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Critical thinking for critical writing

Critical writing depends on critical thinking. Your writing will involve reflection on written texts: that is, critical reading.

Your critical reading of a text and thinking about a text enables you to use it to make your own arguments. As a critical thinker and writer, you make judgments and interpretations of the ideas, arguments, and claims of others presented in the texts you read.

The key is this: don't read looking only or primarily for **information**. Instead, read to determine **ways of thinking** about the subject matter.

TIP: Avoid extracting and compiling lists of evidence, lists of facts, quotations, or examples.

Non-critical vs. critical reading

Non-critical reading is focused on learning the information provided by a source. In this mode, a reader focuses on understanding the information, ideas, and opinions stated within the text.

Sometimes non-critical reading is a part of our day-to-day lives. For example, we may consult a weather report to help us decide whether or not we need to pack an umbrella when we leave the house. Often, we don't need to be critical readers to get the information we need about the weather. However, if the weather report states that it will be a "sunny, cloudless day" and we can see that it is pouring outside our window, we will likely bring our critical reading abilities back into play!

We exercise **non-critical reading**, when we are consulting texts looking for facts/information.

When we need to get beyond facts/information and into analysis or interpretation (as we often do in academic writing), we need to be critical thinkers/readers. **Critical thinkers/readers** engaged not only with what a text says, but also with how it presents

that information and the context in which it was written (including the perspective it was written from).

How to read critically

1. 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 and argued.

TIP: Many academic paragraphs have a topic statement at or near the beginning, which indicates the purpose of the paragraph.

2. Begin to make some judgments about **context**.

- What audience is the text written for?
- Who is it in dialogue with?
- In what historical context is it written?

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?
- How has the author analyzed (broken down) the material?

TIP: Be aware that different disciplines (i.e. history, sociology, philosophy, biology) have different ways of arguing.

4. Examine the **evidence** (the supporting facts, examples, etc.) the text employs.

Supporting evidence is indispensable to an argument, so consider the kinds of evidence used:

Statistical? Literary? Historical? 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. Some assignments may also require you to assess the strengths and weaknesses of an argument.

Why to read critically

Critical reading is an important step for many academic assignments. Critically engaging with the work of others is often a first step in developing our own arguments, interpretations, and analysis.

Critical reading often involves re-reading a text multiple times, putting our focus on different aspects of the text. The first time we read a text, we may be focused on getting an overall sense of the information the author is presenting - in other words, simply understanding what they are trying to say. On subsequent readings, however, we can focus on how the author presents that information, the kinds of evidence they provide to support their arguments (and how convincing we find that evidence), the connection between their evidence and their conclusions, etc. etc.

Example: A **non-critical thinker/reader** might read a history book to learn the facts of the situation or to discover an accepted interpretation of those events.

A **critical thinker/reader** might read the same work to appreciate how a particular perspective on the events and a particular selection of facts can lead to a particular understanding. A critical thinker/reader will likely also think about the perspectives of that event that are NOT being considered or presented in the text.

Modes of critical analysis

What a text says – **restatement**. Talks about the same topic as the original text.

What a text does – **description**. Focuses on aspects of the discussion itself.

What a text means – **interpretation**. Analyzes the text and asserts a meaning for the text as a whole.

TIP: An interpretation includes references to the **content** (the specific actions referred to), the **language** (the specific terms used), and the **structure** (such as the relationship between characters).

Steps to writing critically

1. **Take a critical stance:** recognize that every text, author, and argument comes from a perspective and is subject to interpretation and analysis.

2. **Pay close attention:** read texts not just for *what they say* but also for *how they say it*. Notice examples, evidence, word choice, structure, etc. Consider the "fit" between the information a text provides and the way it provides that information.

3. **Think big picture:** read texts in their context. This can sometimes also involve doing some research about your sources to learn more about the author, the time in which the text was written, the sources that funded the research, etc.
4. **Bring yourself in:** critical writing also involves developing your own understandings, interpretations, analysis, and arguments in response to the texts you are reading. Sometimes this is accomplished by considering the connections/points of divergence between several texts you are reading. It can also involve bringing in your own perspectives and experiences to support or challenge evidence, examples, and/or conclusions.

Implications for writing

Writing critically involves:

- Providing appropriate and sufficient arguments and examples
- Choosing terms that are precise, appropriate, and persuasive
- Making clear the transitions from one thought to another to ensure the overall logic of the presentation
- Editing for content, structure, and language

An increased awareness of the impact of choices of content, language, and structure can help you as a writer to develop habits of rewriting and revision.

Reference: this resource was adapted from Dan Kurland's [Critical Reading, at its Core, Plain and Simple](#)

