

Writing With Shakespeare

Writing Assignment due SES #4 : Paraphrase and line-by-line analysis

This assignment asks you to change gears, from reading aloud to writing about the passage from Shakespeare you were given at the start of the semester. It relies on your having already read your speech carefully and thought about its meaning, and asks you both to paraphrase that basic meaning and then to analyze elements of the speech in a particular way known as “close reading.” Remember that if you were given a longer speech, you don’t need—indeed, probably will be overwhelmed if you try—to discuss its entirety: choose a passage of about fourteen lines and focus on that.

Preparation before you write:

First, re-read. Do not try to make the pieces add up yet; instead try to notice everything that is potentially interesting about *how* the text conveys meaning. Be open rather than judgmental. The following is a list of some elements that can be examined through close reading, adapted from the handout of my colleague Prof. Arthur Bahr. I hope you will find these terms useful as you review your passage:

Diction: also known as “word choice,” diction involves the decision to use the particular words and phrases there on the page, as distinct from many, many other ways of saying roughly the same thing. “Adoration” (for example) is not the same as “affection,” “desire,” or “idolization,” though all may be used to describe experiences we identify with romantic love. What effects result from an author’s choice of a specific word?

Syntax: broadly defined as “sentence structure,” namely how complex or simple, neatly parallel or oblique and expansive, the sentences, clauses, and phrases of a given passage are. Complex sentences can entrap the reader or can convey complex ideas; simple sentences might suggest noble clarity of character or unsophisticated single-mindedness.

Sound, including figures of speech and rhythm: always read passages you are closely analyzing aloud. Alliteration and assonance are examples of repeating consonant or vowel sounds, creating percussive or smooth effects. Think about monosyllabic and polysyllabic phrases, the way poetic lines and grammatical phrases end neatly or “run on” (enjambment), and repetitions and echoes that may create patterns of emphasis or fine distinctions.

Metaphor, Simile, and Image: if a character is said to be “like” or doing something “as” something else, pay close attention to what that simile reveals. Metaphor is even stronger, equating two aspects of the world in ways often startling or unexpected. Always look for images or image-clusters (animals, weather patterns, whatever) that recur or are vivid.

Tone: Sometimes the tone of a passage is as clear as the tone of voice when someone you know well is speaking to you—angrily, affectionately, dispassionately. More often, however, the tone of written passages takes work to identify. Diction, rhythm, sound and imagery (among other things) help to create tone, our sense of the mood or emotion

conveyed by the whole. Always look at the cumulative effect of sound and sense before arriving at a conclusion.

After you have contemplated the parts, consider how they add up, or reinforce one another. Close reading is about using the *how* of written expression to reach a more in-depth understanding of *what* it says and *why* it does so in this particular way. What are the most important words and phrases for creating the overall tone and significance in the passage? Here you are analyzing, thinking for yourself based on the evidence on the page: there may be no single, clear answer, especially when you are discussing poetry, drama and fiction.

Now, write:

In one paragraph, try to summarize in your own words what you think the passage says. This is a paraphrase, not an analysis of its significance, nor speculation about its role in context.

Then follow your passage line by line, but as you do so direct us to what you believe is most significant in creating the tone, meaning, and effects of the whole. Group your observations in paragraphs that capture the organizational flow and breaks within the passage itself. If this is too abstract, just try to put in words what you think matters most about each line.

Then, edit and proofread:

Put down your essay, and do something else. Come back and read through the essay without looking back at the speech itself. Is it clear on its own? Does it seem logical and cite particular words and phrases to support its claims? If so, swiftly read through again to make sure you have represented your best abilities in writing, with complete sentences, proper punctuation, and appropriate diction.

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