

Short Essay: Close Reading *Hamlet*

3 pages/750 words
Double-spaced
MLA format
Times New Roman font
Printed and stapled

You have completed a “distant reading” of *Hamlet* by data-mining the tragedy. In order to speak knowledgeably about a text, you also have to be able to read it carefully -- to know at least parts of it intimately. For this essay, you will have a chance to reflect on any passage from *Hamlet*.

Choose a brief passage from the play (about 50 lines or less) that struck you when you read the play. Perhaps it centers on a quote that you chose to write on the board. Begin to analyze its technical features—such as diction, sentence patterns, tone, figurative language, and structure. Does the speaker use striking symbolism, such as mirrors, traps, prostitution, or other unusual imagery? Write a rough draft in which you investigate these elements of the passage in detail, quoting from the text and developing your point fully. Try to avoid the mechanical structure and narrow range of the five-paragraph essay model. This format, while helpful for certain kinds of writing, will restrict your options here, where you want to explore different possibilities for interpretation. Give yourself room to entertain problems in and even contradictions to your initial assumptions. These will prove useful in the end.

When you have a firm grasp of the specific elements of the passage, write a second draft in which you propose a thesis, your idea of what are the effects or implications of Shakespeare’s use of language in the passage you chose. Use your new introduction to frame your close reading, introducing a thesis statement, topic sentences, and transitions that structure and develop your idea. Conclude with a thoughtful paragraph that *opens up* your analysis for further reflection. You do not want your conclusion to summarize material that you have already explained well in the paper, nor do you want to suggest that the subject is closed.

You do not need to advance an argument for the whole play. Your reading will proceed from careful and sustained attention to one small piece of the larger work. Remember that you are writing for people who have read the book as you have and will not need a report on or summary of its content. Present your reading as part of a continuing dialogue among other interested readers.

Give your essay an evocative title. Consider using some of the language from your selected passage in the title itself.