

Playing basketball's a release for some, like the way Sonny Boy tries to forget the pain of his mother's death when he's on the court. He plays until the "backboard splintered," just like his emotions are splintered. I think these young black men—their race isn't actually mentioned, but you get a sense that they're African American like Komunyakaa—are overflowing with potential to defy their hard lives and racial oppression. They take out their anger on the basketball court. Those references to "Mercury" and "sea monsters" are about gods, mythical creatures who are superhuman. That's how the players feel on the court, where being young and strong means everything. But off the court—it's a different world.

There is no denying that doing a detailed annotation like this one takes time. But understanding a text with layers of meaning requires time and attention to detail, especially if you are preparing to write about it. Plus, once you have examined the work so closely, you'll have already found ideas and evidence to use in your essay.

Developing a Thesis Statement

When it comes time to write a close analysis essay, the first thing to do is formulate a **thesis statement**. You may end up changing it as you go, but having some idea of your argument will help you stay focused. Your teacher will likely have provided you with a prompt or an assignment, and if you've done a thorough job of reading and taking notes in the form of annotation or a graphic organizer, you will probably have more ideas than you can actually use in the essay. For example, your reading may have revealed the intense and vivid imagery that Komunyakaa develops. You may have also noticed mythic allusions to Mercury and sea monsters, and underlying themes—like the transformative power of the game. You might also have noticed the feeling that trouble always seems to be looming nearby, but never seems to touch the players while they're playing. You may have noted the poem's syntax, with lines that alternate between sentences and fragments. Does this pattern suggest the quick movements of the game? There are several ways to approach this poem and many possible interpretations.

Let's say your teacher has assigned you the following prompt:

Write an essay in which you discuss how the style and structure of Yusef Komunyakaa's "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" convey the speaker's attitude toward the game of basketball.

Remember, your thesis must be an interpretation: an argument about the meaning of the poem that you will support with evidence from the text. You should avoid creating a thesis statement that is so broad that it just restates the prompt or assignment, such as the following:

Yusef Komunyakaa uses style and structure to convey the speaker's attitude toward the game of basketball in his poem "Slam, Dunk, & Hook."

Not only does this thesis fail to mention which specific elements the writer plans to discuss, but it also fails to identify the speaker's attitude. The thesis needs to focus

on specific characteristics of the poem's style and structure, so that the essay you can analyze how they help convey your interpretive attitude toward the game of basketball.

On the other hand, it is important not to narrow your thesis so much that it is nothing to say about it, such as the following:

In "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," Yusef Komunyakaa uses classical allusions to convey the speaker's attitude toward the game of basketball.

Although this thesis isolates a style element—classical allusions—it does not interpret the speaker's attitude, nor does it recognize the complexity of the poem. You could not discuss a thesis like this for long before running out of things to say. A good thesis should be expressed clearly and should inform your essay's purpose. It is the backbone of your essay, and everything you write should connect to it.

Working with the prompt above, let's consider the poem's style and structure. Looking back at what we've noted about "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" in the previous chapter, we see many vivid images of action, grace, beauty, and the players' intense focus. We also find danger: the danger of a "roundhouse / Labyrinth," the danger of a "blackjack / Against an open palm." The players are also in a state of "ecstasy," and when they are on the court they are able to transcend their physical lives. The game seems to help the players both escape and transcend it. They are not just playing basketball with a rickety hoop; they are gods like "Mercury," they are "sea monsters," they are transcending. Remembering that it is always important to address a work's context, we can develop the following thesis—though this is only one possibility—that examines the way the style and structure of "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" convey the speaker's attitude.

In "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," Yusef Komunyakaa uses vivid imagery, mythic allusions, and metaphors to characterize the game that offers transcendence for its players.

Organizing a Close Analysis Essay

Once you have an idea for a thesis statement—and, remember, it's important to have one—think about the way you will support it. Look back at your notes. Think about the ideas that inspired your thesis. You may want to organize your essay around the style elements, with a paragraph each on syntax, imagery, and metaphor, in the case of our sample thesis. You could approach it a different way: you might group your ideas according to different attitudes the speaker has about basketball, with one paragraph on the speaker's attitude toward the game, another on how it serves as escape from the trouble of the world, and another on how basketball helps the players transcend their physical, mythical, metaphorical.

You've probably noticed that the thesis we developed is likely to lead to a five-paragraph essay. Perhaps you've been warned to stay away from this organization because it is formulaic or prescriptive. We agree: stay away from the formulaic or prescriptive. However, the five-paragraph essay may or may not fall into that category. There's no rule that says that every question or topic will fit neatly into an introduction, three body (or developmental) paragraphs, and a conclusion. Yet if you happen to have three points to make, you'll end up with five paragraphs that could form a cogent and insightful essay.

Integrating Quotations

The following essay uses brief quotes from the poem as textual evidence, a word or two woven into the writer's own sentence. For longer quotations, a forward slash mark indicates a line break. You will notice that each of the examples is explained. In fact, it's a good idea to aim for a sentence or two of explanation, sometimes called commentary or analysis, for each of your examples. If you need more help with integrating quotations smoothly into your own sentences, see page 152 in Chapter 4.

Documenting Sources

In a close analysis essay, you are likely only writing about one text, so you won't need a formal Works Cited page. Your teacher may ask you to use line numbers to identify where your quotations can be found, but with a short poem or passage of fiction it may be unnecessary. If you do add line numbers, they should go in parentheses after the quotation mark and before your punctuation, like this:

Described as a "roundhouse / Labyrinth" (ll. 6–7), the activity on the court . . .

A Sample Close Analysis Essay

Read the sample essay here, and respond to the questions at the end.

The Beauty and Danger of Basketball

Carlton Curtis

In "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," African American poet Yusef Komunyakaa moves from a description of the physicality of basketball to a philosophical reflection on the lives of the players. Written in terse lines, this poem embodies the energy of young athletes on the court, set against the stark backdrop of the society they live in. Vivid images, classical allusions, and metaphors characterize the game that is both escape and transcendence for its players.

"Slam, Dunk, & Hook" is an exaltation of the sport of basketball and force of the rhythm, power, and grace it inspires in its players. The beginning lines describe the motion of shots in basketball as swift and beautiful, ballet maneuvers, yet the short lines pulse with their own energy, conveying the staccato beat of a basketball being dribbled down the court or maybe even a drum being used as a fragment such as "Nothing but a hot / Swish of strings like silk / Teatime out," Komunyakaa lets an image replace the measured thought of a full sentence. That image captures the quick movement and vitality of the players as they take their best shots. Enjambment, such as "A high note hung there / A long second suspended the moment in time, making the reader part of the 'long second.'" Komunyakaa ends several lines in midair, as it were, giving a feeling of the players being in flight. They "could almost / Last forever, poised in midair," they "cork Up," and they "feint, / & glide." Even the ampersand that replaces the word "and" suggests motion and speed.

The poem flows with exuberant motion, captured in verbs such as "corkscrew," "exploded," "splintered," and "Double-flashing." Komunyakaa emphasizes the sheer physicality with images such as "the roundhouse / Labyrinth our bodies / Created." These players are "All hands & feet . . . sprung rhythm they sweat and dribble. The comparisons created by similes and metaphors emphasize their power. They "glide like a sparrow hawk," their "Muscles were a motor / Double-flashing," and their "bodies spun / On swivels of bone & faith." The last image, combining both concrete and abstract words, is a reminder that the game is more than just basketball to them.

The classical allusions to Mercury, a labyrinth, and sea monsters suggest that these players become more than just kids on the street. Although the reference to Mercury—the Roman messenger of the gods—starts as an act of insignia on a player's sneakers, the symbol also associates the players' movement with speed, flight, and purpose. They are imbued with a mythical power, an epic sensibility, and are frozen in time with their youthful beauty intact: "could almost / Last forever, poised in midair / Like storybook sea monsters." They become so swift that they can "outmaneuver[ed] the footwork / Of bad angels." The speaker sums up the mythical power of the players on the court when he says, "We were metaphysical when girls / Cheered on the sidelines transcend their physical and perceived limitations and play as the chorus of lifts them to a higher state of being. They may not be gods, but they have possibilities.

Yet they are not all grace and beauty. The struggle on the basketball court develops as a metaphor for the lives of these players, trying to "outmaneuver[ed] the footwork / Of bad angels." The description of muscular movement gives way in the second half of the poem to a passage about the

death of Sonny Boy's mother, a loss he copes with by escaping to the court: "He played nonstop all day, so hard / Our backboard splintered." Sonny Boy's crisis, the speaker seems to be saying, is not the exception because "Trouble / Was there slapping a blackjack / Against an open palm." Trouble is part of the lives of these young men, who play with a powerful intent in their hearts, the intent to defy the limitations of their bodies and the limitations of their fortunes as young black men in America. They vent their frustrations on the steel rims and backboards of street ball courts and dream of breaking whatever boundaries that personified "Trouble" brings.

The game of basketball is a release for the players in the poem, whether from the perceived limitations of their youth or perhaps racial or economic barriers. The young men lose themselves on the court, wishing to manipulate their lives as effortlessly as they do the ball. They know they must fight to soar and excel beyond their station of second-class citizens. In the end, the game is not just an escape but an exercise in transcendence, where the stakes are control, freedom, and possibility. The intensity and concentration of losing themselves in basketball becomes a "lyric slipknot / Of joy." These young men are not only confident but also menacing in the knowledge that they are both "Beautiful & dangerous."

Questions

1. Examine the relationship between the thesis and the topic sentences. Do you think the basic structure of the essay is effective or ineffective? Why?
2. Paragraphs 2 and 3 discuss vivid imagery, but the second paragraph focuses on how syntax conveys those images. Should syntax have been specified in the thesis? Explain.
3. How does the essay support its argument with evidence from the text? Cite a paragraph that you find especially effective and explain why.
4. The student writer argues that the basketball players are using the sport to overcome racial and economic challenges. To what extent do you think that the textual evidence supports this interpretation?
5. What is another argument you might make based on a close reading of "Slam, Dunk, & Hook"? It does not have to contradict this student's interpretation entirely but rather offer another way to read the poem or a different conclusion than the one drawn in this sample essay.

• ACTIVITY •

Read the following poem by Edward Hirsch. Then use one of the close reading techniques you've learned to generate ideas for a thesis statement and several topic sentences for a close analysis essay.

Fast Break

EDWARD HIRSCH

(In Memory of Dennis Turner, 1946–1984)

A hook shot kisses the rim and
hangs there, helplessly, but doesn't drop
and for once our gangly starting center
boxes out his man and times his jump
perfectly, gathering the orange leather
from the air like a cherished possession
and spinning around to throw a strike
to the outlet who is already shoveling
an underhand pass toward the other guard
scissoring past a flat-footed defender
who looks stunned and nailed to the floor
in the wrong direction, turning to catch sight
of a high, gliding dribble and a man
letting the play develop in front of him
in slow motion, almost exactly
like a coach's drawing on the blackboard,
both forwards racing down the court
the way that forwards should, fanning out
and filling the lanes in tandem, moving
together as brothers passing the ball
between them without a dribble, without
a single bounce hitting the hardwood
until the guard finally lunges out
and commits to the wrong man
while the power-forward explodes past them
in a fury, taking the ball into the air
by himself now and laying it gently
against the glass for a layup,
but losing his balance in the process,
inexplicably falling, hitting the floor
with a wild, headlong motion
for the game he loved like a country
and swiveling back to see an orange blur
flooding perfectly through the net.