

The Blow Up

Wendy Lee

A classic exercise in the closeness of close reading.

Genre: *any, especially fiction*

Course Level: *any*

Student Difficulty: *easy*

Teacher Preparation: *low*

Class Size: *any*

Semester Time: *any*

Writing Component: *none*

Close Reading: *high*

Estimated Time: *25 to 35 minutes*

EXERCISE

Choose a passage of no more than two hundred words from the text that your class is reading. It may help to choose a particularly idiosyncratic passage that can stand apart from the rest of the book, like a dream sequence in *Jane Eyre* or a single conversation in *Pride and Prejudice* that reads more like a film script than a novel. Format the passage on a handout so that it looks like a page from a children's book: 14-point font and at least half-inch margins all around the text. Feel free to experiment with the way the passage looks on the page. (Get creative with that Microsoft Word toolbox!)

After distributing the handout, instruct your students to take advantage of all the white space to mark up the passage with any observations or associations that come to them during the exercise. Then call on a student to read the passage aloud. Direct the student to read "very slowly and very loudly." Immediately after she or he is finished, call on a second student (preferably with a very different voice) to read the same passage, also very slowly and loudly. After the second reading, give students a few minutes to respond by marking up their passages. (You might show them a sample of a heavily marked-up handout that looks like graffiti so that they are not afraid of the page.)

When students have finished circling words and jotting down comments on the page, go in a circle around the room and invite each student to make a comment about something they noticed (an interesting word, a curious turn of phrase, a notable repetition, an arresting metaphor). If the class is large or time is short, you can instead move straight to framing the discussion according to your needs. For students who need practice close reading, you

might begin with purely formal observations: Who is speaking? To whom? How do you know? Do any words repeat? What kinds of sentences are being used? When you are ready to conclude the exercise, have students find the passage in their books. Does resituating the text yield any surprises?

REFLECTIONS

The point of this exercise is to get students to see and hear the text in a new and focused way. It allows students first to forget what they know about the book and then revisit it from the angle of a carefully examined and *spoken* snippet of text. Changing the actual form of the passage—by enlarging the letters and creating ample white space around them—can transform an otherwise recondite text into an accessible and inviting piece of language.

The exercise works equally well to reframe an all-too-familiar passage. For example, students who devotedly recite the first line of *Pride and Prejudice* by heart (“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife”) are often surprised and discomfited to see the succeeding sentence blown up so starkly on the page: “However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.” In contending with these grammatically complex sentences, some students were drawn to the abstract nouns (“truth,” “minds,” “property”) while others circled the weighty adjectives attached to them. They noted that “universal truth,” “fixed minds,” and even notions of “rightful property” all become the moving targets of the narrator’s unsparing but still ambiguous irony. The “Blow Up” format allowed my students to confront directly the nuances of Austen’s style—which they variously and precisely described as “powerful,” “enigmatic,” and “potentially hostile”—while also providing them with the literal, material space to draw out, write around, or even deface Austen’s own destabilizing prose.

Part of the enchantment of this exercise derives from rendering a written text into an oral experience. Through the two oral readings, you can extend to your (especially quiet) students a low-stakes, seemingly straightforward opportunity to participate and have their voices heard in class. What surprises me is how the shyest students, who shudder to offer a “literary critical” comment, can read aloud with the most uninhibited flair. “Blow Up” enables lively impromptu performances, in which students must unwittingly make important interpretive decisions about pacing, pauses, cadence, and volume, sparking a discussion about elements such as character and scene. (The direction to read loudly and slowly creates a baseline of elocution, making performers’ decisions even more pronounced.) Students are listening to

and learning from each other, inevitably provoking such observations as “I hadn’t realized how funny that part was!”

“The Blow Up” emphasizes the closeness of close reading, but it also grounds and enlivens more general discussions in the text—removing parts from the whole and putting the whole back into conversation with its parts. After having extracted, magnified, transformed, performed, and resituated individual sentences, students will feel more authoritative when the conversation widens to larger themes and ideas. They will also not be afraid to take apart the text, to zoom in and out of any page, drawing in or blocking out what they already know for the sake of testing new claims or ideas. Students will not only feel comfortable referring to specific passages, but they will find it easier to refer to one another’s readings as evidence and counterevidence. Most importantly, they will enjoy the opportunity to converse freely with each other (instead of answering the instructor’s questions), tracking their own interpretative moves and choices in a collective and creative encounter.

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The Cut Up

Diana Fuss

A warm-up close-reading exercise that invites students to repair rather than dissect texts.

Genre: *poetry or prose*

Course Level: *introductory or intermediate*

Student Difficulty: *moderate*

Teacher Preparation: *medium*

Class Size: *any*

Semester Time: *early*

Writing Component: *none*

Close Reading: *high*

Estimated Time: *30 to 50 minutes*

EXERCISE

Choose a short poem or a short prose passage—nearly any poem or passage will suffice. For this simple exercise, which invites students to take up pieces of a text and put it back together again, the text you select will depend largely on the level of challenge you want to present. In fiction classes, students will