Meter

- Does the poem have a regular meter? If so, what is it?
- Read the poem aloud. How does the meter affect the tone of the poem? For instance, does the meter make the poem seem formal, informal, singsongy, celebratory, somber?

Form

- Does the poem follow a traditional form? If so, which?
- If the poem follows a traditional form, but has untraditional content, what might be the poet's purpose in subverting the traditional form?
- If the poem does not follow a traditional form, what sort of logic structures the poem? For instance, why are the stanzas broken as they are? What is the relationship among the stanzas?

Poetic Syntax

- What examples of enjambment can you find? How does the enjambment affect the sound and meaning of the line?
- What examples of caesura can you find? What is the impact of the caesura?
- If the poem has sentences, are they long or short or a combination of the two? How does the length of the sentences relate to the meaning of the poem?

Sound

- How does the poem use rhyme, meter, form, and poetic syntax to create sound?
- How does the poem use repetition, such as alliteration and assonance, to create sound?
- How do the sounds created in the poem connect to the meaning of the poem?

• ACTIVITY •

Use the following sonnet by John Keats to answer the questions above.

Bright Star, would I were stedfast as thou art—

JOHN KEATS

Bright Star, would I were stedfast as thou art—
  Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night,
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
  Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,[1]
The moving waters at their priestlike task 5
  Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen masque
  Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—

[1]Hermit, particularly one under a religious vow.—EDS.

No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable
  Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast, 10
To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,
  Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death—

[18

A Sample Close Analysis

Now that we've considered some of the specific techniques poets use to conv
message, let's look at a poem by Robert Herrick, "Delight in Disorder," in w
describes the appeal of dressing in a way that is careless—or seemingly so.

A sweet disorder in the dress
Kindles in clothes a wantonness.
A lawn[1] about the shoulders thrown
Into a fine distraction;
An erring lace, which here and there 5
Enthralls the crimson stomacher,[2]
A cuff neglectful, and thereby
Ribbons to flow confusedly;
A winning wave, deserving note,
In the tempestuous petticoat; 10
A careless shoestring, in whose tie
I see a wild civility;
Do more bewitch me than when art
Is too precise in every part.

This is a great poem for practicing close reading. Written over 350 year
may seem difficult at first; after a few readings, though, its meaning becom
and it offers some obvious examples of how style and structure create deepe
ing and nuance.

First, be sure you understand what Herrick is talking about. The speaker d
in detail a woman's clothing—style, color, and fabric. Some of the vocab
unfamiliar to readers today, such as *lawn* and *stomacher*. Other words, such
ticoat, may be archaic, but you have probably come across them before. As al
you don't know what something means, you should look it up.

As you read the poem, you might have noticed the personification. The
notes the "fine distraction" of the scarf thrown over the woman's shoulders,

[1]Linen scarf.—EDS.
[2]A piece of stiff, embroidered cloth worn over the stomach.—EDS.

that is "neglectful," ribbons that "flow confusedly," and a "tempestuous petticoat." The personification suggests that the clothes reflect qualities of the person wearing them. Similarly, the "erring lace" "[e]nthralls the crimson stomacher," as if a mere decoration could take such deliberate action. Two **oxymorons** (paradoxes made up of two seemingly contradictory words) support the possibility that something is going on other than the literal description of clothing. The opening line refers to a "sweet disorder," but most would consider disorder unsettling, hardly "sweet"; later, the speaker sees a "wild civility," another seeming contradiction, because how can "civility"—or courteous behavior—be "wild"? Now that you're aware of the personification and the oxymorons in this poem, reread it to see if you can pick up on what they suggest.

Note the words suggesting passion: *Kindles, wantonness, crimson, tempestuous,* and *bewitch.* Is this poem actually about seduction? If so, its indirect manner is not overtly sexual or vulgar but flirtatious, sly, even mischievous. Alliteration adds a teasing singsong quality: "Delight . . . Disorder," "winning wave," and "precise . . . part." Further, the symmetry of the alliteration brings a bit of order into the description of disorder—but only a bit.

We might look to the structure of the poem for further evidence of the playful tone. The structure seems regular and predictable. The fourteen lines are presented in seven rhymed pairs, or couplets, most having eight syllables. The opening and closing couplets have exactly rhyming final syllables ("dress" / "wantonness" and "art" / "part"). Notice the neatly repeating **parallel structure** of lines 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11. However, there are inconsistencies within the poem. Some of the rhymes are only near rhymes (e.g., ll. 11 and 12: "tie" does not rhyme with "civility"). The poem's lines are in iambic tetrameter, but the rhythm is not always even. The evenness of the opening line, for instance ("A sweet disorder in the dress") is violated by line 10 ("In the tempestuous petticoat"). It seems Herrick's contention that "disorder" can be "sweet" is reflected in the structure of the poem.

Or, put in more thematic terms, Herrick might be reminding us that appearances can be deceiving, that perfection may not be as appealing as charming imperfections. Or, given the cultural mores of his time dictating strict outward propriety, he might be telling his readers that passion lurks just beneath the veneer of polite society.

• ACTIVITY •

Spend some time reading the following poem by Simon Ortiz closely. Analyze how the poem's style and structure help the reader understand why the speaker needs his father's song and what that song might be.

My Father's Song

SIMON ORTIZ

Wanting to say things,
I miss my father tonight.
His voice, the slight catch,

the depth from his thin chest,
the tremble of emotion 5
in something he has just said
to his son, his song:

We planted corn one Spring at Acu—
we planted several times
but this one particular time 10
I remember the soft damp sand
in my hand.

My father had stopped at one point
to show me an overturned furrow;
the plowshare had unearthed 15
the burrow nest of a mouse
in the soft moist sand.

Very gently, he scooped tiny pink animals
into the palm of his hand
and told me to touch them. 20
We took them to the edge
of the field and put them in the shade
of a sand moist clod.

I remember the very softness
of cool and warm sand and tiny alive mice 25
and my father saying things.

Talking with the Text

To become a more careful reader, the most important and helpful thing you read, read, and reread, but there are some techniques that can make your rea active. The most important point to keep in mind is that your goal is not identify and list **literary elements**—although that's a first step—but to ana effect. In other words, how do the choices the writer makes help to deliver t message or meaning? We'll discuss several strategies to help you become a m reader, a reader who goes beyond summary to analysis and interpretation.

Think Aloud

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the first step to close readin asking questions. These can be simple ones (such as the meaning of unfamili lary) or more complex ones (such as the meaning suggested by figurative langu the goal is to "talk with the text," a good place to start is by talking to one anoth

Pair up with a classmate and take turns reading and thinking out loud; that is, read a line or a sentence, then stop and comment. See what your partner has to say. Then let him or her read the next line or sentence, and repeat the process until you've finished the text. Although your comments can go in a number of directions, here are a few suggestions:

- Pose questions about something that confuses you or about a possible interpretation
- Identify unfamiliar vocabulary or allusions
- Note specific stylistic elements and their effect
- Rephrase inverted lines
- Make connections within the poem, or passage of fiction, noting any repetitions, patterns, or contrasts

Once you've gone through the text carefully by reading, talking, questioning, and analyzing, you have a strong foundation to either contribute to a discussion in a larger group or prepare to write about the piece.

• ACTIVITY •

Think aloud with a partner on the following poem by Christina Georgina Rossetti. Keep in mind that the title reflects an old English proverb: "Promises are like pie-crust, made to be broken."

Promises like Pie-Crust

CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI

Promise me no promises,
  So will I not promise you;
Keep we both our liberties,
  Never false and never true:
Let us hold the die uncast, 5
  Free to come as free to go;
For I cannot know your past,
  And of mine what can you know?

You, so warm, may once have been
  Warmer towards another one; 10
I, so cold, may once have seen
  Sunlight, once have felt the sun:
Who shall show us if it was
  Thus indeed in time of old?
Fades the image from the glass 15
  And the fortune is not told.

If you promised, you might grieve
  For lost liberty again;
If I promised, I believe
  I should fret to break the chain: 20
Let us be the friends we were,
  Nothing more but nothing less;
Many thrive on frugal fare
  Who would perish of excess.

Annotation

Annotation is simply noting on the page words that strike you, phrases th
or thrill you, or places where you want to talk back to the speaker or narr
goal is to record ideas and impressions for later analysis. If you are not a
write in your book, make your annotations on sticky notes attached to th
margins of the pages. Why bother to do this? Here's what well-known sc
avid reader Mortimer Adler says:

> Why is marking up a book indispensable to reading? First, it keeps you awake
> I don't mean merely conscious; I mean awake.) In the second place, reading, i
> active, is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or wr
> marked book is usually the thought-through book. Finally, writing helps you
> the thought you had, or the thoughts the author expressed. (*How to Read a B*

So whether you use sticky notes, highlight passages, or write comments
the margins, annotation helps you become a better reader. There are no har
rules for annotating properly, but the following approach is a good way to g

On your first reading, circle or highlight words or phrases that are inte
unfamiliar, as well as any elements of style. Note in the margins or on a s
why you are circling or highlighting these words. If you just circle, or just
you will soon forget why you did so. Don't worry if you can't remember th
term for what you find; just describe it. Note words that stand out for th
or oddity as well as words you need to look up. Don't hesitate to make an
guess at their meaning.

On your second reading, move from investigating individual words ar
to making larger-scale observations. If you see patterns, words, or ideas th
connect to one another or are repeated, circle those words or ideas and u
connect them. Note shifts in tone or viewpoint. Underline lines or passage
think are important for understanding the meaning of the poem or passag
themes in the piece. Pose questions. You might want to use colored pencil
entiate your first-reading annotations from your second-reading annotatio
of this as a work in progress, an emerging interpretation. You may change
later, but annotating will record how your thinking develops.

After the third reading, write for three to five minutes about the work. Paraphrase it, and then react to it as a whole and to its parts. Respond to the work in any way you like. Informal, exploratory writing can help you begin to understand what you read.

Here is an example of annotation, using William Shakespeare's Sonnet 29:

First Reading

When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes, — Personification
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, — More personification; ? Look up
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope, 5
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope, — Multiple meanings; ? odd use of this word
With what I most enjoy contented least,
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state, 10 — Sounds like "Happily"
Like to the lark at break of day arising — Long simile!
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate; — More personification
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

[1609]

Second Reading

When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes, — Personification
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, — More personification; ? Look up
And look upon myself and curse my fate, — Contrast: cries vs. sings
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope, — Repeated references to wealth . . . but of hope of friends
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed, — Multiple meanings
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope, — ? odd use of this word
With what I most enjoy contented least,
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising, — Shift in tone
Haply I think on thee, and then my state, — Sounds like "Happily"
Like to the lark at break of day arising — Long simile!
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate; — More personification
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

[1609]

Key! They're poor, but they have each other — Juxtaposing heaven & earth. Earthly things (wealth) not as important as love. — Repetition of "state" Dual meaning?

Exploratory Writing

In this Shakespearean sonnet, the speaker seems miserable at first. He's about being an outcast. I'm not sure about those "bootless cries." He says he's jea people who have it better than he has it. He envies people with hope, with talen friends, and with scope (not sure what that means, but maybe more open-minde seems to also just wish he had more money. He uses words related to fortune and a few times in the poem, once in the first line, again in line 5, and finally in the to-last line, but the meaning is a little different each time. Something happens a line 9, with the word "Yet." Just when he hates himself the most ("almost despisi he thinks of someone (his beloved?) and the whole tone of the poem changes. Su birds are singing "hymns at heaven's gate." And they're larks—morning birds, if remember from *Romeo & Juliet*—which suggests they're pretty optimistic. By the line the speaker has decided that he wouldn't trade places with a king. It seems though the speaker is reflecting on how we often get down on ourselves when w criticized or when things don't go our way. When the speaker is most depressed, only to think of how he is loved, and his optimism returns. He no longer wishes places with those who seem more fortunate (like kings) because somebody loves Lucky guy.

Graphic Organizer

Another approach to close reading is to use a graphic organizer, which h the poem or passage of fiction down into specific areas for commentary. Yo may divide the text for you, or you may discover the divisions as you l analysis. For poetry, you can always use the line or stanza divisions as natu ing points. The graphic organizer on pages 38–39 asks you first to parap the poem is saying, then to identify a literary element by name or descri finally to consider its effect. Setting up the close reading in such a stru guides you through an analysis that does not stop with simple restateme identification of elements of style but links them to effect and meaning.

LINES	PARAPHRASE (PUT IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR SUMMARIZE)	ELEMENT OF STYLE	EFFECT OR FUNCTION
When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes, I all alone beweep my outcast state,	When things are bad, he cries about it by himself.	"Fortune" refers to both wealth and luck. Inversion "all alone" before "beweep" "outcast state."	First reference to words connecte money or riches. Inversion sounds more formal, m sadder. First appearance of three "states."
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, And look upon myself and curse my fate,	God doesn't listen to speaker; he is miserable and self-pitying.	Figures of speech "bootless cries" "deaf heaven."	"Bootless" means "useless" but m pathetic — suggests bare feet. He's so pathetic that heaven offe comfort; he can only look inward.
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope, Featured like him, like him with friends possessed, Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope, With what I most enjoy contented least,	List of anonymous people the speaker envies.	The word "like" is repeated. Second word related to wealth: "rich." Quatrain ends with "contented least"; line also has unconventional word order.	The speaker wants so badly to be else that he says it twice; there is in these lines, just those more for than he is. A person with hope seems "rich" speaker. Quatrain ends on a negative note.
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising, Haply I think on thee, and then my state,	When he's just about hating himself, by chance he thinks of his beloved.	Shift — "Yet" Diction — "Haply" Repetition — second "state"	Tone shifts with "Yet." "Haply" means "by chance" but s like *happily*. "State" a little better this time.
Like to the lark at break of day arising From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;	Compares state of mind to lark, singing heavenly music.	Simile — his state is like a lark. "hymns" and "heaven"	The lark — associated with morni suggests awakening. Word choices change the sonnet's and tone.
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings That then I scorn to change my state with kings.	His beloved makes him feel so wealthy that he wouldn't trade places with a king.	Repetition — third "state"; third reference to wealth. Word order is straightforward in last line.	The poem ends with a direct, clea ment of what makes the speaker f fortunate, rich, and wealthy — an money. He's content with the "sta in. Word order is traditional: subje object. Order is restored.

• ACTIVITY •

The following passage is from the opening of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*. Annotate the passage using the three-step process we have described.

From *The Scarlet Letter*

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule, it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house, somewhere in the vicinity of Cornhill, almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on Isaac Johnson's lot, and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchres in the old church-yard of King's Chapel. Certain it is, that, some fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front. The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door looked more antique than any thing else in the new world. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.

This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history; but whether it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally overshadowed it,—or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door,—we shall not take upon us to determine. Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from that inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader. It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.

[1850]

From Analysis to Essay: Writing a Close Analysis Essay

It should be clear by now that the closer we examine a piece of writing on t
and sentence level, the closer we come to understanding its deeper level of m
When we write about literature, it is those deeper levels that we are intere
otherwise, we run the risk of summarizing a work rather than analyzing it.

Let's do a close reading of "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" by Yusef Komunyakaa. I
reading the piece and formulating some first-impression questions and observ

Fast breaks. Lay ups. With Mercury's
Insignia on our sneakers,
We outmaneuvered the footwork
Of bad angels. Nothing but a hot
Swish of strings like silk 5
Ten feet out. In the roundhouse
Labyrinth our bodies
Created, we could almost
Last forever, poised in midair
Like storybook sea monsters. 10
A high note hung there
A long second. Off
The rim. We'd corkscrew
Up & dunk balls that exploded
The skullcap of hope & good 15
Intention. Bug-eyed, lanky,
All hands & feet . . . sprung rhythm.
We were metaphysical when girls
Cheered on the sidelines.
Tangled up in a falling, 20
Muscles were a bright motor
Double-flashing to the metal hoop
Nailed to our oak.
When Sonny Boy's mama died
He played nonstop all day, so hard 25
Our backboard splintered.
Glistening with sweat, we jibed
& rolled the ball off our
Fingertips. Trouble
Was there slapping a blackjack 30
Against an open palm.
Dribble, drive to the inside, feint,
& glide like a sparrow hawk.
Lay ups. Fast breaks.
We had moves we didn't know 35
We had. Our bodies spun
On swivels of bone & faith,

Of joy, & we knew we were
Beautiful & dangerous. 40

[1992]

Analyzing

Sometimes it's helpful to start by summarizing the work in one sentence, just so you're sure what's going on.

> In "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," the speaker expresses how basketball provided an escape from his life's troubles.

Clearly, even this initial statement engages in a certain level of interpretation—not only does it state that the poem is about basketball, but it also draws the inference that the speaker's life was troubled and that basketball was his means of escape. The next step is examining what makes the poem more complex than this brief summary. How does Komunyakaa convey a sense of exuberance? of joy? of danger? How does he make the situation something we feel rather than just read about?

Let's begin our analysis by thinking a bit about the poem's title. It's all about action, about moves. But a "slam dunk" is just one move, so why is there a comma between "Slam" and "Dunk"? Does this construction anticipate the rhythm in the poem itself? Our next consideration could be the speaker, who is evidently reflecting on a time in his youth when he played basketball with his friends. The speaker describes the "metal hoop" that was "Nailed to [their] oak" and a backboard "splintered" by hard use. We're not in the world of professional sports or even in the school gym. You will probably notice some things about the poem as a whole, such as its short lines, strong verbs, and vivid images. Keep those things in mind as you take a look at the following annotation, where we examine the way specific elements of style and structure add layers of meaning to Komunyakaa's poem. We'll use the three-step annotation process introduced on pages 35–37.

Slam, Dunk, & Hook

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

Begins with matter-of-fact tone — Fast breaks. Lay ups. With Mercury's — Allusion: Greek god
Insignia on our sneakers,
We outmaneuvered the footwork
Oxymoron. Refers to opponents. Symbolic? — Of bad angels. Nothing but a hot
Swish of strings like silk — Strong visual and tactile imagery. Alliteration
Ten feet out. In the roundhouse
Great metaphor! Another allusion — Labyrinth our bodies
Created, we could almost
Last forever, poised in midair
Interesting contrast with fast pace of the poem — Like storybook sea monsters. — Another allusion. All to things that are mythical, and possibly dangerous
A high note hung there
A long second. Off
The rim. We'd corkscrew

Powerful image — Up & dunk balls that exploded — Con
The skullcap of hope & good — 15 — thei
Intention. Bug-eyed, lanky, — and
All hands & feet . . . sprung rhythm. — Goo
We were metaphysical when girls
Cheered on the sidelines.
Tangled up in a falling, — 20
Muscles were a bright motor
Double-flashing to the metal hoop
Nailed to our oak. — Refe
Shift in tone. Not about their power, but power of the game. — When Sonny Boy's mama died — oak
He played nonstop all day, so hard — 25 — bask
Our backboard splintered. — play
Glistening with sweat, we jibed — Returns to vivid tone is reverent,
& rolled the ball off our
Fingertips. Trouble — Perso
Was there slapping a blackjack — 30
Against an open palm.
Dribble, drive to the inside, feint,
& glide like a sparrow hawk.
Inversion of first line — Lay ups. Fast breaks.
We had moves we didn't know — 35
We had. Our bodies spun
On swivels of bone & faith,
Through a lyric slipknot
Of joy, & we knew we were
Key idea. — Beautiful & dangerous. — 40

Exploratory Writing

A "slam dunk" is a type of shot in basketball—a skillful play, and victory in itself, so you say about something you did really well, "It was a s But Komunyakaa separates the two words as if "slam" and "dunk"—and "h separate. Maybe there are connoisseurs of the game who know the differenc a slam and a dunk? But the commas create a sense of jerky movement, abru The title is fragmented, just like the images in the poem—lines break up s some sentences aren't full sentences, lots of strong verbs are used ("outmar "poised," "corkscrew," "exploded," "tangled up," "rolled," "dribble," "glide") the poet has pent-up emotion or maybe he is signifying that the players do motion and movement gets played out in the game, but even the basketball contain it. There's energy but also anger. The speaker (Komunyakaa?) is rem so the images might be fragmented the way memory is often thought to be. with the fragmentation, these guys are beautiful, almost majestic in the wa and spin in the air and take control of the ball.