



**The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning  
Brown University**

Box 1912; 863-1219; [Sheridan\\_Center@brown.edu](mailto:Sheridan_Center@brown.edu)  
[http://www.brown.edu/sheridan\\_center](http://www.brown.edu/sheridan_center)

**Methodology for Close Reading/Analysis of Primary Sources:  
Text, Objects or Architecture**

Rebecca S. More, Ph.D.  
Department of History, Sheridan Center

The "close-reading" methodology below is designed to help students of history to develop systematic analytical skills based on careful observation and recording of data. In the case of primary historical source materials, these skills may be applied to "reading" texts (manuscripts, printed documents, rare books, colophons. etc.) images, objects and artifacts, architectural structures, the landscape, or even food, music and fragrance. *Primary* or *secondary* source material data includes *all* visible elements: physical shape, configuration and condition as well as subject content and source context. This approach may be used in the research and writing of analytical essays and oral presentations. It may also be easily adapted to other disciplinary needs and/or course goals.

Learning (substantive retention of information and the ability to subject it to ongoing analysis and application in new contexts) is based on how a student:

1. Observes and records data;
2. Analyzes, organizes and stores the data in the memory (processes);
3. Rehearses the stored data in the memory;
4. Applies the processed data over time.

The following three (3)-part methodology provides a framework for the applying the close reading process to "reading" the widest variety of historical source materials:

- 1) **Description:** begin with a meticulous *description* of the source material based on your observations:
  - *Describe* everything you observe in careful detail. Often seemingly insignificant observations become the basis for an original, innovative, analysis. Include the structure and style.
  - *Identify* the type of source material: primary, secondary, text, artifact, etc.
- 2) **Context:** Identify and explain the original context for the source material (historical, literary, artistic, etc).
- 3) **Meaning:** Based on the data observed and the context identified, analyze and interpret the meaning and significance of the source material.

Ed. Note: You may wish to adapt the following "Close Reading Observation Sheet" for students to use during field trips to view objects and/or buildings, or to use with texts. [Click here\\*](#) to download an rtf document (which can be opened in Word, or most other word processing applications). You can alter to suit your specific course goals and objectives.



**The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning  
Brown University**

Box 1912; 863-1219; [Sheridan\\_Center@brown.edu](mailto:Sheridan_Center@brown.edu)

[http://www.brown.edu/sheridan\\_center](http://www.brown.edu/sheridan_center)

**Field trip: Visual Images, Architecture, Artifacts, Music, etc.**

***Methodology for "Close Reading/Looking"***

1. **Description:** begin with a meticulous *description* of the source material based on your observations:
  - *Describe* everything you observe in careful detail. Often seemingly insignificant observations become the basis for an original, innovative, analysis. Include the structure and style.
  - *Identify* the type of source material: primary, secondary, text, artifact, etc.
2. **Context:** Identify and explain the original context for the source material (historical, literary, artistic, etc).
3. **Meaning:** Based on the data observed and the context identified, analyze and interpret the meaning and significance of the source material.

***Observation/Objective Description Exercise***

***Pick only one object/painting/building/ etc. to describe***

**1. Description:**

**2. Context:**

**3. Meaning:**