

ANNOTATING TEXT FOR CLOSE READING

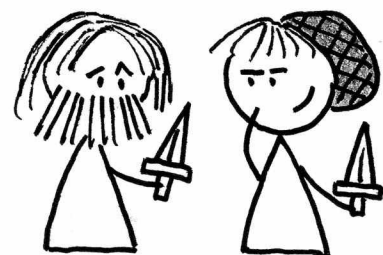
Close reading allows us to deconstruct Shakespeare's text in order to understand the craftsmanship behind it.

Everything from the choice of vocabulary to a line's length and rhythm can tell the reader something about the characters, their situations and even what they're supposed to be doing on stage. It is especially useful to close read Shakespeare's plays because he designed them to be heard in theatres. In Shakespeare's day, theatre was all about language and listening carefully, so he never wasted a single word or chose them randomly.

Let's have a look at some text and see if we can analyse it line-by-line.

How to Annotate Text: A Checklist

- Look for interesting or striking vocabulary and consider meaning and purpose
- Think about structure and form (verse/prose) and what this brings to the dialogue
- Consider what each line or sentence is doing – what would you lose if it were gone?



Macbeth

Annotating Text for Close Reading

Read the following exchange and the annotations.

The question informs the audience that the soldier on stage is bloody – important if you need to use your imagination in a large open-air theatre. 'That' suggests the King is gesturing in the direction of the new character on stage – the actor knows which direction to face and how to behave from this line.

The pentameter is incomplete. Duncan is keen to know the news so he leaves 6 syllables to Malcolm. Leaving off a line like this implies haste and creates a sense of urgency.

DUNCAN

What bloody man is that? He can report,
As seemeth by his plight, of the revolt
The newest state.

Duncan is piecing together evidence. The soldier 'seemeth' from the blood to have come straight from the battle. Hence he will be able to tell the latest or 'newest' report. 'Plight' implies that the Sergeant is limping or struggling somehow.

The sergeant is both 'good' i.e. competent and 'hardy', or strong and resilient.

Malcolm invites the Sergeant – still unnamed – to tell Duncan his news directly.

MALCOLM

This is the sergeant
Who like a good and hardy soldier fought
'Gainst my captivity. Hail, brave friend!
Say to the King the knowledge of the broil
As thou didst leave it.

Malcolm uses the rest of the pentameter line to get in as much information as possible. 'Sergeant' in Early Modern English was pronounced 'ser-gee-ent', thereby giving it three syllables. Within one line of iambic pentameter split between two characters, we get a question and an answer. The haste contributes to the urgency.

This half line is rushed. Malcolm stopped mid-pentameter to greet the Sergeant directly. 'Hail, brave friend' is welcoming and urgent, because he is keen to turn his attention to the newcomer so that he can introduce him to the King. Malcolm is more interested in welcoming the soldier than sounding grand.

Malcolm values the sergeant because he saved his life. He takes his time to introduce his deeds to the King.

Malcolm refers to the Sergeant's 'knowledge' or experience of the battle. He invites him to speak directly to the King. Despite his 'plight' and being bloody from battle, he does not complain; rather, he dutifully obliges Malcolm and satisfies the King's curiosity.

Informal address. Although the Sergeant is a social inferior. It may suggest equality between the two men. Malcolm owes the Sergeant his life, so it is easy to imagine him taking the soldier by the arm or being physically encouraging here.

Macbeth

2. Now read and annotate the rest of the exchange in pairs or groups

SERGEANT

Doubtful it stood,
As two spent swimmers, that do cling together
And choke their art. The merciless Macdonwald -
Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villanies of nature
Do swarm upon him - from the western isles
Of kerns and gallowglasses is supplied;
And Fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling,
Showed like a rebel's whore. But all's too weak;
For brave Macbeth - well he deserves that name -
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like valour's minion carved out his passage
Till he faced the slave,
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseamed him from the nave to the chops,
And fixed his head upon our battlements.

DUNCAN

O valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman!

3. Discussion Activity

Personalities:

Who does the audience learn about here? What do we learn about these characters?

Why do you think Shakespeare introduces the Sergeant, a new character, to deliver news of the battle?

Theatricality:

How dramatically exciting do you find this passage? How is it crafted to be engaging?