Close reading is an extremely important skill for writers in all disciplines. For most assignments, writing is based in close analysis of some sort of reading, whether it’s an English class in which you’ll be analyzing characters, metaphors, narrative voice, etc, in novels, poems, etc.; a sociology class in which you’ll be relying on good research reading to make your own arguments; or any other of a number of classes. You need to be able to read closely and critically—to clearly understand the nuances of the readings and to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses—before writing about most texts.

We offer two kinds of close reading workshops, and tutors should be in touch with faculty members to see which kind they’d like. Some might like both.

The first is evaluative and is ideally conducted on a day students have a difficult reading due. It asks students to reconsider the reading they’ve done in more detail (Handout: Close Reading: Evaluating an Article as a Whole). Faculty should see this handout ahead of time and feel free to revise it with questions specific to the reading they’re teaching.

The second has a narrow focus: it provides a single passage (about one paragraph). Students really try to get as deeply into that paragraph as they can, noting the specific moves being made by the author and talking about the more difficult or confusing phrases or sentences. Faculty should be given a choice of providing a paragraph (maybe of a reading they’ll assign at the end of the class) or of using a paragraph we provide. The paragraph on the handout (Close Reading: Looking Closely at “The Feminist Critique”) has been used in a Women’s Studies/History class as something related to the class but not actually assigned in it. If a prof asks for a related text, find out which readings are being used that week and do a little research in finding something related. Then put the related text in our folder in case it’s useful to another tutor in the future.

For the Evaluating an Article as a Whole workshop, tutors should do the following:

1. Introduce yourself and the Academic Center. Tell students that we can help with reading as well as writing. We’re also happy to run small groups if a bunch of students are struggling with the same reading.

2. Ask: What are the biggest challenges you face when doing your reading for this or other classes? Write these on the board. You’ll probably get: not enough time, get distracted/sleepy/bored, don’t understand the point, don’t understand the vocabulary, read it but then forget the key points, don’t see how it relates to other readings.

3. Ask: What strategies do you have to combat these problems? Beside each point, note the strategies. Add your own if people have no ideas.

4. Say: Today we’re going to do a little exercise with the reading you had for today. For starters, has everyone read it? If people say “no,” tell them to focus on the intro and conclusion in doing the exercise. Stress that they really need to read the whole thing carefully before writing anything about it.

5. Provide the handout and go over it, making sure people are familiar with all the terms. Then give students 10-20 minutes to fill it in. Depending how much time you have, you can either put
6. students in groups to compare (takes longer) or discuss as a group. Here you’ll want to turn over to the prof, since he/she will know the details of the reading.

7. Thank them for their attention (unless that would seem really ironic) and tell them you hope to see them in the Academic Center at some point.

For the Looking Closely at a Specific Article workshop, tutors will do the following:

1. Introduce yourself and the Academic Center. Tell students that we can help with reading as well as writing. We’re also happy to run small groups if a bunch of students are struggling with the same reading.

2. Say something like: Our focus today will be on processing difficult reading, since you’ve got some coming up in this class. What strategies do you use when you face a really hard article? Write these on the board. By the end, you’ll probably have (and you might be adding some of these): figure out the thesis/main point; spend lots of time on the most important parts (probably intro and conclusion), even if it means skimming the middle; read with a pen and write down all the questions or ideas you have while reading; make note of all the unfamiliar vocabulary words and look up those that seem most important; write a one-sentence summary of each paragraph; compare notes with a classmate to make sure you’ve got it; make a list of questions to bring to class.

3. Provide the handout. Give students about 10 minutes with the reading. Tell them to use the entire 10 minutes. If they feel they’ve answered the questions in 5 minutes, tell them to use the rest of the time to really delve in and make as many notes as they can in the margins about ideas sparked by the reading, more questions, whatever.

4. Put students into groups for 10 minutes to compare answers and choose 3 specific phrases or passages they think are crucial in understanding the paragraph.

5. Go around asking each group to talk about one specific phrase.

6. Time permitting, ask students in what ways the discussion (in small groups and/or as a class) helped them see the reading more clearly.

7. Thank them for their attention (unless that would seem really ironic) and tell them you hope to see them in the Academic Center at some point.