UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

# Close Reading an Email

Close reading can seem like a complicated or specialized academic skill – but the fact is that we all do close reading every single day! We all read “between the lines” of emails, books, movies, and social interactions, and that is essentially what close reading is: reading small details and weighing them in context to arrive at a larger conclusion.

Take a look at the email below and see if you can decode what’s going on:

Dear Bob,

Good to see you. Thanks for going with me to dinner and the movies. It was interesting overall to hear about your research interests. I’m impressed with the enormous amount of time you spend in the lab and at the library. You are clearly very devoted to and diligent about your work.

But, unfortunately I won’t be able to join you for the Celtics game next week due to a yearly commitment. Good luck with your new experiments. I hope they go well, especially since they mean so much to you.

Best,

Carol

## Things to consider as you decode this email:

1. What is its structure? Formal, informal, or a mix?
2. What is the tone?
3. What kind of unspoken meaning can you infer from the sentences? How do you know whether or not a second date is likely to occur?
4. Are there double entendres?
5. What is the hidden message? (Hint: look for an acrostic)

Credit: Lisa Rourke and Robert Cochran, University Writing Program

The Brandeis University Writing Program, including the Writing Center, First-Year Writing, and Writing in the Majors, offers support for writing throughout the community, including undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff.

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# Close reading an email: Procedures

To make the term “close reading” less scary, I begin by explaining that close reading is analyzing what you know instinctively and that everyone already knows how to do it. In other words, close reading is figuring out how you know what you sense.

To illustrate my point, I distribute the email below and have a student read it aloud. I ask what likely happened to initiate the email (i.e., a date)? The email never says there was a date involved, so how do they know? I then ask whether it is likely that Bob will ever get another date with Carol? They all know he will not, so after breaking students into groups I ask them to analyze the letter and tell me how they know. We end up discussing the structure of the email (anyone under the age of 100 would never write to a peer so formally) as well as the content. Carol doesn’t outwardly say anything derogatory about Bob, yet we know that he talks about himself incessantly and is consumed with his work. There are several cases where the words seem to say one thing but mean another, etc.

After we’ve finished with the email, we begin a close reading of the text students will be writing on for their first essay so that the connection is clear between the email and the work they will be doing for the paper.

This exercise works well because it is very accessible and immediately puts students at ease. Yet, it teaches them important skills that they’ll be using throughout the semester. Incidentally, the “secret message” is that the first letter of every line spells the word “goodbye” (this gives new meaning to a “hidden subtext”!).

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# Close reading an email: instructor Notes

Dear Bob, (READS LIKE A BUSINESS LETTER AND NOT OF SOMEONE WHO IS ROMANTICALLY INTERESTED)

Good to see you. Thanks for going with me to dinner and the movies. (THE GUY WAS TOO CHEAP TO PAY!) It was interesting overall to hear about your research interests. (WRITTEN IN PASSIVE VOICE) I’m impressed with the tremendous (DOUBLE ENTENDRE) amount of time you spend in the lab and at the library. (CLEARLY, THE GUY SPENT THE ENTIRE NIGHT TALKING ABOUT HIMSELF AND HAS NO LIFE.) You are clearly very devoted to and diligent about your work. (SEEMS LIKE A COMPLIMENT BUT REALLY ISN’T—A CASE WHERE THE WORDS DON’T MATCH UP TO THEIR OSTENSIBLE MEANING.)

But, unfortunately I won’t be able to join you for the Celtics game next week due to a yearly commitment. (VAGUE ANSWER INDICATES SHE JUST DOESN’T WANT TO GO) Good luck with your new experiments. I hope they go well, especially since they mean so much to you. (LEAVES NO ROOM FOR HIM TO ISSUE A FUTURE INVITATION AND PROVIDES FURTHER PROOF THAT HE TALKED ABOUT HIMSELF INCESSANTLY)

Best (COMPLETELY IMPERSONAL),

Carol

Handout: Lisa Rourke and Robert Cochran, University Writing Program