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.

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
have a much easier time with contemporary examples written in a familiar language or style than with the elongated sentences and complicated syntax of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stories. In poetry courses the exact opposite holds: early poems (ballads, sonnets, odes) that have a fixed meter and rhyme prove easier test cases for students than do free verse poems that have fewer auditory or visual signposts. In either case, no more than eight to ten sentences or verse lines work best.

Reproduce your poem or prose passage on a handout and keep this in reserve. Then digitally cut the text into parts: for poems, make the cuts after every line break; for prose, make the cuts after every sentence. Place each individual line or sentence on a separate page and be sure to increase the font size (to 20, 30, or whatever size font your single page will bear). Before printing out each isolated enlarged line or sentence, format the page on its horizontal (landscape) side for more room. (You can use smaller slips of paper instead, though students working and standing in groups find the larger sheets easier to see.) Shuffle all the sheets so the lines are in random order.

In class, separate students into groups of three or four and give each group a full set of the cut-up passages. You might disclose in advance the author’s name, but if you are using a poem, do not identify which of the lines is the poem’s title. You can give every group the same text or different texts, depending on your needs.

Now ask each group to reconstruct the text. Tell them that, without the aid of electronic devices, their mission is to place the cut-up lines in their proper order. Invite groups to move around the room and use any surface: table, wall, floor, blackboard. Tables work best, providing a flat surface and ample room for students to stand and shuffle the sheets as they debate different sequencings. Taping the sheets to the wall (you will need to provide painter’s tape) or writing on blackboards and whiteboards works almost as well. Allow fifteen to twenty minutes for students to experiment with different line placements and arrive at a possible order.

Let groups strategize on their own, discussing among themselves the best way to put the mystery text back together. Part of the point of the exercise is to alert students to some of the more subtle formal features that convey style and carry meaning, so resist the impulse to give them clues. As they grapple with what might go where, you will see them suddenly start to look carefully at punctuation marks, listen for aural resonances, or check for verb tenses. Sit back and watch, taking notes for your own purposes on the things that seem to puzzle them most.

When the students are reasonably confident of their final order, mark off for them exactly which of their lines are in the right places. Give them a couple more minutes to try to reorder the text one more time with this new information in hand. For groups that have put all or nearly all of the lines in the wrong place, offer them the first and the last line of the poem or passage.
For groups that have succeeded in reconstructing all or nearly all of the text, move directly to the final phase.

Hand out the original text and let each group discover exactly how close or how far they came to getting everything where it belongs. Reconvene the whole class and begin a conversation. If a particular group did well, ask them how they did it—what did they look for and what clues did they follow? If they were off base, ask them what obstacles they encountered or misdirections they followed, and why. Reassure students that “getting it wrong” can be as instructive for this exercise as “getting it right.” They will know, either way, what formal features to look for next time.

As students reflect afterward on their experience suturing (Frankenstein-style) small pieces into functional wholes, keep a record on the board of every formal feature they mention: language, tone, punctuation, and so on. This listing activity is especially crucial. It allows you to bring the exercise to a satisfying close by doing a group close reading that uses the terms on the board as a checklist of sorts, thus guiding the class to a more sophisticated understanding of how literature works.

**REFLECTIONS**

Most close reading exercises deploy a method that students often label “dissection”: taking a whole poem or passage and breaking it into parts. “The Cut Up” inverts this method by deploying a strategy not of dissection but of repair: beginning with the parts and putting the whole back together. This shift in emphasis productively subverts expectations while offering an alternative approach to understanding literary formalism. It works especially well early in the semester as a warm-up exercise.

For example, in a poetry survey, I like to begin the course by using cut-ups of Emily Dickinson poems, which provide a particular challenge because of her twisty syntax and unconventional punctuation (the Dickinson dash). Recently I handed out cut-ups of two poems, “Pain—has an Element of Blank” and “I’ve seen a Dying Eye,” each lyric containing eight lines (two quatrains) and little or no end rhyme. Student groups had no trouble sequencing the first two lines of these poems correctly, but they had a much more difficult time with the last lines—interestingly, not unlike Dickinson herself, whose manuscripts include more textual variants at the ends of poems than at their beginnings.

Deprived of rhyme as an obvious guide, students tried other strategies to identify underlying patterns. They focused on internal sounds (listening for both alliteration and assonance). They measured line lengths (fixing on a long/short pattern I later explained was ballad form). They talked about tone (asking if certain sequencings produced a more solemn effect). They counted beats (wondering if particular rhythms might regulate the flow).
And they looked for narrative elements (searching for a buried story that organized the whole). Later, when I asked them which tactic they tried first to make sense of the jumbled lines, all the groups agreed that, without even thinking about it consciously, they turned to basic grammar as their point of entry, initially attempting to sequence lines by subject-verb-object or another syntactical pattern.

The exercise proved to be an exceedingly quick way to introduce students to several key features that distinguish Dickinson’s poetry: the problem of reference (those confusing “it”s), the challenge of mechanics (those seemingly random capitalizations), and the puzzle of parataxis (those repeated line openings “and then... and then”). It also proved to be an even more useful exercise for introducing students to the general properties of almost any poem. By the end students had generated a rather full checklist of formal features, which they listed in this order: grammar, referent, rhyme, syntax, sound, content, rhythm, meter, punctuation, tense, parallelism, story, imagery, form, tone, closure, diction, speaker, personification, and theme.

To drive the lesson home, I have also immediately repeated the exercise, this time cutting up the poem by stanzas rather than by individual lines, and putting a strict ten-minute time limit on the activity. Dickinson’s “Grief is a Mouse” is a great candidate for a stanza cut-up because each of the poem’s four stanzas begins with a different definition of grief: grief is a “Mouse,” a “Thief,” a “Juggler,” and “Tongueless” (and a “Gourmand” too, one learns later in stanza three). With much less time, students zeroed in on figuration and personification to try to determine an internal logic that would make sense of these implied similes. No group got the stanza sequence exactly right, so after the big reveal I invited them to look harder at what the different personifications of Grief had in common and what precisely Dickinson might be saying about the lived experience of grief. The students concluded that mouse, thief, juggler, and gourmand are all active but silent figures; as one student phrased the poem’s point, “Grief may render us speechless or tongueless but it is always industrious.” Another student noticed a completely different set of figures organizing the four stanzas: Breast, Ear, Eye, and Tongue. She wondered if the cut-up stanzas, with their cut-up body parts, offered another perspective on grief’s deep physical and emotional toll: “Grief mutilates and transforms bodies and language.”

Inductive in method, “The Cut Up” offers a nice departure from the more common deductive approach to analyzing texts. It challenges students to get inside a writer’s mind-set and reminds them of the infinite choices—in word and design—that any writer must negotiate. For me this approach to teaching close reading has felt liberating, perhaps because it carries a more creative and consequential feel overall: it combines the sportive play of solving a puzzle with the serious task of creating something meaningful.