

Guidelines for Critical Reading

Critical Reading means reading with a conscious effort to see both sides of an issue, to draw valid conclusions, and to detect bias. It means burrowing below your immediate reaction and trying to fathom the underlying meaning of a piece of writing. This is not the sort of reading you do when you read a detective novel or a pulp magazine. But it is the best way to read, although perhaps the most strenuous, because it helps you to learn. Critical reading as a goal includes the ability to evaluate ideas socially or politically. Here are ten guidelines to help you read critically.

Understand What You Read

Reread difficult passages, looking up in a dictionary all the unfamiliar words. You cannot form an opinion of what you have read unless you understand what the author is saying.

Imagine an Opposing Point of View for All Opinions

If a writer says that the Arab punishment of cutting off the hands of a thief is more humane than the American equivalent of imprisonment, reverse the argument and see what happens. In other words, look for reasons that support the other side.

Search for Biases and Hidden Assumptions

Be alert to the biases of the writer. For example, an atheist arguing for abortion will not attribute a soul to the unborn fetus; a devout Catholic will. To ferret out possible biases and hidden assumptions, check the author's age, gender, education, and ethnic background. These and other personal biographical facts might have influenced the opinions expressed in the work, but you cannot know to what extent unless you know something about the author. (That is the rationale behind the use of biographical headnotes, which accompany the readings in many books, especially anthologies.)

Separate Emotion from Fact

Talented writers frequently color an issue with emotionally charged language, thus casting their opinions in the best possible light. For example, a condemned murderer may be described in sympathetic language that draws attention away from a horrifying crime. Be alert to sloganeering, to bumper-sticker philosophizing about complex issues. Emotion is no solution to complicated problems.

If the Issue Is New to You, Look Up the Facts

If you are reading about an unfamiliar issue, be willing to fill in the gaps in your knowledge with research. For example, if you are reading an editorial that proposes raising home insurance rates for families taking care of foster children, you will want to know why. Is it because foster children do more damage than other children? Is it because natural parents are apt to file lawsuits against foster parents? You can find answers to these questions by asking representatives of the affected parties: the State Department of Social Services, typical insurance agencies, foster parents associations, the County Welfare Directors Association, any children's lobby, and others. To make a critical judgment you must know, and carefully weigh, the facts.

Use Insights from One Subject to Illuminate or Correct Another

Be prepared to apply what you already know to whatever you read. history can inform psychology; literature can give you insights into geography. For example, if a writer in psychology argues that most oppressed people develop a psychology of defeat that gives them a subconscious desire to be subjugated and makes them prey to tyrants, your knowledge of American history should tell you otherwise. As proof that oppressed people often fight oppression unto

death, you can point to the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794, to the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811, and to the Black Hawk War of 1832—conflicts in which the Indians fought desperately to retain their territories rather than go meekly to the reservations. In other words, you can use what you have learned from history to refute a falsehood from psychology.

Evaluate the Evidence

Critical readers do not accept evidence at face value. They question its source, its verifiability, its appropriateness. Here are some practical tips for evaluating evidence:

- Verify a questionable opinion by cross-checking with other sources. For example, if a medical writer argues that heavy smoking tends to cause serious bladder diseases in males, check the medical journals for confirmation of this view. Diligent research often turns up a consensus of opinion among the experts in any field.
- Check the date of the evidence. In science especially, evidence varies from year to year. Before 1987, no one really knew exactly how the immune system worked. Then Susumu Tonegawa, a geneticist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, discovered how the immune system protects the body from foreign substances by manufacturing antibodies. In 1980, the evidence would say that the working of the immune system was a mystery; that evidence would be inaccurate in 1987.
- Use common sense in evaluating evidence. For example, if a writer argues that a child's handwriting can accurately predict his or her life as an adult, your own experience with human nature should lead you to reject this conclusion as speculative. No convincing evidence exists to corroborate it.

Ponder the Values That Give an Argument Its Impetus

In writing the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson based his arguments on the value that “all men are created equal.” On the other hand, Karl Marx based the arguments of his *Communist Manifesto* on the value that the laborer is society's greatest good. Critical reading means thinking about the values implicit in an argument. For instance, to argue that murderers should be hanged in public to satisfy society's need for revenge is to value revenge over human dignity. On the other hand, to argue that democracy can exist only with free speech is to highly value freedom of speech.

Look for Logical Fallacies

These typical logical flaws occur in a wide range of arguments: the *ad hominem* attack (attacking the person instead of the issue or the argument); the *ad populum* appeal (the use of simplistic popular slogans to convince); the *false analogy* (comparing situations that have no bearing on each other); *begging the question* (arguing in circles); and *ignoring the question* (focusing on matters that are beside the point).

Don't Be Seduced by Bogus Claims

Arguments are often based on unsubstantiated claims. For example, a writer may warn that “recent studies show women becoming increasingly hostile to men.” Or, another writer might announce, “Statistics have shown beyond doubt that most well-educated males oppose gun control.” You should always remain skeptical of these and similar claims when they are unaccompanied by hard-headed evidence. A proper claim will always be documented with verifiable evidence.

Annotate Your Reading

Many of us have the tendency to become lazy readers. We sit back with a book and almost immediately lapse into a daze. One way to avoid being a lazy reader is to annotate your reading.

Annotating your reading means making notes in the margins as you read. Your focus should be on getting the most out of your book, and annotating is one way to do that. Indeed, to make notes in the margins of books is, in a way, to interact with the reading—almost like chatting with the author. If you can't bring yourself to write directly on the

printed page of your own books, make notes on a separate sheet as you read, or stick Post-It Notes in the margins and write on those. Here are some suggestions for annotating your reading.

- **Write down your immediate impression of the essay (or section or paragraph).**
 1. Did the subject interest you? (NEVER write “This is boring” or something akin to that.)
 2. Did the reading leave you inspired, worried, angry, tickled, or better informed?
 3. Did the reading remind you of something in your own experience? (Cite the experience.)
 4. Did you agree or disagree with the author? (Note specific passages.)
 5. Did the reading give you any new ideas?

- **Note the author’s style, especially the words or expressions used.**
 1. What specific passages made you think? Explain briefly.
 2. Where did the writer use an expression or image that triggered your emotions?
 3. Where, if any place, did the author write “over your head”?
 4. What rhetorical modes were you able to detect (narration, description, illustration, process, comparison/contrast, definition, division/classification, causal analysis, persuasion/argumentation)?
 5. What kind of audience did the author seem to address? Did it include you, or did you feel left out?

- **Make marginal notes that express your responses to the author’s ideas.**
 1. Supplement the author’s idea or example by one of your own.
 2. Underline passages that seem essential to the author’s point.
 3. Write down any questions you might want to ask the author if he or she were sitting next to you.
 4. Write down any sudden insights you got.
 5. If you disagree with the author, say so and why in a marginal note.

Source: McCuen, Jo Ray and Anthony C. Winkler. *Readings for Writers*. 10th ed. Boston: Thomson, 2001.

More information on annotating text can be found at the following websites. Print these out and refer to them as you read. These should be in the front of your English binder (3-ring, at least 1”) on the first day of school.

<<http://www.greece.k12.ny.us/instruction/ela>>. Path: ELA Best Practices; Annotating a Text.

<<http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu/reading-writing/on-line/annotating-a-text.pdf>>.