

# Close Reading of Poetry

## Learning Targets

- Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).
- Analyze the representation of a subject or key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment (e.g., Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” and Brueghel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*).
- By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the high end of the grades 9–10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.
- Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on *grades 9–10 reading and content*, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
- Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
- Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one on one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

## Close Reading for Meaning

To read closely means that as readers, we should not just consider what information is conveyed by a text, we must also consider the author’s use of structure, allusion, and other literary techniques to convey tone and theme.

In this workshop, you will read three different texts and will practice close reading using strategies that will help you make meaning of the text. Your teacher will guide you through the first activity. In Activity 2, you will work in a collaborative group to read and respond to the text. For the third activity, you will work independently to apply close reading strategies to determine meaning in a new text.

### ACTIVITY 1

## Guided Practice

You will read the text in this activity at least three times, focusing on a different purpose for each reading.

### Preview the Title

The title of the poem is “Musée des Beaux Arts.” Based on this title, make a prediction about what the poem is about:

**LEARNING STRATEGIES:**  
Diffusing, Close Reading, Graphic Organizer, Marking the Text, Guided Reading, Questioning the Text, Rereading, Shared Reading, Summarizing, Paraphrasing, Think-Pair-Share, Choral Reading, TP-CASTT, OPTIC, Metacognitive Markers

**ACADEMIC VOCABULARY**  
An **allusion** is a reference made to a well-known person, event, or place from history, music, art, or another literary work. **Juxtaposition** refers to the arrangement of two or more things for the purpose of comparison.

### First Reading: First Impressions

Read the following poem silently. Your focus for this first reading is on understanding the meaning of the poem. As you read, practice **diffusing** the words you may not know by replacing unfamiliar words with synonyms or definitions for the underlined words. Use the definitions and synonyms to the right of the poem to help your understanding.

# Musée des Beaux Arts

by W.H. Auden

old Masters: great artists of the past, especially of the 13th–17th centuries in Europe

reverently: with deep respect

martyrdom: being willingly put to death or enduring great suffering for one's religion, cause, or principle

Brueghel's Icarus: a painting by the Flemish Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel (Brueghel) the Elder; the painting depicts a landscape that includes the fall of mythological Icarus, who flew too close to the sun with wings crafted of feathers and wax

forsaken: abandoned or deserted

About **suffering** they were never wrong,

The old Masters: how well they understood

Its human position: how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking **dully** along;

5 How, when the aged are reverently, **passionately** waiting

For the **miraculous** birth, there always must be

Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating

On a pond at the edge of the wood:

They never forgot

10 That even the **dreadful** martyrdom must run its course

Anyhow in a corner, some **untidy** spot

Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse

Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away

15 Quite **leisurely** from the disaster; the **ploughman** may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green

Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen

20 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,

Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

## Second Reading: Vocabulary in Context

Now that you have read the poem silently, listen and follow along as the poem is read aloud. As you read along, mark the text with **metacognitive markers**. Use the following symbols to represent your thoughts:

- ? = parts of the poem about which you have a question
- ! = parts of the poem you find surprising or interesting
- \* = parts about which you have a comment or connection
- = underline key ideas

## Check Your Understanding

1. Pair with another student and share your metacognitive markers. Then choose two or three words from the vocabulary that have been underlined or bolded, and discuss how the definitions help you understand the meaning of the poem.
  
2. Use these vocabulary words in a summary of the central ideas in the poem. Explain how these words contribute to your understanding of the poem.
  
3. With a small group of your peers, plan and rehearse a **choral reading** of the poem by following these steps:
  - Separate the poem into **sense units** by drawing a slash mark after punctuation marks such as semicolons, colons, or periods.
  - Divide up the sense units so that at least one person is speaking each one, and have each person highlight the lines to be spoken aloud.
  - Decide how you will perform the lines to emphasize tone and meaning. For example, you may choose to emphasize lines by having more than one speaker read at the same time, or you may want to vary your loudness, rate of speech, and/or tone of voice.

## Third Reading: Text-Dependent Questioning

Now read the poem again, this time with the focus of reading to respond to the Key Ideas and Details interpretive questions. Write your responses to each question and highlight or underline the textual evidence that supports your answer. During class discussion, you may also want to annotate the text to record a new or different meaning of the poem.

**Background Information:** W.H. Auden (1907–1973) was born in England and became an American citizen in 1946. He wrote the poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” in 1938 after visiting the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique in Brussels, famous for its collection of early Dutch painting. This free verse poem is an example of ekphrasis, a term for literary works inspired by the visual arts.

**Free verse** is poetry without a strict pattern of rhyme and meter.  
**Ekphrasis** is a literary description or commentary on a visual work of art.

## Musée des Beaux Arts

by W.H. Auden

### KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What claim does the speaker make about the painters' view of human suffering?

### KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What allusions does the poet use in lines 5–13? How does he use imagery to juxtapose the “miraculous” and “dreadful” with the mundane details of daily life?

### KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What inferences can you make about Brueghel's painting based on the poet's description? Sketch or describe what you imagine the painting would look like, using textual evidence to support your depiction.

About **suffering** they were never wrong,  
The old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position: how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking **dully** along;

5 How, when the aged are reverently, **passionately** waiting

For the **miraculous** birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood:

They never forgot

10 That even the **dreadful** martyrdom must run its course

Anyhow in a corner, some **untidy** spot

Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away

15 Quite **leisurely** from the disaster; the **ploughman** may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen

20 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,

Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

## Check Your Understanding

Now that you have read closely and worked to understand challenging portions of this poem, choose one line that you think is important to understanding what the poem is about and why the author wrote it. Explain in your own words what the line means and why it is important to understanding the poem.

## Synthesizing Your Understanding

Now that you have read the poem three times and studied its vocabulary and sentences, synthesize your understanding by applying the TP-CASTT strategy.

### Introducing the Strategy: TP-CASTT

TP-CASTT is a strategy for close reading of poetry. This reading strategy is used to guide analysis of a text through exploration of each topic in the acronym: *Title (preview)*, *Paraphrase*, *Connotation*, *Attitude*, *Shift*, *Title (revisited)* and *Theme*.

**T–Title:** Before reading a poem, stop to consider its title. Revisit the predictions you made about the poem before reading “Musée des Beaux Arts.”

**P–Paraphrase:** Divide the poem logically into three or four chunks, and then work with a partner to paraphrase the main idea of each chunk in your own words.

Chunk 1:

Chunk 2:

Chunk 3:

Chunk 4:

**C–Connotation:** What words or phrases suggest something beyond their literal meanings? What do you think the poet is saying in this poem? Go beyond the literal meanings or the plot of the poem.

**A–Attitude:** Describe the speaker’s attitude or tone. Use specific adjectives and explain your choices.

**S–Shifts:** Describe where the poem appears to shift, either in subject, speaker, or tone. Record each line number where a shift occurs, and then explain what kind of shift is occurring.

**T–Title (revisited):** Reexamine the title. What does it mean in the poem’s context? What new meaning or significance can you find in the choice of title?

**T–Theme:** What do you think is the underlying message about life expressed in this poem?

**Writing Prompt:** Based on your current understanding of the poem, explain how W.H. Auden uses allusion and/or juxtaposition to convey theme.

Be sure to

- Identify at least one theme in the poem.
- Provide textual evidence of the poet’s use of allusion and/or juxtaposition.
- Include commentary explaining how the details in the poem convey theme.

### ACTIVITY 2

## Collaborative Practice

The following painting titled “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” was long thought to be a work by Pieter Brueghel (1525–1569), the first in a family of Flemish painters, although recent technical examination indicates that it may be an early copy of Brueghel’s lost original. (Brueghel changed the spelling of his last name to Bruegel in 1559 and is also known as Peasant Brueghel or Brueghel the Elder.)

In Greek mythology, Icarus was the son of Daedalus, an inventor who crafted wings using feathers and wax, so that they could escape the island where they were imprisoned. Daedalus warned his son not to fly too close to the sun, but Icarus ignored his father’s warnings. As the heat of the sun melted the wax, Icarus lost his wings, fell into the sea, and drowned.



### Introducing the Strategy: OPTIC

OPTIC is a strategy for systematically analyzing visual texts—including paintings, photographs, advertisements, maps, charts, or graphs—and developing an interpretation regarding the meaning or theme(s) of the text. The acronym stands for Overview, Parts, Title, Interrelationships, and Conclusion.

### Applying OPTIC

The OPTIC strategy allows you to analyze a visual image in a systematic way in order to understand how all aspects of the artwork combine to create an overall impression.

Work collaboratively to respond to the following prompts that are part of the OPTIC strategy. To do a close reading of a visual image, you should view and review the artwork each time you respond to the questions.

**O**—Conduct a brief overview of the visual by examining it carefully. Note the details: images, shapes, position or angle in the frame, etc.

**P**—Key in on all of the parts by noting any specific details that seem important. This can be anything: captions, text, figures, scenery, or any other detail that may be symbolic.

**T**—Use the *title* and verbal *text* to clarify the subject(s) of the artwork. How does the text enhance or suggest meaning?

**I**—Specify the *interrelationships* within the painting. In other words, how do the parts relate to one another? If relevant, consider any connections established to texts beyond this page.

**C**—Draw a *conclusion* about the theme of the painting. What does it suggest about Brueghel's purpose?

**Writing Prompt:** Now that you have carefully examined this painting and identified many of its features, make a connection between this painting and W.H. Auden's poem. Be sure to

- Write a topic sentence that connects the two texts.
- Include textual details and explain how they support your connection.
- Write a conclusion that follows from your explanations.

A **sonnet** is a fourteen-line lyric poem, usually written in iambic pentameter and following a strict pattern of rhyme.

ACTIVITY 3:

## Independent Practice

**Background:** Anne Sexton (1928–1974) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet who began writing as a way of coping with depression and mental illness. Her work was known as “confessional verse” due to its highly personal subject matter. This poem follows the rhyme scheme (though not the typical meter) of a **sonnet**.

### First Reading: First Impressions

Read the poem silently to yourself. As you read, think about the meanings of the **underlined** words. Look at the definitions in the right margin, and also use your knowledge of the words and context clues to help you make meaning of the text.

# To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph

by Anne Sexton

**labyrinth:** In Greek mythology, the labyrinth was an elaborate mazelike structure built by Daedalus for King Minos of Crete. Imprisoned by the king so that he could not share the labyrinth’s secrets, Daedalus invented wings so that he and his son Icarus could escape.

**starlings:** small to medium-sized birds with a strong, direct flight

**acclaiming:** enthusiastically and publicly praising

- 1 Consider Icarus, pasting those sticky wings on, testing that strange little tug at his shoulder blade, and think of that first **flawless** moment over the lawn of the labyrinth. Think of the difference it made!
- 5 There below are the trees, as awkward as camels; and here are the shocked starlings pumping past and think of innocent Icarus who is doing quite well. Larger than a sail, over the fog and the blast of the **plushy** ocean, he goes. Admire his wings!
- 10 Feel the fire at his neck and see how casually he glances up and is caught, wondrously **tunneling** into that hot eye. Who cares that he fell back to the sea? See him acclaiming the sun and come **plunging** down while his **sensible** daddy goes straight into town.

### Second Reading: Vocabulary in Context

After reading the poem to yourself, listen and follow along as the poem is read aloud.

Mark the text with **metacognitive markers**. Use the following symbols to represent your thoughts:

- ? = parts of the poem you question
- ! = parts of the poem you find surprising or interesting
- \* = parts that inspire a comment or connection
- underline key ideas



## Check Your Understanding

1. Pair with another student to share your metacognitive markers. Using the underlined and bolded vocabulary from the poem, discuss how learning the vocabulary affects your understanding of the entire poem. Choose two or three of the words you have examined that you think are significant to understanding the poem. Use the words in a sentence or two that explains how these words contribute to your understanding.
2. With a small group of your peers, plan and rehearse a **choral reading** of the poem by following these steps:
  - Separate the poem into **sense units** (based on the punctuation marks) or **stanzas** (based on the rhyme scheme.)
  - Divide up the sense units so that at least one person is speaking each one, and have each person highlight the lines to be spoken out loud.
  - Decide how you will perform the lines to emphasize tone and meaning. For example, you may choose to emphasize lines by having more than one speaker read at the same time, or you may want to vary your loudness, rate of speech, and/or tone if voice.

## Third Reading: Text-Dependent Questioning

Now read the poem again, this time with the focus of reading to respond to the Key Ideas and Details interpretive questions. Write your responses to each question and highlight or underline the textual evidence that supports your answer.

*To A Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph*

by Anne Sexton

- 1 Consider Icarus, pasting those sticky wings on, testing that strange little tug at his shoulder blade, and think of that first **flawless** moment over the lawn of the labyrinth. Think of the difference it made!
- 5 There below are the trees, as awkward as camels; and here are the shocked starlings pumping past and think of innocent Icarus who is doing quite well. Larger than a sail, over the fog and the blast of the **plushy** ocean, he goes. Admire his wings!
- 10 Feel the fire at his neck and see how casually he glances up and is caught, wondrously **tunneling** into that hot eye. Who cares that he fell back to the sea? See him acclaiming the sun and come **plunging** down while his **sensible** daddy goes straight into town.

### KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Why does the speaker use the imperative mood (to make commands) in the opening of the poem? Who is she speaking to, and what is her tone?

### KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What images does the poet use to juxtapose against Icarus as he is depicted in flight? What is the effect of this juxtaposition?

### KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What does the rhetorical question in line 12 mean? How is it answered in the final couplet of the poem?

### Check Your Understanding

**Questioning the Text:** Using the text-based questions as a model, ask questions about the poem. Begin your questions with *why* or *how*. Remember that you may not know the answer to the question, but you think the answer might be important to understanding the meaning of the passage.

### Synthesizing Your Understanding

Now that you have read the poem three times and studied its vocabulary and sentences, synthesize your understanding by applying the TP-CASTT strategy.

**T–Title:** Before reading a poem, consider its title. Revisit the predictions you made about the poem before reading “To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph.”

**P–Paraphrase:** Number the three quatrains and final couplet of the poem, and then work with a partner to paraphrase the main idea of each stanza in your own words.

Quatrain 1:

Quatrain 2:

Quatrain 3:

Couplet:

**C–Connotation:** What words or phrases suggest something beyond their literal meanings? What do you think the poet is saying in this poem? Go beyond the literal meanings or the plot of the poem.

**A–Attitude:** Describe the speaker’s attitude or tone. Use specific adjectives and explain your choices.

**S–Shift:** Describe where the poem appears to shift, either in subject, speaker, or tone. Record each line number at which you believe a shift occurs, and explain what kind of shift is occurring.

**T–Title (revisited):** Re-examine the title. What does it mean now in the context of the poem? What new meaning or significance can you find in the choice of title?

**T–Theme:** What do you think is the underlying message about life expressed in this poem?

**Writing Prompt:** Using textual evidence to support your thinking, summarize how Sexton uses allusion, juxtaposition, and other techniques to convey a tone or theme. Be sure to

- Write a topic sentence that identifies the poem’s tones.
- Choose several pieces of appropriate textual evidence.
- Explain how your textual evidence conveys tone.

### ACTIVITY 4

## Synthesis Questions

Your teacher may choose or ask you to choose one of the following assessments as a way of showing your understanding of the texts you have read.

**Writing Prompt:** Review the different ways that allusions to a Greek myth were used to convey theme in this workshop. Revisit the work you have done with these three texts, and consider how the two poets and the artist used significant details and other literary and visual techniques to present their interpretations of the life lessons communicated by Icarus’s story. Examine other Greek myths and explore the lessons embedded within the myths, and then compose an original poem that contains an allusion to at least one figure or event from Greek mythology.

**Debate/Discussion:** One of the themes traditionally associated with the myth of Daedalus and Icarus is that one must find balance between contentment and ambition. Daedalus warns his son not to fly too high because the sun will melt his wings, but also not to fly too low (over the ocean) because his wings will get wet and fail. Consider the following quotes about contentment and ambition:

“He is rich who is content with the least, for content is the wealth of nature.”

–Socrates

“With great risk comes great reward.”–Thomas Jefferson

With a partner or small group, prepare for a debate or a class discussion to challenge, defend or qualify the wisdom of the advice Daedalus gave Icarus. Use examples from literature, history, or personal experience to explain whether you think people should seek contentment, ambition, or balance.

**Multimedia Presentation:** The poem you examined in the first activity of this workshop was an example of **ekphrasis**, a written text that commented on a work of visual art. Your exploration of the visual text in the second activity likely enhanced your understanding of the poem. Conduct independent research to locate another example of ekphrasis in which a poet reflected on a work of visual art. Prepare to present the original text along with the artwork to your peers, explaining how the two works are connected. Consider using a presentation tool in order to share your findings with the class.

## Reflection

Think about what you have learned from your close reading and analysis of the text passages you have read in this workshop.

1. How can writers and other kinds of artists use allusions and juxtaposition to convey tone and theme?
2. In this workshop, you have learned how to make meaning of three different texts. How can you use what you have learned to help you as you encounter challenging texts in the future? What strategies best helped you as a learner during this workshop? When and why would you use these strategies in the future?