ENGL 293: American Gilded Ages
How to read for this class

The kind of reading we will emphasize in this class, called “close reading” in literary studies, emphasizes careful, focused attention to language and detail, as well as asking analytic how and why questions about what you’re reading. While close reading is central to the study of literature, it is by no means limited to the English department, or even to written texts. The same process, attention to detail, and analytic questions you apply to a story or poem can be applied to an image, movie, or song. Close reading skills can help you become a more attentive and critical reader of everything from emails to political speeches to Twilight novels, as well as a more analytic thinker and thoughtful critic.

So, what are the steps to becoming a better close reader? You can start by reading like this:

1. **With a pencil in your hand.**
   Making notes as you read is one of the most important things you can do in this class. Reading actively will improve your engagement with the text and will help you remember more of what you read. In addition, marking what you think is important and why will mean a lot less time spent re-reading when you go to write your close readings and study for the exams. Underline important passages, and make a note in the margin about why they’re important. Write questions that occur to you at the top of the page, or record them in a separate notebook. This will give you something to go back to when you’re writing your provocation questions.

2. **Slowly.**
   Give yourself enough time to read each assignment thoroughly. If it’s a short selection, work slowly and methodically through the whole thing, pausing to make sure you understand exactly what’s going on in the text, and to make notes about the details you notice and the questions you want to ask. For longer readings, read through them a bit more quickly (but still carefully enough to know what’s going on), and mark important passages to come back to. Re-read those passages slowly and thoroughly, paying attention to the details you notice and thinking about how they relate to the whole text.

3. **Closely and carefully, for more than just plot.**
   It’s necessary to know what’s going on in each reading—what happens, who the major characters are, what the setting is, etc. But that’s where you want to start, not where you should end up. As you read closely and carefully, pay attention to language, detail, and form. What kind of words does the author use? How are sentences structured—are they long and complicated, or short and to the point? How are characters described? What kind of narrative voice is used—first person, third-person limited, third person-omniscient? Does the narrative focus on one single character or perspective, or does it jump around? Is the narrator reliable? How is the narrative being structured? When does the narrative slow down or speed up?

4. **With a dictionary.**
   Stop to look up words you aren’t familiar with, or even words you’ve seen before but can’t quite remember their meanings. One word can change an entire sentence.

5. **Inquisitively.**
   Always, always, always ask questions (and write those questions down!). The most useful questions to ask as you read are how, why, and so what questions. Once you’ve noticed something significant about the text, ask why the text does what you’ve noticed, how that affects the way we read it, and, most importantly, so what?—why is what you’ve observed significant? Asking these questions will help you make connections between specific textual details and a broader thesis and conclusion about the text.