**What is Critical Reading?**

Reading critically does not, necessarily, mean being critical of what you read.

Both reading and [thinking critically](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/critical-thinking.html) don’t mean being ‘*critical*’ about some idea, argument, or piece of writing - claiming that it is somehow faulty or flawed.

Critical reading means engaging in what you read by asking yourself questions such as, ‘*what is the author trying to say?*’ or ‘*what is the main argument being presented?*’

Critical reading involves presenting a reasoned argument that evaluates and analyses what you have read.  Being critical, therefore - in an academic sense - means **advancing your understanding**, not dismissing and therefore closing off learning.

See also: [**Listening Types**](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/listening-types.html) to learn about the importance of critical listening skills.

**To read critically is to exercise your judgement about what you are reading – that is, not taking anything you read at face value.**

When reading academic material you will be faced with the author’s interpretation and opinion.  Different authors will, naturally, have different slants. You should always examine what you are reading critically and look for limitations, omissions, inconsistencies, oversights and arguments against what you are reading.

In academic circles, whilst you are a student, you will be expected to understand different viewpoints and make your own judgements based on what you have read.

Critical reading goes further than just being satisfied with what a text says, it also involves reflecting on what the text describes, and analysing what the text actually means, in the context of your studies.

As a critical reader you should reflect on:

* **What the text says:**  after critically reading a piece you should be able to take notes, paraphrasing - in your own words - the key points.
* **What the text describes:** you should be confident that you have understood the text sufficiently to be able to use your own examples and compare and contrast with other writing on the subject in hand.
* **Interpretation of the text:** this means that you should be able to fully analyse the text and state a meaning for the text as a whole.

Critical reading means being able to reflect on what a text says, what it describes and what it means by scrutinising the style and structure of the writing, the language used as well as the content.

Important link to check

https://wr.english.fsu.edu/College-Composition/The-Inkwell/Critical-Reading-Activities

**Critical Thinking is an Extension of Critical Reading**

Thinking critically, in the academic sense, involves being open-minded - using judgement and discipline to process what you are learning about without letting your personal bias or opinion detract from the arguments.

Critical thinking involves being rational and aware of your own feelings on the subject – being able to reorganise your thoughts, prior knowledge and understanding to accommodate new ideas or viewpoints.

Critical reading and critical thinking are therefore the very foundations of true learning and personal development.

See our page: [Critical Thinking](https://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/critical-thinking.html) for more.

**Reading Critically:  How Well Does The Text Do What It Does**

We can think of a writer as having taken on a job.  No matter what the topic, certain tasks must be done:

* a specific topic must be addressed
* terms must be clearly defined
* evidence must be presented
* common knowledge must be accounted for
* exceptions must be explained
* causes must be shown to precede effects and to be capable of the effect
* conclusions must be shown to follow logically from earlier arguments and evidence

As critical readers and writers, we want to assure ourselves that these tasks have been completed in a complete, comprehensive, and consistent manner. Only once we have determined that a text is consistent and coherent can we then begin to evaluate whether or not to accept the assertions and conclusions. 

**Thinking Critically: Evaluating The Evidence**

Reading to see what a text says may suffice when the goal is to learn specific information or to understand someone else's ideas. But we usually read with other purposes. We need to solve problems, build roads, write legislation, or design an advertising campaign.  We must evaluate what we have read and integrate that understanding with our prior understanding of the world.  We must decide what to accept as true and useful.

As readers, we want to accept as fact only that which is actually true.  To evaluate a conclusion, we must evaluate the evidence upon which that conclusion is based.  We do not want just any information; we want reliable information.  To assess the validity of remarks within a text, we must go outside a text and bring to bear outside knowledge and standards.

The definition of critical reading means reading with the goal of finding a deep understanding of the material, whether it is [fiction](https://www.thoughtco.com/difference-between-fiction-and-literature-739696) or [nonfiction](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-nonfiction-1691434). It is the act of analyzing and evaluating what you are reading as you make your way through the text or as you reflect back upon your reading.

**Using Your Head**

When you read a piece of fiction critically, you use your common sense to determine what the writer means, as opposed to what the written words actually say. The following passage appears in "[The Red Badge of Courage](https://www.thoughtco.com/the-red-badge-of-courage-profile-1856865)", the classic Civil War-era work by Stephen Crane. In this passage, the main character, Henry Fleming, has just returned from battle and is now receiving treatment for a nasty head wound.

*"Yeh don't holler ner say nothin'... an' yeh never squeaked. Yer a good un, Henry. Most 'a men would a' been in th' hospital long ago. A shot in th' head ain't foolin' business..."*

The point seems clear enough. Henry is receiving praise for his apparent fortitude and bravery. But what is really happening in this scene?

During the confusion and terror of the battle, Henry Fleming had actually panicked and run away, abandoning his fellow soldiers in the process. He had received the blow in the chaos of retreat; not the frenzy of battle. In this scene, he was feeling ashamed of himself.

When you read this passage critically, you actually read between the lines. By doing so, you determine the message that the [author](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-authors-tone-3211744) is really conveying. The words speak of bravery, but the real message of this scene is concerned feelings of cowardice that tormented Henry.

Shortly after the scene above, Fleming realizes that nobody in the entire regiment knows the truth about his wound. They all believe that the wound was the result of fighting in the battle:

*His self-pride was now entirely restored....He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man.*

Despite the claim that Henry feels relieved, we know by reflecting and thinking critically that Henry isn't really comforted. By reading between the lines, we know he is deeply bothered by the sham.

**What's the Lesson?**

One way to read a novel critically is to be aware of the [lessons or messages](https://www.thoughtco.com/common-book-themes-1857647) that a writer is sending in a subtle way.

After reading "The Red Badge of Courage", a critical reader would reflect back on the many scenes and look for a lesson or a message. What is the writer trying to say about courage and war?

The good news is, there isn't a right or wrong answer. It's the act of forming a question and offering your own opinion that counts.

**Nonfiction**

Nonfiction writing can be just as tricky to evaluate as fiction, although there are differences. Nonfiction writing normally involves a series of statements that are backed by evidence.

As a critical reader, you will need to be mindful of this process. The goal of critical thinking is to evaluate information in an unbiased way. This includes being open to changing your mind about a subject if the good evidence exists. However, you should also try *not* to be influenced by unsound evidence.

The trick to critical reading in nonfiction is to know how to separate the good evidence from the bad.

There are signs to look out for when it comes to misleading or bad evidence.

**Assumptions**

Watch for broad, unsupported statements like "most people in the pre-war South approved of [enslavement](https://www.thoughtco.com/interesting-facts-about-slavery-in-america-2834587)." Every time you see a statement, ask yourself if the author provides any evidence to back up his point.

**Implications**

Be mindful of subtle statements such as "Statistics support those who argue that boys are better at math than girls, so why should this be such a controversial issue?"

Don't become distracted by the fact that some people *do* believe that males are naturally better at math, and address that issue. When you do this, you are accepting the implication and, therefore, falling for bad evidence.

The point is, in critical reading, that the author has not provided [statistics](https://www.thoughtco.com/finding-statistics-for-research-papers-1857284); he merely implied that statistics exist.

**Critical Reading v. Critical Thinking**

We can distinguish between critical reading and critical thinking in the following way:

* Critical *reading* is a technique for **discovering** information and ideas within a text.
* Critical *thinking* is a technique for **evaluating** information and ideas, for deciding what to accept and believe.

Critical reading refers to a careful, active, reflective, analytic reading. Critical thinking involves reflecting on the validity of what you have read in light of our prior knowledge and understanding of the world.

For example, consider the following (somewhat humorous) sentence from a student essay:

*Parents are buying expensive cars for their kids to destroy them.*

As the terms are used here, **critical reading** is concerned with figuring out whether, within the context of the text as a whole, " *them* " refers to the parents, the kids, or the cars, and whether the text supports that practice. **Critical thinking** would come into play when deciding whether the chosen meaning was indeed true, and whether or not you, as the reader, should support that practice.

By these definitions, critical reading would appear to come before critical thinking: Only once we have fully understood a text (critical reading) can we truly evaluate its assertions (critical thinking). 

**The Two Together in Harmony**

In actual practice, critical reading and critical thinking work together.

Critical thinking allows us to monitor our understanding as we read.  If we sense that assertions are ridiculous or irresponsible (critical thinking), we examine the text more closely to test our understanding (critical reading).

Conversely,  critical thinking depends on critical reading.  You can think critically about a text (critical thinking), after all, only if you have understood it (critical reading).  We may choose to accept or reject a presentation, but we must know why. We have a responsibility to ourselves, as well as to others, to isolate the real issues of agreement or disagreement. Only then can we understand and respect other people’s views.  To recognize and understand those views, we must read critically.

**The Usefulness of the Distinction**

If critical thinking and critical reading are so closely linked, why is this still a useful distinction?

The usefulness of the distinction lies in its reminder that we must read each text on its own merits, not imposing our prior knowledge or views on it. While we must evaluate ideas as we read, we must not distort the meaning within a text. We must not allow ourselves to force a text to say what we would otherwise like it to say—or we will never learn anything new!

**Extra Reading**

**Developing a Reading Strategy**

You will, in formal learning situations, be required to read and critically think about a lot of information from different sources.

It is important therefore, that you not only learn to read critically but also efficiently.

The first step to efficient reading is to become selective.

If you cannot read all of the books on a recommended reading list, you need to find a way of selecting the best texts for you. To start with, you need to know what you are looking for.  You can then examine the contents page and/or index of a book or journal to ascertain whether a chapter or article is worth pursuing further.

Once you have selected a suitable piece the next step is to speed-read.

Speed reading is also often referred to as skim-reading or scanning.  Once you have identified a relevant piece of text, like a chapter in a book, you should scan the first few sentences of each paragraph to gain an overall impression of subject areas it covers.  Scan-reading essentially means that you know what you are looking for, you identify the chapters or sections most relevant to you and ignore the rest.

When you speed-read you are not aiming to gain a full understanding of the arguments or topics raised in the text.  It is simply a way of determining what the text is about.

When you find a relevant or interesting section you will need to slow your reading speed dramatically, allowing you to gain a more in-depth understanding of the arguments raised.  Even when you slow your reading down it may well be necessary to read passages several times to gain a full understanding.

**Following SQ3R**

SQ3R is a well-known strategy for reading.  SQ3R can be applied to a whole range of reading purposes as it is flexible and takes into account the need to change reading speeds.

**SQ3R is an acronym and stands for:**

* **Survey**
* **Question**
* **Read**
* **Recall**
* **Review**

**Survey**

This relates to speed-reading, scanning and skimming the text.  At this initial stage you will be attempting to gain the general gist of the material in question.

**Question**

It is important that, before you begin to read, you have a question or set of questions that will guide you - why am I reading this?  When you have a purpose to your reading you want to learn and retain certain information.  Having questions changes reading from a passive to an active pursuit.  Examples of possible questions include:

* *What do I already know about this subject?*
* *How does this chapter relate to the assignment question?*
* *How can I relate what I read to my own experiences?*

**Read**

Now you will be ready for the main activity of reading.  This involves careful consideration of the meaning of what the author is trying to convey and involves being critical as well as active.

**Recall**

Regardless of how interesting an article or chapter is, unless you make a concerted effort to recall what you have just read, you will forget a lot of the important points.  Recalling from time to time allows you to focus upon the main points – which in turn aids concentration. Recalling gives you the chance to think about and assimilate what you have just read, keeping you active.  A significant element in being active is to write down, in your own words, the key points.

**Review**

The final step is to review the material that you have recalled in your notes.  Did you understand the main principles of the argument?  Did you identify all the main points?  Are there any gaps?   Do not take for granted that you have recalled everything you need correctly – review the text again to make sure and clarify.

References

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