

Summary & Critique of Primary Text

Context: This assignment is a primer for immersing students in a close reading of primary texts they have selected to write about for their culminating final papers. I have used it with equal success in both face-to-face and online 2000-level literature courses. The goal is to foster student engagement with primary texts to yield original thoughts. This exercise should be assigned before students begin researching and annotating secondary sources.

Assignment: This is a close-reading activity, so no secondary sources should be used.

Summary (1 page): Your summary should not be a plain narration of the story element of the text. The focus is on identifying and recording your observations, and these may include . . .

- unique patterns of form and technique (specific words or expressions that catch your attention).
- contradictions (that occur wittingly or unwittingly).
- recurrent symbols and other forms of repetition (e.g., the repetitive reference to 'freedom' in Douglass's "apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships" in Chapter X of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*).
- striking ordering of formal elements (setting, story, plot, and etc.).

These observations are an important step in getting you fired up for a research paper that dives deep into your selected primary text.

Close Reading Critique (1 page): The critique portion of this assignment is your attempt at interpreting or making sense of what you have observed and beginning to organize your thoughts about your selected text. At the beginning of your one-page critique, you should list major themes, questions, and symbols that your close reading has enabled you to discern in the text. You may choose to focus on one theme and explain briefly how the writer has painted a picture of that theme in the text (e.g., how the text's formal elements reinforce this theme). You may also focus on the questions (one or two) that the text's treatment of this theme has helped answer for you and what questions (two or three) the text has raised but not answered. You should highlight the unanswered question that most appeals to you and indicate how you plan to explain/investigate it more.

Charles Tita is an Associate Professor of English at the University of North Carolina, Pembroke. He teaches several courses in the Department of English, Theater, and World Languages, including composition, British, and African American literature. His research focuses on the scholarship of teaching and learning, transatlantic borders and perspectives and post-colonial experience. He holds a PhD in English from Howard University in Washington, D.C. He has been the recipient of several fellowships and awards, including a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship to study the intersections of African literature and modern experience at the University of Ghana, Legon.