

CRITICAL READING TOWARD CRITICAL WRITING

Critical writing depends on critical reading. Most of the essays you write will involve reflection on written texts -- the thinking and research that have already been done on your subject. In order to write your own analysis of this subject, you will need to do careful critical reading of sources and to use them critically to make your own argument. The judgments and interpretations you make of the texts you read are the first steps towards formulating your own approach.

CRITICAL READING: WHAT IS IT?

To read critically is to make judgments about **how** a text is argued. This is a highly reflective skill requiring you to “stand back” and gain some distance from the text you are reading. (You might have to read a text through once to get a basic grasp of content before you launch into an intensive critical reading.) **THE KEY IS THIS:**

- don't read looking only or primarily for **information**
- do read looking for **ways of thinking** about the subject matter

When you are reading, highlighting, or taking notes, avoid extracting and compiling lists of evidence, lists of facts and examples. Avoid approaching a text by asking “What information can I get out of it?” Rather ask “How does this text work? How is it argued? How is the evidence (the facts, examples, etc.) used and interpreted? How does the text reach its conclusions?

HOW DO I READ LOOKING FOR WAYS OF THINKING?

1. First determine the **central claims or purpose** of the text (its thesis). A critical reading attempts to identify and assess how these central claims are developed or argued.
2. Begin to make some judgments about **context**. What audience is the text written for? Who is it in dialogue with? (This will probably be other scholars or authors with differing viewpoints.) In what historical context is it written? All these matters of context can contribute to your assessment of what is going on in a text.
3. Distinguish the **kinds of reasoning** the text employs. What concepts are defined and used? Does the text appeal to a theory or theories? Is any specific methodology laid out? If there is an appeal to a particular concept, theory, or method, how is that concept, theory, or method then used to organize and interpret the data? You might also examine how the text is organized: how has the author analyzed (broken down) the material? Be aware that different disciplines (i.e. history, sociology, philosophy, biology) will have different ways of arguing.

4. Examine the **evidence** (the supporting facts, examples, etc) the text employs. Supporting evidence is indispensable to an argument. Having worked through Steps 1-3, you are now in a position to grasp how the evidence is used to develop the argument and its controlling claims and concepts. Steps 1-3 allow you to see evidence in its context. Consider the kinds of evidence that are used. What counts as evidence in this argument? Is the evidence statistical? literary? historical? etc. From what sources is the evidence taken? Are these sources primary or secondary?
5. Critical reading may involve **evaluation**. Your reading of a text is already critical if it accounts for and makes a series of judgments about how a text is argued. However, some essays may also require you to assess the strengths and weaknesses of an argument. If the argument is strong, why? Could it be better or differently supported? Are there gaps, leaps, or inconsistencies in the argument? Is the method of analysis problematic? Could the evidence be interpreted differently? Are the conclusions warranted by the evidence presented? What are the unargued assumptions? Are they problematic? What might an opposing argument be?

SOME PRACTICAL TIPS:

1. Critical reading occurs after some preliminary processes of reading. Begin by skimming research materials, especially introductions and conclusions, in order to strategically choose where to focus your critical efforts.
2. When highlighting a text or taking notes from it, teach yourself to highlight argument: those places in a text where an author explains her analytical moves, the concepts she uses, how she uses them, how she arrives at conclusions. Don't let yourself foreground and isolate facts and examples, no matter how interesting they may be. First, look for the large patterns that give purpose, order, and meaning to those examples. The opening sentences of paragraphs can be important to this task.
3. When you begin to think about how you might use a portion of a text in the argument you are forging in your own paper, try to remain aware of how this portion fits into the whole argument from which it is taken. Paying attention to context is a fundamental critical move.
4. When you quote directly from a source, use the quotation critically. This means that you should not substitute the quotation for your own articulation of a point. Rather, introduce the quotation by laying out the judgments you are making about it, and the reasons why you are using it. Often a quotation is followed by some further analysis.
5. Critical reading skills are also critical listening skills. In your lectures, listen not only for information but also for ways of thinking. Your instructor will often explicate and model ways of thinking appropriate to a discipline.