

Close Reading Strategies for Essay Exams

General Prewriting Tips

--read the question thoroughly!

--make sure you understand all parts of the question.

--you should spend time pre-writing. This may mean making an outline, jotting bullet notes, or just gathering quotes. This is a time for you to gather your thoughts and evidence so that you have some idea of what you want to say when you start writing.

--write out your **THESIS** statement. **Your thesis consists of** one or two sentence that state your argument in such a way that I understand your position, why it's important and relative, and generally how you are going to go about elaborating /proving that argument. Your essay **MUST HAVE A THESIS**.

Writing Strategies

--the question I will ask you can be answered by using one of two main strategies

1. **Archeological Dig -- the careful dissecting of one particular passage**
2. **Following the trail—highlighting a pattern or recurring element**

Method 1:::

In the first method, the archeological dig or careful dissection of one particular passage, you will pick a passage. A passage should be a minimum of two paragraphs to a maximum of two pages long. [Note: some paragraphs are very long, so one very long paragraph could easily count as a passage. If you are concerned, you can just ask me. The point is that a passage is a segment of the text that usually has its own narrative moment. It is thus bigger than a sentence or a phrase.] You will develop your entire argument around how this passage is working. In this method you will think about the multiple ways Wright communicates a message or a feeling or suggests an idea in this passage. In this method you will identify various literary strategies and talk about what comes out of how Wright assembles them together. Like maybe you point out that in this passage he uses only short sentences, and that he uses words that remind you of fire. Using a particular word choice is called diction. I am not though concerned that you know the name of the device as much as that you take the time to explain how Wright is writing the passage in such a way that makes an overall effect.

Method 2:::

The second option involves gathering evidence as you go along. With this method you are trying to look closely at the text to see what kind of themes, patterns, ideas are growing in the text. Instead of picking one longer quote, here you will be looking for repeated instances. You will need to find 3-5 instances to convince your reader that you have noticed a pattern in the text. **For each of these instances:** *You should tell your reader what the most important thing is about this quote, meaning what about it helps the overall argument you are making. *Explain your quote or paraphrase it by briefly reminding me where it is in the story. *Either provide the direct quote in quotation marks and include the page number or paraphrase the event in your own words in a clear manner. *Explain how this quote or paraphrase relates to your argument and point out any particularly interesting thing about the quote that you think helps contribute to your argument.

CONTEXT ::: For both methods, it will be key for you in your introduction or conclusion to situate [contextualize] your remarks about this one pattern or one passage in terms of what you see as Wright's overall tone and purpose. That is, if you think a particular passage is showing affection and quiet intimacy then you would need to contextualize that by pointing out that this passage exists, but it exists as a moment within Wright's larger tone of cynicism and chronic isolation that explicitly doubts sentimentalism and displays of affection. OR if you notice a pattern of Wright's anxious recourse (relying) on details that have to do with seeing and looking (ie. the book in the first scene is a picture book that he seems to know is sacred even though he doesn't care to look, he becomes a drunkard because of his attempts to try to see into a world, his fear of the ghost and generally of these un-seeable things, the explicit reference to how if he had seen the atrocities of a lynching it might have helped him deal with it but having it just been an unseen terror immobilized him, he ends up working twice for optics (eyeglasses and lens) companies around objects that to see and being seen, you might contextualize it) as being representative of Wright's overall tone of wanting to illuminate the motives and rational meaning underneath the events of his life, his desire to see the real while knowing that the negro like a child is supposed to not see or understand what's going on around them (think how he was not supposed to look at the family cursing at the table).

METHOD ONE: You might decide to look at the first two pages, in which Wright describes how he came to as a four year old set fire to his grandparent's home. **[Possible Thesis]: This scene sets up a frequently repeated tension between Wright's curiosity and the dangers of asking questions by only using visual images when Wright is describing his thought processes.** Wright's growing ideas and yearning to know how the world works takes him out of the physical reality of his present moment until it's too late and the whole house is on fire. I might point out how in describing this scene, Wright starts with a nod to sight, sound, and feeling, but as his curiosity about the fire grows he describes all his moves in terms of sight and thoughts. I would then need to explain how making this choice, Wright shows how when he is fascinated and thinking about something it also makes him distant. Even though he is close to the fire, he sees it more than feels it. Unlike touching something, we can see something from very far the same way we can think about something that is distant from us. It is as if the reality of the fire's heat and smell and crackling sound are far away until the moment when he touches the forbidden to touch curtains and it is too late. Then all of the sudden the scene becomes tangible and dangerous. To aid this point I might also point out how Wright includes a couple of very short rhetorical questions in telling this scene. I would explain that these questions are almost not needed for their content, but that what they do is mirror his anxious and excited thought process and suggest that there was only one right answer, one possible way for the events to unfold. I would explain how this prodding questions with their inevitable answers add to the sense that Wright's curiosity and his yearning were like something set in motion that couldn't be stopped, but like the flame had to keep going. I could point to maybe one other strategy that aids to this sense of Wright being caught in a growing desire for knowledge and hands on experience with the world that is perhaps understandable but ultimately dangerous to him and the people around him.

METHOD TWO: **[Possible Thesis]: Despite all the resistance to books and reading Wright illustrates in his family and communities, his story also suggests that black people in a racist America are always reading and writing themselves as characters for white people to read.** For evidence I would point to his meditation on how the white woman who asks him if he can steal must be reading him like all black people as a child. Then I might point out the man at the optics company who puts on such a show that he actually invites the white people to kick him for a quarter. Then I might point out his frustration with the white man from the north who seems to be able to read his hunger despite his best attempts to play the part of a happy negro, and finally I might conclude with the necessity of giving white people what they want to read by talking about Wright's fear that once he starts reading the white people will see it in him, that they will be able to read the result of his reading.