

READING CRITICALLY

This handout is available in an alternative format on request.

Critical reading is a more **ACTIVE** way of reading. It is a deeper and more complex engagement with a text. Critical reading is a process of **analyzing, interpreting** and, sometimes, **evaluating**. When we read critically, we use our critical thinking skills to **QUESTION** both the text and our own reading of it. Different disciplines may have distinctive modes of critical reading (scientific, philosophical, literary, etc).

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN READING AND CRITICAL READING?

	READING	CRITICAL READING
Purpose	To get a basic grasp of the text.	To form judgments about HOW a text works.
Activity	Absorbing/Understanding	Analyzing/Interpreting/Evaluating
Focus	What a text SAYS	What a text DOES and MEANS
Questions	What is the text saying? What information can I get out of it?	How does the text work? How is it argued? What are the choices made? The patterns that result? What kinds of reasoning and evidence are used? What are the underlying assumptions? What does the text mean?
Direction	WITH the text (taking for granted it is right)	AGAINST the text (questioning its assumptions and argument, interpreting meaning in context)
Response	Restatement, Summary	Description, Interpretation, Evaluation

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO PREPARE FOR CRITICAL READING?

There are two steps to preparing to read critically:

1. **Self-Reflect:** What experiences, assumptions, knowledge, and perspectives do you bring to the text? What biases might you have? Are you able to keep an open mind and consider other points of view?
2. **Read to Understand:**
 - a. Examine the text and context: Who is the author? Who is the publisher? Where and when was it written? What kind of text is it?
 - b. Skim the text: What is the topic? What are the main ideas?
 - c. Resolve confusion: Look up unfamiliar words or terms in dictionaries or glossaries. Go over difficult passages to clarify them.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS FOR READING CRITICALLY?

To read critically, you must think critically. This involves analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. Each of these processes helps you to interact with the text in different ways: highlighting important points and examples, taking notes, testing answers to your questions, brainstorming, outlining, describing aspects of the text or argument, reflecting on your own reading and thinking, raising objections to the ideas or evidence presented, etc.

Analysis Asks: What are the patterns of the text?

Analysis means looking at the parts of something to detect patterns. In looking at these patterns, your critical thinking skills will be engaged in analyzing the argument the author is making:

- What is the thesis or overall theory?
- What are the supporting points that create the argument? How do they relate to each other? How do they relate to the thesis?
- What are the examples used as evidence for the supporting points? How do they relate to the points they support? To each other? To the thesis?
- What techniques of persuasion are used (appeals to emotion, reason, authority, etc.)?
- What rhetorical strategies are used (e.g. definition, explanation, description, narration, elaboration, argumentation, evaluation)?
- What modes of analysis are used (illustration, comparison/contrast, cause and effect, process analysis, classification/division, definition)?

Interpretation Asks: What do the patterns of the argument mean?

Interpretation is reading *ideas* as well as *sentences*. We need to be aware of the cultural and historical context, the context of its author's life, the context of debates within the discipline at that time and the intellectual context of debates within the discipline today.

- What debates were the author and the text engaging with at that time?
- What kinds of reasoning (historical, psychological, political, philosophical, scientific, etc) are employed?
- What methodology is employed and what theory is developed?
- How might my reading of the text be biased? Am I imposing 21st century ideas or values on the text? If so, is this problematic?

Evaluation Asks: How well does the text do what it does? What is its value?

Evaluation is making judgments about the intellectual/cognitive, aesthetic, moral or practical value of a text. When we are considering its intellectual/cognitive value we ask questions such as these:

- How does it contribute to the discipline? Are its main conclusions original?
- Does the evidence and reasoning adequately support the theory/theories presented?
- Are the sources reliable?
- Is the argument logically consistent? Convincing?
- Are any experiments, questionnaires, statistical sections, etc designed and executed in accordance with the accepted standards of the relevant discipline?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the theory?
- How would competing theories criticize this text? How could the author reply?
- Overall, is the theory/approach in this text better than competing theories/approaches? In other words, what are its **comparative** strengths and weaknesses? In reading critically we need to keep competing theories in mind.

FOR FURTHER STUDY: QUICK WEB RESOURCES ON CRITICAL READING

Karland, Dan. <http://www.criticalreading.com/>

Knott, Deborah. "Critical Reading Towards Critical Writing." <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/reading-and-researching/critical-reading>

Wheeler, Dr.L.Kip. "Critical Reading of an Essay's Argument." *Dr. Wheeler's Website*. 12 Oct. 2004. http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/reading_basic.html

Handout also available at <http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/webresources>

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