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kid brother may listen only to the sound of money in his palm. It's usually wise to think of your audience in an academic setting as someone who is perfectly smart, but who doesn't already or necessarily agree with you. You are not just expressing your opinion in an argument ("it's true because I said so")--and in most cases your audience is pretty knowledgeable on the subject at hand--so you will need sturdier proof. At the same time, do not think of your audience as a genius clairvoyant. You have to come out and state both your claim and your evidence clearly. Do not assume that because the instructor knows the material that he or she understands what part of it you are using, what you think about it, and why.

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Critical Reading

Critical reading is a big part of understanding argument. Although some of the material you read will be very persuasive, do not fall under the spell of the printed word as authority. Very few of your instructors think of the texts they assign as the last word on the subject. Remember that the author of every text has an agenda, something that they want you to believe. Take notes either in the margins or on a separate sheet as you read. Put away that highlighter! Simply highlighting a text is only good for memorizing that text--it does not encourage critical reading. Part of the goal is to put the author's ideas in your own words. Then you can stop thinking of these ideas as facts and start thinking of them as arguments.

When you read, ask yourself questions like "What is the author trying to prove?" and "What is the author assuming I will agree with?" Do you agree with the author? Does the author adequately defend her argument? What kind of proof does she use? Is there something she leaves out that you would put in? Does putting it in hurt her argument? As you get used to reading critically, you will start to see the sometimes hidden agendas of other writers, and you can use this skill to improve your own ability to argue.

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