2, I see the need for students to engage in a literary experience with text before they can better develop their discursive experiences with it. Ultimately, engaging discursively is important because it helps us extrapolate messages from what we've read; it is not about closing doors on other possibilities and ending the literary experience, but it is about using the experience we have gained in our exploration to construct and put together what we see as a likely perspective of more abstract meaning. I suggest that we are more able to do this once we

have engaged in an authentic (truly exploratory) literary experience. Wilhelm (2008) also concludes that readers must be able to immerse themselves in the world of the text before they can step back and reflect on its more abstract messages, observations, and questions. Wilhelm notes 10 different dimensions of how readers respond to texts, and suggests that they fall into three categories: evocative, connective, and reflective (67-8). Wilhelm's dimensions in each category are reflected in the table below.

Evocative	Connective	Reflective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entering the Story World</li> <li>• Showing Interest in the Story</li> <li>• Relating to Characters</li> <li>• Seeing the Story World</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elaborating on the Story World</li> <li>• Connecting Literature to Life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considering Significance</li> <li>• Recognizing Literary Conventions</li> <li>• Recognizing Reading as a Transaction</li> <li>• Evaluating an Author, and the Self as Reader</li> </ul>

(67-8)

Looking at Wilhelm's dimensions, it is clear that despite my intentions, much of what my instruction asked students to do, in the close reading and theme unit, fell into the reflective dimensions. Langer's argument about the value of the literary experience involves experiences that are more connected with the evocative and connective dimensions than the experiences I emphasized in this unit, and as I've noted, I need to engage those dimensions more explicitly in my close reading instruction.

Wilhelm aligns with Langer in terms of the different kinds of thinking readers are positioned to do. He notes that "there are various purposes and ways of reading. When reading in different ways, readers operate on different dimensions"(69). It is therefore critical for me to consciously reflect on how I want to emphasize different dimensions in my instruction. Wilhelm suggests that engaging in literary experiences the way that Langer advocates can help us reach

more sophisticated discursive approaches to text—in his language, we must engage with text in evocative and connective dimensions before we are able to engage with it in a reflective dimension (which includes abstract meaning making like theme, but also aspects of close reading that I emphasized, like examining authorial choices and analyzing their effect on significance). In other words, “reading in richer ways [...] depends upon first having built a story world that depends in large part on associating real-life experiences with textual cues. This indicates that what a teacher might at first disregard as an impoverished reading is in fact a necessary building block to richer understandings”(69-70). Seen in this light, close reading must either be a sophisticated process that students are not ready for unless they have already engaged in an exploratory literary experience, or close reading must be a more holistic process than the way I have imagined it (and the way it is sometimes imagined in English Language Arts); while I cannot invent a new definition of close reading, I can enrich my definition to allow students to engage with this process on multiple dimensions.

Wilhelm notes the importance of “building and revising [...] understanding based on accumulating and adding together details from throughout a text”(101); I see close reading as one way we engage in this process, and it has to involve authentic exploration in order to encourage us to “build” and revis[e]” what we know. Wilhelm argues that teachers must

tolerate, or perhaps even contribute to, student confusion by pointing out details they might not have considered. Then time needs to be given to consider and work through the confusion. A further implication is for assessment and evaluation of student reading: confusion and the inability to answer certain questions may indicate growth, that is, that the student has taken on a new challenge that she is still struggling to meet. This kind of move needs to be applauded and encouraged. (101)

This confusion embodies the productive discomfort I wanted my students to encounter as they navigated the demands of close reading a text, and I saw evidence of this in student work

(Aaron's especially). I am now recognizing these student moves as productive, not as deficient. Wilhelm experienced a similar attitude shift: "I became aware that many readings that I had considered invalid or impoverished often served student purposes, and at other times provided a springboard to richer readings. My new attitude helped me become a listener instead of a teller"(110). Allowing students the space to explore the text is critical to supporting them in entering new and more sophisticated dimensions of meaning making. While my students were engaging with the text discursively and impressively, they could have benefited from more free exploration of the text and their responses as readers. This exploration would have informed and substantiated their close reading, and supported them in shifting to a discursive orientation with the text in terms of theme. It is important, when helping students to engage in a literary orientation, or in evocative and connective dimensions, to support them in moving beyond those modes of thinking (because readers need to engage the text in multiple dimensions, including discursively). I am thinking about how I can support students in a) engaging in literary orientations and immersing themselves in text worlds, b) moving to discursive orientations informed by those experiences. One answer may lie in the collaborative work Langer advocates. When students are given more opportunities to explore and verbalize their impressions and understandings, those understandings can be modified and revised and are more likely to develop into material for substantial abstract meaning making. Through engaging students in literary experiences with the text and providing multiple forums for discussion (with guiding questions and teacher facilitation), I might allow thematic issues to emerge more organically (because students will build towards deeper meaning), and then name them. This can happen when we build from authentic literary explorations. In the next and final section, I will discuss possible

outcomes of my insights in this final chapter, looking at how I can put these reflections into practice in my classroom.

### **Outcomes**

Based on my newly informed conception of close reading, I would approach my Enduring Understandings for my students differently. Rather than only link close reading to the value embedded in theme, I would make sure to focus my instruction around the exploratory value of close reading as a process that helps illuminate the text and our reactions to it. I might use: “Students will understand that close reading is a means of exploring text on a detailed level in order to more fully experience its dimensions of meaning” and “Students will be able to use close reading to enhance and expand their understanding of the text, and to reflect on the effect of authorial choices on their reading experience.” Some version of these Enduring Understandings would better promote a more full close reading experience that allowed students to engage with the text more openly. I also need to make it clear, however, that close reading is not a skill divorced from reality; I might also incorporate some learning targets about its value in the real world, and some learning experiences that show this value (close reading a text message conversation, an advertisement, a newspaper article, a scenario, etc).

The question then emerges regarding how to present this concept to students in a way that embodies my new conception of it. I believe that students do need access to some form of protocol or procedure in order to support their exploration of the text, but it needs to be more open, less directive, more intuitive, and easier to internalize than my close reading steps were. I think using some version of a See-Think-Wonder-Connect protocol to approach close reading would help students to enter and dig into texts more fully. This was a protocol I observed my mentor teacher using every day during my first Observation placement, usually with images. For

“See,” she would ask, “What do you SEE in this image? What different parts do you notice?” For “Think,” she would ask, “What do these things make you THINK? What do you think it means? What meaning are you making? What are you thinking about this image?” For “Wonder,” she would ask, “What do you WONDER about this image? What questions do you have?” Finally, for “Connect,” she would ask, “What CONNECTIONS can you make? To life? To our class concepts?”

My mentor teacher would project a cartoon or image of some kind, and students would have a few minutes to individually fill in charts in their journals organized into See-Think-Wonder-Connect categories. They would then Pair-Share and discuss how they were engaging with the image in those four categories. After a few minutes, my mentor teacher would bring the full class back together to fill in a giant See-Think-Wonder-Connect chart on the board. This protocol helps students engage with text on various dimensions and guides their approaches towards it (providing support), while also opening a space for them to really explore their own observations and reactions (providing freedom). In moving from observations (“See”) to inferences (“Think”) to questions (“Wonder”) to extrapolations and applications beyond the text (“Connect”), this protocol helps model both literary exploration and more discursive processes of making abstract meaning, and takes students through the full transition between those orientations. It also takes readers through that process in a more supportive, collaborative, and less directive way. Observing this in my Observation placement, I noticed how much student comments would spark ideas for their classmates, who would then verbalize them, and that process would continue; when working with varying strengths and perspectives, it became clear that students could do more, together.

This protocol was effective for students of varying skill levels because it allowed students to engage with the text on different dimensions. Students who were still developing discursive approaches to text were often very effective at picking out details for the “See” category; they could then benefit by moving through that process with their peers to engage with the text in different modes. Peers modeled for each other what engagement looked like in each of these categories. Students who were more advanced and tended to focus discursively were forced to slow down and note just how much there was to “See,” which some of their peers showed them. When filling in the “See” category, no detail is irrelevant; students noted all kinds of components of the text that became apparent when they examined it extensively. The free-for-all style of participation during the class See-Think-Wonder-Connect sessions showed just how much students were able to build ideas from each other.

The See-Think-Wonder-Connect protocol aligns with close reading because it begins in specific observations and moves towards our analyses and interpretations so that our constructions of more abstract meaning are rooted in the individual components. It also moves us through transitioning between these different modes of thinking. Students in that class learned this practice early in the year and used it every day, so they were consistently developing their abilities to engage with texts in those modes. Students of different strengths could work together to construct a more full picture of the text and to experience it in different ways. This protocol was effective in helping students engage with images in thoughtful ways, but I also see it as a valuable approach to written text. With extensive modeling, this could become a protocol in my classroom and a way to help students embrace the exploratory nature and the various dimensions of the close reading process. I might adapt it to something like this:



**NOTICE:** What do you NOTICE in the text? What are you responding to? What parts grab your attention? What are you relating to? What pieces stand out to you? What patterns do you see?

What literary devices are you noticing?

**THINK:** What do these things make you THINK? What can you infer? What ideas and feelings are coming up for you?

**WONDER:** What are you WONDERING about this text? What questions do you have?

**CONNECT:** What CONNECTIONS can you make? What big concepts are you connecting this text to? How are you relating this text to yourself? To the world? What messages are you taking from this text?

As I teach this, I can provide more guiding questions as needed in terms of what to look for in the text, but this format will likely provide students with more freedom and less stress. It takes students through the process of looking at surface features of the text, digging into their own inferences and responses, questioning the text, and stepping back to form abstract meanings and make connections. It is important to remember that I do not always need to engage students in all of these steps in a single activity, but this approach might be valuable to me because it moves towards engaging students in literary and discursive orientations towards text, and gives them a more full and collaborative meaning making experience. Because it is more accessible (with practice) and invites students to share their initial impressions and their more advanced ones, this process will likely be more meaningful and engaging for students, as well as a way to bridge the cognitive leap from close reading to theme. To begin to evaluate its effectiveness, I will engage in this process with the passage I asked my students to close read on their quiz.

Below is a re-print of the passage, with my guided responses to it (in free-writing form, the more open way I would ask students to engage with it).

O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,  
 That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!  
 Thou art the ruins of the noblest man  
 That ever lived in the tide of times.  
 Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!  
 Over thy wounds now do I prophesy,—  
 Which, like dumb mouths, do ope their ruby lips,  
 To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue—  
 A curse shall light upon the limbs of men;  
 Domestic fury and fierce civil strife  
 Shall cumber all the parts of Italy  
 ...  
 And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,  
 With Ate by his side come hot from hell,  
 Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice  
 Cry 'Havoc,' and let slip the dogs of war

**NOTICE:** I'm struck by Antony's passion and anger here. I'm noticing language patterns with words like "butchers," "curse," "fury," "fierce," "revenge," "hot," and "hell." This infuses the passage with a tone of rage channeled into revenge. There is a sense of unbridled fury here, and knowing from the play that Antony is cold and calculating, it is interesting to see him so furious and note how he channels that fury. Part of me is with Antony here—feeling his pain, his anger, his desire to punish the conspirators; the other part of me is thinking about the kind of man Caesar was (potentially tyrannical), and feeling ambivalent about and uncomfortable with Antony's drive to avenge Caesar by fostering violence and destruction that will negatively impact the people of Rome. I'm also noting just how magnificent a person Caesar was to Antony. He calls him a "piece of Earth," which to me implies a person who is so substantial he is almost elemental—part of the earth itself. It seems impossible, and horribly wrong, from Antony's perspective, that such a person could be gone. I'm also noticing the initiative Antony takes in taking responsibility for enacting Caesar's revenge—he even suggests that it is his duty

to be Caesar's voice and carry out his wishes. This seems dangerous to me to assume he can and should decide what Caesar would have wanted and would have done.

**THINK:** I think this passage is not supposed to be easy—or not supposed to clearly tell us which side to be on. The sense of pain at Caesar's death validates Antony's anger, but does not validate what he decides to do with that anger. I'm feeling conflicted because I think killing someone is rarely an appropriate way to solve a problem (the way the conspirators killed Caesar), but I see Antony planning the same thing here. It really makes me think that this is commenting on the cycle of revenge, and suggesting that violence begets violence.

**WONDER:** I have a lot of questions about this passage. I'm wondering if Caesar's death was justified, and even if it was, I'm wondering if Antony's revenge is justified. Why does Antony want to take out his anger on the Roman people? Is he only thinking about what will cause the most trouble for the conspirators? What do I learn about his character in this passage? I am also wondering more about the nature of his relationship with Caesar, which we get to see mostly peripherally and retrospectively. Why does he imply that Caesar is in hell (with the god of revenge)? Does he realize the implications of this? *Is this what Caesar would want him to do?*

**CONNECT:** I'm making connections to a few big ideas. One is friendship. This passage raises some questions about what the nature of friendship is, and how far loyalty should go. I'm also connecting to the idea of expression. If someone does not have the ability to express him or herself, is it our responsibility to speak for him or her? Isn't it presumptuous to assume we know what this person would want to say? I'm also connecting the text to the concept of justice—is all of this violence just “justice,” or is the passage suggesting that this concept is flawed? This relates to revenge as well—will Antony be satisfied after this? Is revenge a justified, substantial, and “rewarding” way to heal? Or is it inherently problematic?

Reflecting on my reading using this protocol, I am realizing how different my reading experience is when I open it up to these different modes of thinking. I still believe this process needs honing (my see and my think blend into each other, and it is not clear where the distinction is), but this protocol seems to have been effective for me, and I believe it will work with students if I guide them towards familiarity with this approach (and all its embedded approaches). This re-conceptualized protocol of close reading significantly enriches my experience reading the passage and gives me much more freedom in authentically exploring the text and my responses to it. I do still have some concerns about students' ability to engage in close reading as it is understood in the discipline (making sure to "deconstruct" sections of the text and note specific literary devices), but I view this approach as much more holistic; it makes room for students to explore the different layers of the text.

As I enter my own classroom and work to teach students the disciplinary discourses and vocabulary necessary to English in the academic world, I need to remember my goals of meaningful learning and empowerment; I want to empower readers to engage in authentic exploration of literature, and to work together to construct meaning from that exploration. Reminding myself of those purposes can only enrich my own and my students' experiences with text.

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