

Required Reading: *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood

*Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi

\*see also sample close reading handout: *What Makes Good Writing* by Christina Schwarz

Over the next two years in IB English HL you will be learning how to recognize patterns in texts and how to construct scholarly interpretations of literature. This is a course in critical thinking, so expect to read thoroughly and come to class prepared to thoroughly discuss the reading and the connections you have discovered.

Complete steps 1-2 for **both books**:

1. **Quotation base:** Follow a theme, motif, or symbol in each book. Compose a thoughtful and well written thesis statement on the significance of your chosen detailed study. Select ten excerpts(they can be 1-2 sentences long) from the novel to support your thesis. Make sure to include page numbers.
2. **Close reading:** Select your favorite passage from each novel(approximately 10-40 lines, 1 or 2 pages for *Persepolis*). Type or copy the passage including the page numbers. Write a 8-10 sentence commentary on the passage. Focus on the way language is crafted and specific stylistic choices the author has made. Note meaningful patterns--grammatical, literary, rhetorical, critical or other. Avoid abstract diction and generalizations. For *Persepolis*, you will want to note significant details in the illustrations and panels--why is one panel bigger than the others? What is the effect of the dramatic color contrasts or simple lines? What is the effect of this particular panel juxtaposition? Do not simply list literary devices used by the writer. Do not paraphrase or summarize the passage. Do not translate, explaining what the author really meant. An example close reading is attached to these directions.

Your work is due the first day of class. Feel free to contact me at [lacyam@gm.sbac.edu](mailto:lacyam@gm.sbac.edu) if you have any questions. I look forward to meeting you next year.

Best,  
Ms. Shitama

## ***A Close Read: What makes good writing good***

By [Christina Schwarz](#) *The Atlantic*

### October 2006 Issue

*It was clear that his sense of his own worth had ballooned since they had seen him last. His movements were slower and more rounded, and there was a new quality of ripeness in his way of speaking, as if he were listening to himself through headphones. He was trying on the part of the distinguished man.*

—from *Breakable You*, by Brian Morton (Harcourt)

Morton, like the character from whose point of view this passage is written, recognizes that meaning is expressed mostly through subtleties—choice of words, tone of voice, posture—rather than grand speeches and gestures. The verb *ballooned* is inspired, suggesting, as it does, puffed-up-ness and hot air; after all, it's not the man's worth that has expanded, but merely his sense of that worth (at least in the eyes of his observer). Morton milks significance from the finest of perceptions: the "slower," "rounded" movements and the "ripeness" of speech. *Rounded* is also visually linked to *ballooned* and aurally, through alliteration, to *ripeness*, so the general observation of the first sentence and the specific details that follow work gracefully together, beyond the level of meaning. Morton is especially skilled with subtle humor: the image of someone "listening to himself through headphones" nails the ridiculous pomposity of a man who is not distinguished, but is merely "trying on the part."

### July/August 2006 Issue

*"She brought the coffee, in delicate white china cups, on a black lacquered tray, which she set on the table before the couch. They sipped the coffee and talked strainedly for a few moments. Then Stoner spoke of the part of the manuscript he had read, and the excitement he had felt earlier, in the library, came over him; he leaned forward, speaking intensely.*

*For many minutes the two of them were able to talk together unselfconsciously, hiding themselves under the cover of their discourse."*

—from *Stoner*, by John Williams (NYRB)

The first two sentences in this passage (from a 1965 novel long out of print, and just reissued) enhance the sense of unease between the characters—especially the first sentence, chopped as it is into four distinct phrases, each of about equal weight. The vivid detail of the delicate white china and the black lacquer draw attention to each separate description, emphasizing the stiltedness. The second sentence flows smoothly but contains the wonderfully effortful word *strainedly*. The structure of the last two sentences suggests the characters' connection and the beginnings of some complications they then experience. As Stoner's excitement builds, his actions are linked with a semicolon rather than cut apart with a period. Here are participles—*speaking* and *hiding*—rather than the simple past tense of these verbs, which, to remain consistent with the overall style, would have had to be set apart with an *and* ("he leaned forward and spoke intensely"). There is a suggestion here of forces beyond the characters' control: Stoner doesn't get excited; the excitement "came over him." And the two don't just talk; they are "able to talk—a reminder that something had to be overcome first. Williams, whose writing style is strikingly plain, finally employs a rare and lovely metaphor—"hiding themselves under the cover of their discourse"—precisely when it's most necessary: to communicate a sensation that might shrivel in the light of straightforward expression.

