

HOW TO READ CRITICALLY

WHAT IS CRITICAL READING?

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** the larger meanings of a text and how those meanings are created by the text. When we read critically, we use our critical thinking skills to **QUESTION** both the text and our own reading of it.

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 and perspectives? What does the text mean? Is the text effective? How can I use it to develop my own argument?
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 are your feelings about the topic? 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? What kinds of sources are referenced?
 - b. Skim the text: What is the topic? What is the main idea? What are the most important points?
 - 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. What does this mean? Critical thinking involves several related mental processes: analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. Each of these thinking processes helps you to question the text in different ways. The questions you ask will depend on the type of text you are reading, and general questions should lead to more specific questions. Questions should also consider relationships between the text and the author, the reader, and the context. While reading critically, you interact with the text by highlighting important points, taking notes, testing answers to your questions, brainstorming, outlining, describing, and reflecting on your own reading and thinking.

Analysis Asks: What are the patterns of the text?

Analysis means looking at the parts of something to detect patterns. If you were a detective, this is when you would gather all your clues to see how they might relate to each other. In reading a scholarly journal, for example, you look at three main parts of the text:

1. Choice of Content: what ideas and examples have been selected?
2. Choice of Language: what words and sentence structures have been selected?
3. Choice of Structure: what arrangement has been selected to present the ideas in?

Patterns will emerge when you look at these choices, patterns that reveal the purpose, strategies and perspective employed by the author. 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 main idea?
- 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 (definition, explanation, description, narration, elaboration, argumentation, evaluation) and modes (illustration, comparison/contrast, cause and effect, process analysis, classification/division, definition) are used?
- In what order are the points presented (chronological, spatial, from general to specific, from similarity to difference, from cause to effect, from reason to conclusion)?
- What sources are used? What other theorists or researchers are referred to? What schools of thought are relied upon? Analysis enables you to understand how the text works so that you can then interpret its deeper meanings and evaluate its meanings and effectiveness.
- Have I understood the text correctly?

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

Interpretation is reading *ideas* as well as *sentences*. It is when you look at the patterns in a text and make inferences (educated guesses) about its underlying meanings. It can be compared to being a detective interpreting the patterns of clues in order to theorize about whom the possible suspects are and why the crime might have been committed. At this point, context plays a greater role as a text's fuller meaning is in relationship to its context – its cultural and historical context, the context of its author, the context of dialogues within the discipline, etc. Here, you are questioning the text within its context. Thus, the more knowledge you have of the context of your discipline, the stronger your powers of interpretation, and thus evaluation.

- What kinds of reasoning (historical, psychological, political, philosophical, scientific, etc) are employed?
- What methodology or theoretical approach is used?
- What are the implicit assumptions?
- What is the point of view, or perspective, like?
- What alternative perspectives remain unconsidered?
- How might my reading of the text be biased?

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

Evaluation is making judgments about a text. If you were a detective, this is when you would run with one educated guess and build a case for or against a suspect's credibility. Out of your interpretation of the patterns of the argument, you evaluate:

- Is the thesis strong?
- Are the points argued well?
- Are the examples valid?
- Are the sources reliable?
- Is the argument logically consistent? Convincing?
- Does the argument contribute to the discipline?
- How can I use the text in creating my own argument?

NOTE: These questions are meant as a starting point only. Keep developing specific questions as you read. Also, the more you learn about critical thinking and logical argument, the better you will become at developing questions and testing answers when critical reading.

FOR FURTHER STUDY: QUICK WEB RESOURCES ON CRITICAL READING

Karland, Dan. *Strategies for Critical Reading and Writing*. 15 Sept. 2004. <http://www.criticalreading.com/>

Knott, Deborah. "Critical Reading Towards Critical Writing." *Writing at the University of Toronto*. 13 Oct. 2004. <http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/critrdg.html>

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