ESSENTIALS

This section features essential exercises that work well with almost any literary work. Of easy or moderate difficulty, they can serve as key building blocks for training students to look carefully at the meaning of words and passages, lines and titles, or definitions and themes. Because the exercises work with more than one genre, they can also be used and reused across courses, whether your focus is on literary formalism, literary periods, or literary history. Arranged in order from the small to the large, and the specific to the general, these are classic exercises that everyone should try.

“The Blow Up” and “The Cut Up” each teach the essentials of close reading, but from two different directions: the first works through deduction (taking a text apart), while the second operates through induction (putting a text back together). In both cases, students learn to produce a coherent and cohesive literary interpretation.

The next pair of exercises, “The One-Liner” and “The New Title,” shows students how to multiply a text’s meaning and how to widen the interpretive frame. These exercises emphasize both the way literary texts contain many meanings and the way readers actively participate in the construction of those meanings.

The final set of exercises, “The Descriptive Word” and “The Common Thread,” continue to move from a close-up view to a long view. Ideal for the start or end of a course, such overview exercises are perfect for taking stock, particularly of big-picture subjects like genre or period. Whether these six essential exercises aim to teach patient close reading or to demonstrate careful consideration of larger themes, they all show students the importance of slowing down.