

A Guide to Writing in A & I 33 Ancient Fictions: The Ancient Novel in Context



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Introduction

In A & I 33 we will read a range of ancient novels with an eye to what they show us about ancient literature, gender roles, religious belief, and why we read. In order to write successful papers in this course, you will need to employ critical or “close” reading skills. Close reading is a form of analytic reading, and it should be the meat of your essay. This guide provides some strategies for close reading (Parts I and II). It also offers some more specific suggestions about how to go about writing your close reading assignment (Part III) as well as one model of close reading from Professor Elmer’s lectures (Part IV).



Close Reading

What is Close Reading?

Close reading is the technique of carefully analyzing a passage’s language, content, structure, and patterns in order to understand what it means, what it suggests, and how it connects to the whole work (that is, its context). A successful close reading will often take on all three tasks. It will delve into what a passage means in order to understand what it suggests, and will then link what the passage suggests to its context. One goal of close reading is to help readers to see facets of the text that they may not have noticed before. To this end, close reading entails “reading out of” a text rather than “reading into” it. The goal of close reading, therefore, is to notice, describe, and interpret details of the text that *are already there*, rather than to impose your own point of view on the text. As a general rule of thumb, *every claim you make should be directly supported by evidence in the text*. This writing guide will highlight some successful strategies for close reading and illustrate them with examples from Professor Elmer’s lectures and the work of students from past years.

Why Close Reading?

Close reading is a fundamental skill for the analysis of any sort of text or discourse, whether it is literary, political, or commercial. It enables you to analyze how a text functions, and it helps you to understand a text’s explicit and implicit goals. The structure, vocabulary, language, imagery, and metaphors used in a text are all crucial to the way it achieves its purpose, and they are therefore all targets for close reading. The skills you learn and employ in this paper will form the building blocks for the writing you do throughout the semester, but they will also continue to be useful during your time at Harvard and beyond. Practicing close reading will train you to be an intelligent and critical reader of all kinds of writing, from political speeches to television advertisements, trashy novels, and works of high literature.

Where to Begin

An interesting and successful close reading starts with the right passage(s). One hint for finding a passage is to look for what Professor Elmer calls places of “friction” in the novels, for example:

- Passages which are puzzling in some way.
- Passages which contradict the reader’s expectations.
- Passages which seem at first to be irrelevant digressions from the main narrative.

These places of friction are often places where the novelists are doing the most interesting things. Identifying them gives you a lever with which to pry open, so to speak, a text’s internal mechanisms. This was the strategy that Timothy Hopper (Fall 2010) used when he examined Charmides’ description of the hippopotamus in *Leucippe and Clitophon*:

An elaborate figurative comparison between Charmides's relationship with Leucippe and the hunting of an Egyptian "Nile horse" (222) contradicts the reader's expectations by turning the hunter into the hunted.

By looking for a place of friction, Timothy identified an apparent contradiction in the text: the hunter of the Nile horse (Charmides) becomes portrayed as the prey of Leucippe's beauty. This led him to an important motif in the novel, namely the transformation of the "hunter" into the "hunted." Further, his analysis of this motif allowed him, in turn, to illustrate a prominent narrative strategy in *Leucippe and Clitophon*, whereby Achilles Tatius uses natural imagery to comment on the erotic relationship between Leucippe and Clitophon (particularly the way that eros irrationally disrupts any stable configuration of active "pursuer" and passive "victim").

Another strategy for choosing a passage for close reading is to look for places rich in concrete details and imagery. Sometimes these passages seem to be irrelevant digressions, but often the repetition of imagery can be a clue that a novelist is trying to draw attention to a particular issue. Alexa Zahl (Fall 2009), for instance, examined the way in which Clitophon deployed the natural imagery of the garden in *Leucippe and Clitophon* to seduce Leucippe. By focusing on this imagery, Alexa shows how the speaker deploys nature imagery as an act of rhetorical persuasion.



Strategies for Close Reading

There are several strategies for getting to a meaningful close reading, once you have chosen your passage. The goal of close reading is to learn what the passage says, what the passage implies, and how the passage connects to its context. This phase should occur while you are planning and outlining your paper, before you have started writing. You might re-read the passage several times, each time keeping a set of reading approaches in mind:

- **Reading for the Literal Meaning:** rewrite the passage by paraphrasing it. You might not use this paraphrase verbatim in your essay, but in the final version of your essay you will want to be sure to orient your reader to the larger context from which your passage was taken. What does the text literally mean? What is it doing in the narrative? This first step in close reading will allow you to put aside what you think you know about the passage(s), and help you to read “out of the text” rather than “into the text.”
- **Reading for Formal Elements:** identify some of the formal mechanisms of the writing, such as:
 - *Narrative:* How would you describe the narrative voice in your passage? Is the narrator first or third person, male or female, omniscient or restricted in knowledge? What are the limitations of the narrator, and how are these reflected in the text?
 - *Structure:* How is the passage structured? Does it move from point A to B? Does it move from point A to B and then back to A again (ring composition)? Does it linger on a single detail?
 - *Patterns:* are there images, keywords, or other devices that reappear in the passage? Are these elements used the same way? Finding a pattern can help establish general characteristics of the text.
- **Reading for the Implications of the Passage:** the next step in close reading is to start examining the implications of a passage. One way to delve into the implications of a passage is to connect its formal elements to your literal reading. Do these formal mechanisms underscore or undermine what the passage says on a literal level?
- **Reading for the Context of the Passage:** Does this passage share imagery with another passage in the novel? Does it contradict it? Does the passage engage with larger themes in the novel (e.g., vision and voyeurism, the natural world, the nature of desire)? Are there important similarities and differences between this passage and others like it throughout the novel?

As you can see, the process of close reading becomes more sophisticated and complicated as you read and re-read, but it also helps you to focus on a text’s puzzling moments, patterns, or expectations. Close reading, in other words, is not just a static, mechanical process, but an analytical tool you leverage to make an argument.

A Note on Close Reading Material in Translation

The novels we study in the course have all been translated into English. These translations are independent works of art in themselves, but they also strive to reproduce as accurately as possible both the content and the form of the Greek and Latin originals. (See, for example, John J. Winkler's introduction to his translation of Achilles Tatius in *CAGN*.) For the purposes of this course, the object of study and of our close readings will be the translations, which we will treat as reasonably good approximations of the original works.

Close Reading and Extratextual Evidence

The ancient novels are deeply entwined with the rest of classical literature, and the novelists frequently make allusions to other literary works. In lecture and sections, Professor Elmer and your TF will introduce a variety of extratextual evidence—materials that are ‘outside’ the primary text, like works of visual art or other ancient texts—to contextualize the novels within the literary world of ancient Greece and Rome. *We do not expect you to do this in your close reading essay!* A close reading is, first and foremost, an analysis of how a single text works.

If you happen to have prior experience with other classical texts, you may find that this knowledge can help to inform your close reading. In that case, you should by all means feel free to draw comparisons: you might notice, for instance, that your passage engages with ancient epic, tragedy, or historiography. But make sure you can provide precise points of comparison, supported by appropriate citations of *specific passages* (not just “Virgil’s *Aeneid*,” but “*Aeneid* Book 4, lines 1–5”). As in the case of your close reading more generally, everything you say should be supported by textual evidence.

Strategies for Writing and Editing

Writing

Once you have begun to analyze and outline your essay, the next step is to turn your ideas into a clear and persuasive essay. In part, the ideal structure for your essay depends on how many passages you choose to examine and how multi-faceted your reading of those passages is. There are, however, some things that all close reading essays should do:

- *Introduce your argument:* It is helpful in the introduction to establish what is at stake in your close reading and what your argument is. Your thesis claim can range in its specificity. It even can be as broad as the claim: “This passage is important and worthy of attention because it suggests/illuminates . . .” Some thesis claims are more specific, however. Timothy argued: “Through complex figurative language, precise diction, ironic comparison, and sudden twists of fate, Achilles Tatius defies expectations and transforms the novel’s dominant pursuers of relationships into powerless victims, slaves before Eros.” He focused on the importance of a single theme to several passages in the novel.
- *Introduce your passage(s) in context.* It is helpful for your reader to summarize the literal content of the passages in a few sentences and also to explain where they come in the narrative of the novel. This should be no more than about a paragraph.
- *Present your reading(s) of a passage supported by evidence from the text.* No matter what you argue, your thesis should be supported by close analysis of the structure, language, and imagery of the text. For instance, when discussing the theme of visual observation, Alexa notices parallels between the farmer in the garden, who “ascends to ‘a vantage point to see’ which female tree the male craves (189)” and the lover Clitophon, who “‘look[s] at [Leucippe] to see how she react[s]’ to his speech (189).” She uses details of the passage to highlight an important facet of the text.
- *Clarify the relationship(s) between different pieces of evidence.* Timothy’s paper examines two related passages; the paper is easy to follow because he clearly states how each passage relates to the other. For instance, he begins his analysis of the second passage by explaining how it picks up on themes he elucidated in his analysis of the first passage: “Echoing the aforementioned ironic comparison, a complementary passage later in the novel transforms Clitophon from the role of the lover to that of the beloved.” This transition helps to orient his reader within his argument.

Editing

Some of the best writing seems effortless. It isn’t. Writing takes time and careful editing. Professional writers and editors spend hours writing, re-writing, proofreading, and fact-checking their work. Here are some tips:

Take a break and come back to your paper. Distance will give you perspective and make it easier for you to notice mistakes.

Write in **short sentences**.

Avoid parentheses. Parentheses confuse your reader, and they usually represent afterthoughts that can be integrated into your prose.

Be extra careful about the **spelling of ancient names**.

Read your paper out loud, either to yourself or to a friend. It should be clear, enjoyable to listen to, and easy to understand. We will be impressed by papers which are clear and explore a few related, surprising ideas in depth, not those with long sentences and complex vocabulary.

A word about using quotations...

One feature that unifies all the examples of close reading in this guide is their frequent use of quotations. Quotations can be either "in-line" quotations (quotations that are integrated into your sentences and paragraphs) or "block" quotations (longer quotations, usually of more than one sentence, that are printed as indented "blocks" of text set off from the paragraph in which they are embedded).

If you use an in-line quotation, make sure it is "anchored" in your text: that is, make sure it is connected to your prose by some introductory or contextualizing phrase. An in-line quotation should be integrated into your prose by some formula such as (for example), "Chariton writes, '[quotation],'" "Later we read, '[quotation],'" "This theme is exemplified by the expression '[quotation],'" etc.

Sometimes, especially if you wish to quote extended passages, it is helpful to use block quotations. If you do, it is important to begin each quotation by explaining why it is important, or otherwise contextualizing it, and to follow it with substantial analysis: every quotation should have both an introduction and analysis. Professor Elmer's lecture is a good example of one way to use block quotation.

For more information on incorporating quotations into your writing (a necessary component of any close reading), see "The Nuts & Bolts of Integrating" in the Harvard Guide to Using Sources (available online from the Harvard College Writing Program).

Case Study from Lecture: The Trial Scene in Chariton (*CAGN* p. 83–6)

In his second lecture on Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, Professor Elmer uses close reading techniques to make an argument specifically, about how Chariton uses a trial scene to comment on the effect he intends his novel to have on the reader. Some of what Professor Elmer does here goes beyond a strict close reading: for instance, he brings in extratextual evidence to supplement his interpretation of Chariton. The lecture is not intended, then, as an absolute model for your close reading paper. But it does exemplify many of the techniques discussed in this writing guide, including:

- The exploration of a point of “friction,” which is, in this case, the way that Chariton conspicuously focuses on the emotions of the spectators at the trial.
- The use of block quotations: note the way that Professor Elmer both introduces each quotation and follows up with specific analysis showing the quotation’s significance.
- “Reading for context”: Professor Elmer explores the significance of details in the passage that is his primary object of interest by establishing connections with other passages in the novel.

Let’s take a look at the relevant portion of the lecture.

The scene of Dionysius’ trial before the Persian king has a lot to say about Chariton’s goals for the novel, about the *effect* he intends it to have. The trial hinges on the interpretation of a text—the letter of Chaereas to Callirhoe. The scene stages a contrast between the reader of that text, Dionysius—who has a limited knowledge of the larger story, and therefore arrives at a misinterpretation—and Mithridates, who knows the larger context. To some extent this difference in knowledge corresponds to the difference between the reader of the novel and Chariton the author: the reader doesn’t know what will happen next, while Chariton does, just like Mithridates. Moreover, Mithridates actually *stages* what happens next—he becomes the architect of the whole scene—as though he were a figure for the author, the architect of the story.

We are dealing here with the literary device known as *mise-en-abyme*, a term that refers to the depiction of a work of art *within* a work of art (think of the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet*, for example). Just in case we don’t pick up on what’s going on, Chariton even compares the situation to the situation constructed by a dramatic poet, i.e. he compares the trial to a literary composition (a play):

Who could fitly describe that scene in court? What dramatist ever staged such an astonishing story? It was like being at a play packed with passionate scenes, with emotions tumbling over each other - weeping and rejoicing, astonishment and pity, disbelief and prayers. How happy all were for Chaereas! How glad for Mithridates! For Dionysius, how

The depiction of a work of art within a work of art is an example of something puzzling—that is, a point of friction. A reader might encounter this example of a text within a text and ask: does Chaereas’ letter and its interpretation (as part of a fraught, dramatic trial!) have anything to suggest about the text I am reading by Chariton? What am I to make of this ‘double’ or ‘shadow’ text?

sorrowful! As for Callirhoe, they did not know what to think. She was in total confusion and stood there unable to utter a word . . . (*Chaereas and Callirhoe* 85)

Note that Chariton also emphasizes the emotions felt by the audience at this “play.” This focus on the reactions of the internal spectators is a way of reflecting on the projected emotional effect of the novel itself on the reader. We, as readers, may not be as surprised as the spectators at the trial by Chaereas’ apparent return to life (we know that he isn’t really dead), but **we can think back to how we reacted to Callirhoe’s apparent death and return to life earlier in the novel.**

It is not by coincidence that Chariton uses the metaphor of the theater to frame these reflections on the emotional impact of storytelling. **Tragic drama was probably the most highly theorized genre in antiquity, most notably in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In that text, Aristotle put forth his influential theory of “catharsis,” which was his way of describing the emotional effects of drama (*Poetics* 1449b).** Largely because of Aristotle’s work on tragedy, Chariton had at his disposal an established set of concepts for thinking about the emotional power of a work of literature. Drama, in other words, could provide a framework for thinking about other kinds of texts, including novels.

Pointing to the emotions of the reader is a familiar technique in Chariton’s novel. We find several scenes that showcase storytelling; in these scenes, the storyteller often gives to his listener some kind of advice on how to interpret the story or react to it emotionally. All of these stories can be considered as *mises-en-abyme* for the novel: implicit in them is a whole theory about how a text is supposed to be read: in order, without succumbing to excessive alarm or anxiety, in expectation of some pleasurable outcome. Let’s look at some examples where internal narrators comment on how a story is to be understood. Earlier in the novel, Phocas relates the story of the destruction of the Syracusan ship:

Dionysius sent everyone away. “There you are,” he said, “We are alone. Don’t tell any more lies—tell me the truth, even if it is ugly.” “Ugly, no, sir,” he said, “In fact I have very good news for you; the beginning may sound rather grim, but don’t let that worry you or distress you; wait till you’ve heard the whole story—you’ll find it has a happy ending.” (*Chaereas and Callirhoe* 63)

Here, **Phocas directs Dionysius to suspend his judgment until he has heard the whole story, and to listen to it in the expectation that it will end well.** This same advice would be equally appropriate as advice for the reader of Chariton’s novel, which is likewise full of “grim” moments, but which also leads to a happy conclusion.

Near the end of the novel, Chaereas becomes a storyteller when he narrates his and Callirhoe’s adventures to the assembled Syracusans:

Chaereas started at the end, since he did not want to cause the people sorrow by telling them of the grim episodes at the beginning. They kept on insisting, however. “Begin at the beginning, we beg you – tell us the whole story, don’t leave anything out.” . . . “We crossed the Ionian Sea safely and landed on the estate of a citizen of Miletus called Dionysius . . . he was the man who had bought Callirhoe from Theron for a talent. Do not be afraid; Callirhoe did not become a slave!” (*Chaereas and Callirhoe* 121)

Here Professor Elmer is reading for context: he makes sense of the trial scene (specifically, the passionate reactions it details) in relation to an earlier scene that invites passionate reactions from the reader.

Here Professor Elmer offers some additional extratextual evidence. Keep in mind that a successful close reading need not introduce extratextual material. If you do opt to introduce such evidence, make sure that it is relevant and specific.

Notice how Professor Elmer follows the quotation first with a paraphrase that highlights the most relevant features of the passage, and then offers some analysis of why these features are significant.

This is a second instance of friction. Reading the final sentence of the block quotation, a reader today might ask: why is the storyteller giving us a spoiler? Why is he telling the audience about the end before he reaches the end? As Professor Elmer points out, we see here an authorial anxiety about the excessive negative emotions that a listener or reader might experience in the act of reading.

In this passage we find a similar concern with the anxiety a listener (or reader) might experience over the “grim” moments of a tale. But we also find an important new addition to the implicit theory of storytelling that emerges from these scenes: now we find an expression of the interest and pleasure that listeners / readers can derive from precisely these grim moments. Chaereas’ audience insists on hearing the whole tale, in order, with all the disheartening episodes included. They want to hear these episodes, because they add to their enjoyment of the tale. The same, of course, goes for any decent novel: without moments of anguish, it won’t be a very interesting read.

Here we see a third instance of friction. It confronts us with the counterintuitive (and thus unexpected) idea of deriving pleasure from “grim” or painful moments. It suggests that art operates in ways fundamentally different from life. (In life, pain is usually pain; in art, pain is pleasure.)

All of our novels feature internal narration, and the way such internal narration is presented not infrequently casts important light on the framing text as well. But Chariton, more than any other novelist, has his internal narrators instruct their audiences on how to respond to the narrative. This may be a sign of the fact that what Chariton is up to—writing a novel—is something relatively new, something in need of explanation or a kind of ‘owner’s manual.’ He seems to be trying to figure out just how his text is supposed to work, and to explain to readers how to use it. In fact, Chariton offers something close to a kind of reader’s guide in the preface to the eighth and final book:

I think that this last chapter will prove very agreeable to its readers: it cleanses (*katharsios*; cf. Aristotle’s term “catharsis”) away the grim events of the earlier ones. There will be no more pirates or slavery or lawsuits or fighting or suicide or wars or conquests; now there will be lawful love and sanctioned marriage. (*Chaereas and Callirhoe* 110)

Chariton’s direct address to the reader amounts to a kind of explanation of how one should read his novel. It is as though he were saying: ‘The early books of my novel were intended to produce a certain amount of (not unpleasurable) distress. But now you may justifiably experience relief and satisfaction, because my story is about to reach its happy ending.’ This manner of instructing the reader is perfectly analogous to the way Chariton’s internal narrators direct their listeners.

I want to return now to the emotions that Chariton ascribes to the audience at the trial, which I’ve suggested are like cues for the emotions of readers. Chariton suggests that the situations of all the characters involved in the trial call for some kind of emotional response. This response is simple, straightforward, in most cases—happiness for Chaereas, sorrow for Dionysius—but not in the case of Callirhoe herself. Her case is the most complex. Chariton suggests that it involves a real dilemma, a dilemma that leaves the trial’s spectators, and us as readers, at a loss. I’m fascinated by this response—because it seems to mirror so precisely Callirhoe’s own situation. Note the juxtaposition between the audience’s reaction and Callirhoe’s: while the audience does “not know what to think,” Callirhoe is likewise “in total confusion.” Callirhoe is torn between two decent, loving husbands—and so, in a sense, are we. The fact that Chariton establishes this parallel between Callirhoe’s feelings and those of the spectators (and implicitly of his readers) suggests—and this is what I find most fascinating—that he expects a kind of psychological identification between reader and protagonist.

Professor Elmer concludes his close reading by drawing a conclusion on the basis of his analysis. The close reading has shown (1) that the reactions of internal audiences mirror the reactions of the reader, and (2) that there is a connection between those reactions and the emotions of the protagonists. The conclusion—that this textual strategy indicates that the author expects his readers to identify psychologically with the characters—explains why the results of the close reading are significant, and how they enrich our understanding of the text. Now we can see that embedded within Chariton’s story is an implicit theory of novel reading!

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