Close Reading Literature

"Close reading" is the careful and sustained explication and interpretation of a brief passage in a text, paying meticulous attention to the particular (individual words, images, rhetorical and narrative devices, word order, the order of sentences, how ideas unfold within individual sentences) and its relationship to the general (the narrative arc, argument, or atmosphere of the whole text). The purpose of close reading is to pay acute attention to not just *what* the writer is saying explicitly but also *how* they are saying it. When close-reading a passage, the following foci can offer you a variety of ways to begin engaging it, but this list is far from exhaustive.

1) **First impressions:** Are there features of the passage that strike the reader immediately? What are they, and why might it be significant that this is what first draws attention?

2) **Diction (word choice):** Language is rich and often offers many ways of saying something. What might be significant about specific words chosen in this passage? Are there words that seem oddly chosen? Do any words have multiple connotations? Does the diction reveal to us anything about the speaker, whether it's a narrator or a character?

3) **Syntax (word order):** Words within a sentence can be arranged in many ways without altering the explicit meaning. Yet shifts in word order can alter very much the emphasis of a sentence. What might be significant about the word order in this passage?

4) **Figures of speech (e.g. metaphor, simile, etc.):** Does the passage employ interesting moments of comparison, either using "like" or "as" (simile) or not (metaphor)? How might these moments of comparison reveal to us details of either the objects of comparison or the person making the comparison?

5) **Patterns:** Do certain patterns seem to emerge either in the style or the content of the piece? In other words, are there images or words that recur? Are there certain sentence structures or sounds or rhythms that repeat? What might be significant about these patterns? Do they suggest a theme in which the text is interested? How?

6) **Gaps:** Are there things that seem to be missing or left unsaid? Characters one might expect—either because of the context or because the text itself makes reference to them —who remain absent? How might these gaps be significant to the text?

7) **Point of view:** Who speaks in the passage? To whom? Does the narrator have a point of view with full or partial access to characters' thoughts (omniscience or limited omniscience)? Or is the narrator unable to see inside minds (objective narrator)?

8) **Characterization:** How does the passage draw its characters? What impressions are we given of these characters, and why?

9) **Setting:** When and where does this passage occur? Are these made specific, or are they left vague? What might be significant about the time and place of this passage?