

Reading critically

Ways to develop your critical reading skills

What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking is the central intellectual skill that a tertiary education seeks to develop in students. It involves taking an attitude of **'reflective skepticism'** (McPeck, 1981) towards information and ideas. This means thinking deeply about the ideas you encounter in readings, lectures other course material and questioning their validity or reasonableness.

'Critical' in this context does not mean looking for mistakes and weaknesses. It means analysing and evaluating somebody's ideas and arguments.

What is critical reading?

Critical reading means applying critical thinking to a written text, by analysing and evaluating what you read.

An important foundation for critically evaluating a text is trying to understand the writer's ideas and arguments as it's difficult to evaluate something you don't understand! You should then seek to identify the strengths and limitations in the author's argument and evidence, and to challenge any assumptions the author might have made.

The following strategies will help you develop your critical reading skills:

1. Previewing the text

Quickly looking over the whole text will help you to build your understanding of the context in which it was written. This will help you to read more critically.

Understand the disciplinary context:

Be aware that authors present their ideas in the context of a specific discipline. This will influence their overall perspective, their conceptual framework, the way in which they present their evidence and how this evidence might be used to support an argument. For example, approaches and assumptions used in medical research might not be appropriate in a History or Sociology paper, and vice-versa.

Find out about the author

Find out what work the author does, what else they have published and how widely cited they are by others in the field.

This information may point to the author's purpose, the audience they typically write for, who they typically collaborate with in research, and their ideological orientation or conceptual framework.

Note the publication date

Knowing when the author is writing in relation to other scholars in the field can help you better understand their perspective. Furthermore, the author's thinking and preoccupations may be influenced by the broader historical context in which they are writing.

If the text is 'old' (i.e. more than a decade or so) ask yourself whether you should find a more recent resource.

Note the publication format, e.g. book, journal article etc.

In an edited **book** that is a collection of articles on a particular topic, the editor's introduction may provide a useful summary of each article, some background on the authors and the overall theoretical and research context of the volume.

Be aware that certain **journals** in each discipline are considered important, and are often associated with particular theoretical approaches.

2. Reading the text

As you read, develop the habit of asking and answering questions. The following questions, adapted from Marshall and Rowland (2006, p.152) could provide a useful approach:

The author's purpose

- Why has the author written the material? Are these purposes explicitly stated? Are there other implicit purposes?
- For whom is the material intended?

The author's approach

- What theoretical perspective has the author taken? How does this perspective relate to other material in the field?
- What are the author's underlying assumptions? Are these explicitly stated?

- Is there any evidence of bias in the interpretation of material or in the choice of sources and information? (identifying emotional language can help to detect this.)

Content

- What is the nature of the content? For example, is the author presenting information, reporting on some research or putting forward an argument?
- If an argument, what is the author's thesis (the statement or proposition that they are arguing)? How do they develop the thesis? What evidence, examples or explanations are used to support the thesis?
- Which aspects of the topic has the author chosen to concentrate on? Which aspects have been left out?
- Are there alternative explanations for the material or data presented? Has the author addressed these alternative explanations?
- If there are any visual or graphic materials (e.g. images or charts), how are these linked with the written text?
- Which of your own questions about the subject topic does the author answer? Which are not answered?
- Do any items puzzle or intrigue you?

Structure

- Is a clear, logical framework used to organise the material?
- How does the author introduce the argument? How is the supporting material organised and developed within the framework?
- Does the author recapitulate what has been said at appropriate points?

Style and format

- In what style has the material been written? For example, formal/informal, descriptive critical, didactic, persuasive, narrative or analytical?
- How does the style and format influence your own reaction to the material?

(Source: Adapted from Marshall & Rowland, 2006, p.152)

Note that not all of these questions will be relevant to all your reading; you also need to keep your own purpose in mind. Nevertheless, reading for assignments, lectures, and tutorials always requires some level of critical analysis.

Research-based articles

Research articles are typically structured in a particular way (Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion). In addition to the above types of questions, the following questions are useful:

- What were the authors trying to discover?
- Why is the research important?

- What information is given about the sample (the people or materials selected for study)?
- Were the data collection and analysis methods appropriate?
- What was measured?
- What were the results?
- What do the authors conclude?
- Can you accept their findings as true?
- Can you apply their findings to your own work?
- What if different studies have contradictory results?

3. Developing your own view

Your own knowledge and experience can help you to critique a text. Do the ideas and arguments make sense in terms of your own experience and knowledge? Does the text lead you to question your own assumptions and prejudices?

Ideas presented in lectures and from other course readings will also help you develop your thinking in relation to a text. These offer points of view that you can use to help you evaluate the text.

Comparing authors with different points of view on the same topic can also help you to identify their ideological frameworks and their assumptions. Can the assumptions each author makes be challenged? Why and how are these writers interpreting the same events, data or evidence differently?

If you are having difficulty identifying the argument and/or finding things to say about the text, try discussing the text with friends, with classmates in tutorials and with anyone else who might be interested. Discussion can generate ideas and help you clarify your thinking.

Works Cited

- McPeck, J. E. (1981). *Critical thinking and education*. Oxford, UK: Martin Robertson.
- Marshall, L., & Rowland, F. (2006). *A guide to learning independently* (4th ed.). Frenchs Forest: Pearson Education Australia.

Further Resources

- Cottrell, S. (2005). *Critical thinking skills: developing effective analysis*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Kurland, D. (2010). *Dan Kurland's www.criticalreading.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.criticalreading.com>
- Gillett, A. (2012). *Using English for academic purposes: a guide for students in higher education*. Retrieved from <http://www.uefap.com/reading/readfram.htm>

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