

## Close Reading Presentations

In your groups, you will prepare a series of presentations explaining a set passage from the primary texts. Your group will present multiple times over the semester.

You will be given a short passage from a primary text. Your group's job is to *convince* your classmates that *your* interpretation of this passage is correct. Think of this like a courtroom: you're not just telling the jury what happened: you need to prove it with evidence.

**The #1 Rule:** Never just tell us “this passage means X.” Instead, *show us why* we should believe your interpretation. Every claim needs evidence.

These presentations should offer a close, careful, and sustained explanation of the set passage, as well as a defense of that interpretation. Any presentation that does nothing more than offer an interpretation of the passage, with no defense of that interpretation, is not engaging in the core activity of this assignment.

### How to Build Your Case

One recommended way to approach these presentations is to develop a range of *plausible* interpretations of the passage, then show why your interpretation is the most accurate, by virtue of its greater internal coherence and its consistency with other background knowledge of that school of thought. For instance, you might point out that another plausible interpretation cannot account for why particular words have been chosen, or why the author has said something in particular elsewhere in the passage or the text. Or, you might note that an alternative interpretation does not accord with other philosophical commitments that author is known to hold.

You should present the argument for your interpretation as if you are addressing it to someone who holds a competing interpretation, and who is extremely skeptical about everything you say. They will not take your word for anything and will expect every claim you make to be supported by evidence and argument.

Doing the above will require you to carefully deconstruct the passage and consider *how* its meaning has been fashioned by the author. As such, you will need to break the passage down into individual words and sentences and take the passage piece by piece. Instead of jumping straight to the “meaning” of the passage as a whole, put your immediate interpretation aside and consider what meaning comes from reading the passage slowly and carefully, taking each word and sentence in turn. In other words, your interpretation of the text as a whole should come at the *end* of the process, only *after* you have broken the passage down into its component parts: it should not come first and should not frame your analysis of the components of the text.

### Structure Your Presentation Like This

- “You might think this passage means X, but look at [specific evidence]...”
- “This word choice is significant because...”

- “If the author meant [alternative interpretation], they would have said...”
- “This interpretation makes more sense because it connects to [other ideas in the text]...”

## **Tools for Building Your Case**

### **1. Working with Language**

When you spot an important term, ask:

- Why this specific word?
- What other words could the author have used instead?
- If the author uses different terms for seemingly similar ideas, why the variation?
- Are any technical terms being used? How are they being used in this context, and what reason do you have to think (based on other aspects of the passage or your knowledge of the wider context) that your interpretation of that term is the right one?
- Why did the author choose the particular terms she did, rather than closely related but different terms?

*Example approaches:*

- “The author uses ‘teach’ instead of ‘tell’ here. This is important because teaching involves more than just passing on information...”
- “At the start of the passage they use ‘good person,’ but later switch to ‘worthy person’. This suggests they’re making a point about different kinds of goodness...”

### **2. Building Context**

Connect to:

- Other parts of the same text.
- What we know about this school of thought.
- Historical or philosophical context.
- The purpose of the passage. What is the author trying to accomplish with it? Why has she written this passage in the first place?
- Who the passage is addressed to. Is it responding to any specific arguments or positions?

*Example approach:*

- “This part about family matches what we read earlier in the text about respect. The author is building on those same ideas...”

### **3. Strengthening Your Argument**

Compare competing interpretations:

- Present a plausible alternative reading.

- Show why it falls short.
- Point to specific evidence that favors your interpretation.

*Example approaches:*

- “You might think this is just saying ‘be kind to others,’ but look at how the passage emphasizes practice and habits, not just feelings...”
- “Some might read this as criticism, but notice how the author follows up with positive examples. They’re trying to improve things, not tear them down...”

## **5. Making Connections**

Show how your interpretation:

- Makes sense of the whole passage.
- Explains why certain examples or arguments appear.
- Connects to broader themes we’ve discussed.

*Example approaches:*

- “Our reading explains both why the passage starts with small actions and ends with big results. It’s showing how little things build up...”
- “When we connect this to what we learned about harmony, we can see why the author cares about both individual actions and their effects on others...”

## **Common Mistakes to Avoid**

- “This passage means X.” (Where’s your evidence?)
- “The author is saying...” (Prove it!)
- Simply summarizing without arguing (Remember: convince us!)
- Reading the full quote at the beginning of the presentation. Reading the quote in full adds nothing to the listener’s understanding. It’s a transparent way of using up time. Instead, read the parts of the quote when and as they become relevant.
- Failing to move between big picture and fine details. The fine details on their own are pointless without situating them in the context of the bigger picture meaning of the passage. At the same time, simply stating a bigger picture meaning without reference to the fine details that constitute that meaning tells the listener nothing of interest.
- Ignoring surrounding context. You should always read the sections of the original text that surround the quote. The meaning of a passage is affected by the context in which it exists.
- Giving equal attention to everything. Often a deep reading on a particular sentence, phrase, or even word can be more powerful than a relatively superficial discussion of the entirety of the passage.

A note on non-English sources: where the primary text is in another language, be aware that non-English terms are often transliterated differently across translations (e.g., “humaneness” in

Chinese philosophy is sometimes transliterated as “*jen*” and sometimes as “*ren*”). This is something you must be attentive to when reading from different sources.

Think of your audience as skeptical: they disagree with your interpretation and need to be convinced. Every claim you make should be followed by “...and here’s why we should think this.”

Your success in this assignment will depend primarily on how well you *argue* for your interpretation, not on the interpretation itself.