



## How to Do a Close Read

By Siri Carpenter  
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Part of sharpening one's craft as a reporter and writer involves understanding what makes notable nonfiction stories tick. One way to do that is to closely read stories that you've admired (or for that matter, stories that have irked you) or that have racked up [awards](#), been included in [anthologies](#), or otherwise gotten attention (including being highlighted in *The Open Notebook's* [writer interviews](#) or [Storygram annotations](#)). But reading a nonfiction story from a journalistic perspective is about more than just comprehending the subject matter and noting whether you liked or didn't like the story. Examining stories more closely, for the purpose of studying the craft, usually requires reading them several times with some purposeful questions in mind, then giving yourself the gift of time to think about how you might incorporate some of your observations into your own work.

Below are some of the kinds of questions you can ask about a feature story to deepen your perceptions of it and to get you thinking about how writers make the most of their craft. These questions encourage thinking about stories on multiple levels.

Looking for a story to start with? You could begin with some stories TON has showcased through our interviews and annotations, such as [Maggie Koerth-Baker's](#) 2017 *FiveThirtyEight* story about Pan Pan, the panda who was "really, really, ridiculously good at sex." Or with [Kathryn Schulz's](#) much-acclaimed 2015 *New Yorker* story "The Really Big One," about the likelihood of an eventual massive earthquake in the Pacific Northwest's Cascadia subduction zone. Or with *Washington Post* reporter [Brian Vastag's](#) 2012 profile of dinosaur footprint tracker Ray Stanford.

A note of caution: Don't torture yourself trying to answer every question below while doing a close read. Instead, pick a manageable number—perhaps one or two from each category, for starters. If you do close reads regularly, it will become easier to pick up on important elements in the stories you read.

## Your First Take

- Did you enjoy reading the story? Did you find yourself wanting to keep reading, to find out what happens next? Or did you find yourself drifting or have to force yourself to finish?
- What aspects of the story appealed to you? (The tone? Voice? Character development? A conflict or tension at the center of the story?)
- Did you want to tell others about the story? In a sentence, what would you want to tell them?
- Did you want to learn more?
- Did you wish you'd thought of the story yourself? If so, what might have led you toward such a story?

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## Story Topic

- Is the topic new or controversial? Why or why not?
- Has this topic received a lot of media attention? Why or why not?
- Is the topic of interest to you? Why or why not?
- Who might be affected by this issue?
- What are the political/economic/social ramifications of the topic discussed in this story?
- How should this story influence how we think about the subject matter?
- How does the story add or contribute to what's already been written on this topic or to public discussion on the topic?

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## Story Focus

- What is the story's central question or argument? Can you boil the central point down to a sentence? (Try the six-word test: Can you boil it down to just six words? Can you distill the story's essence down to a headline that communicates why readers should read it?)
- Does the most compelling information in the story support this central theme or focus? If so, how?
- Is there anything that, if handled differently, might have distracted from the main focus?
- Are there any disconnects, or points that don't flow logically?
- Where is the story's main idea first articulated? How much detail is provided there?

- Are there any secondary themes in the story? What are they? How do they connect with the main theme?
- Consider the difference between *topic* and *story*. What makes this piece a story?

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## Information

- What are the most essential pieces of information that this story conveys?
- Does all the information belong in the story? Or is there any information that you feel should have been left out or that adds “color” for color's sake?
- What information do you think the writer left out? Do you think the writer left that information out unintentionally, or intentionally, so that readers can draw their own conclusions? Did you find yourself wishing the story had included some other information? Did the story leave any of your questions unanswered?
- What facts/numbers/statistics/quotes/anecdotes/characters/details stand out? What makes them stand out?
- Does any information in the story show deep reporting on the writer’s part? If so, how so?
- Does the writer use similes, metaphors, or analogies to explain concepts or processes? What are some examples, and why do they work well (or not)?
- Does the writer use particulars as stand-ins for something larger—a synecdoche?
- Does the writer convey some information (say, about a character or a situation) subtly, rather than directly?
- Does the story include conflicting points of view? How does the writer present these? From the way the story is written, is the writer’s own opinion evident? Why or why not?
- If the story focuses on a particular approach or solution to a scientific or social problem, does it present evidence of the real-world impact of that approach? Does it present limitations of that approach?
- Does the story contain speculation? If so, is there good justification for the speculation? How does the writer make clear that it is speculation?
- What insights did reading this story give you about the subject matter?

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## Structure

- What makes the story's lede successful (or not), in your opinion?
- Is the main organization thematic or chronological? Why did the writer choose a particular episode to begin the story? Did it succeed? How did the story move forward in time? Did it jump back-and-forth in time? Can you think of other ways of beginning and ending the story?
- Is the story organized into acts (like a play)? If so, what are the acts?
- Is there anything unusual or striking about the story's structure?
- Does the story have a nut graf (also known as a billboard)? How long is it? What does it convey? What does it leave out? Does it give away too much detail too early, or just enough to signpost where the story is headed?
- If the story does *not* have a nut graf, per se, how does the writer signal the story's main themes to readers early in the story?
- What kinds of transitions does the writer use to move readers from one idea to another? Do the transitions flow smoothly, or are they jarring? Are there any tricks the writer has used to make those transitions less obvious?
- Does the story have characters it comes back to and steps away from at crucial points, or does it stay with a central narrative line?
- Are there flashbacks? Where? What do they accomplish for the reader?
- What type of ending, or kicker, does the story have? Does it end on a quote? (If so, whose voice gets the last word, and what does that convey? Does it summarize main points in the story? Does it give closure? Does it relate in any way to the lede? Does it point the reader toward the future in some way?
- Do you agree with the way the ending is written? Would you have done it differently? Why or why not?

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## Narrative

- What elements of narrative are present in the story? (Scenes? Dialogue? Character development? Conflict? Action? Sensory details?)
- What is the central conflict or source of tension within the story? Is that conflict resolved by the end? How?
- How does the writer create suspense and tug the narrative forward?
- Is there a main character in the story? Who is it? Or is the main narrative thread an idea or problem?
- How does the writer bring characters to life in the story? What actions and other details are key? In painting a picture of the main character, does the writer include any characteristics that readers might perceive as less than positive?
- Do the length and pacing of quotes add to your sense about a character's inner life?

- Is there foreshadowing? Where? What effect does that have?
- Is the writing cinematic? Does it pull back to a wider angle in certain “scenes” and zoom in for others?
- Is there only a single narrative thread through the story, or are there multiple narrative threads? If there is more than one, how does the writer weave them together?
- How is expository material, such as technical or historical background, woven into the narrative? How does the writer weave expository material into the narrative without slowing the pacing of the story?
- Is the writer himself/herself a part of the narrative? Is that necessary? Effective?
- Choose a particularly evocative scene and reverse-engineer it: Does the writer include a physical description of any of the characters? Are the descriptions effective? If there’s no physical description, does that detract from the scene? How many senses does the writer highlight? What physical details does the writer include and, crucially, what details does she omit? How does her choice of details contribute to the scene’s strengths?

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## Language

- What vivid nouns and active verbs help give the story energy?
- Is the language in the story more formal or informal? What are some examples?
- What is the story’s tone? Is it witty? Somber? Celebratory? Informative? Satirical? Chatty? Forceful? Optimistic?
- What types of language usage contribute to an accessible, conversational tone?
- Does the story contain technical language? How does the writer avoid confusing readers with technical or specialized terms?
- Does the writer use other devices, such as alliteration, assonance, or onomatopoeia to make the writing sing?
- When does the writer use adjectives and adverbs?
- Are there examples of parallel construction that make the writing more compelling?
- How long are the sentences? How variable are they in length? What effect do the writer’s decisions about sentence length have?
- How long are the paragraphs? How variable are they in length?
- Does the writer ever intentionally violate conventions of grammar or usage? Where? What effect does that have?
- Would you describe the writer as distant from or close to the reader? What effect does that have?
- What kinds of words does the writer place at the ends of sentences and paragraphs? What effect does that have?
- What senses does the story draw on?
- Does the tense change at any point? Why might the writer have done that? What effect does it have?

- Does the voice change from active to passive, or vice versa, at any point? What effect does that have?
- Does the writer use humor or satire to affect the story’s tone?
- Does the writer use any literary or pop-cultural allusions? What effect does doing so have?
- Are there moments when the writer changes voice or perspective to match the tone of one or more characters? This is sometimes called “writing in character” and can effectively communicate a subject’s personality.

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### Art and Multimedia Elements

- Does the story contain memorable visual elements, such as photos, illustrations, charts, graphs, maps, or videos? If so, what makes those elements memorable?
- Do the visual elements of the story merely “decorate” the piece? Or do they substantially contribute to readers’ understanding of the topic or narrative? How so?
- How does the lead art in the story convey important themes or draw readers into the story?
- If the story contains portraits of people, do they help communicate something meaningful about that character? If so, how?
- What emotions do the art or multimedia elements in the story evoke? Is that appropriate to the piece? Why or why not?
- If information is presented through data visualizations, does this presentation make the information easier to understand? Is there any aspect of the presentation that might be misleading?
- What information is left out of visualizations in the story? Why might that information have been left out?
- How does the style of visualizations contribute to their value?
- Are text and multimedia elements presented in a way that makes it clear how best to navigate the story? Or is it easy to lose your place in moving back and forth between elements?
- Is the placement of multimedia elements important to their impact?
- Do the multimedia elements just repeat what was in the written story, or does it expand or enrich the written story in some substantive way? Does it support the written story, or does it distract from the written story?
- What multimedia elements could further enrich the story, if they aren’t already present in the story?

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## Take Your Close Read to the Next Level

What are the three most important things the writer did to make this story so good?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are three things that can elevate a fairly good story into an excellent one?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are three key observations you made in the course of close-reading this story that you'd like to remember for your future work?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are three concrete things you can do to help enhance your own reporting or writing, based on observations you've made here?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.