



## CRITICAL READING FOR ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON

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### **Abstract:**

*Critical reading* generally refers to reading in a scholarly context, with an eye toward identifying a text or author's viewpoints, arguments, evidence, potential biases, and conclusions. Critical reading means evaluating what you have read using your knowledge as a scholar. You may look at the quality of the writing, the quality of the research, and the persuasiveness of the arguments, among other things. Finally, critical reading is an active process by which a scholar rigorously and systematically questions the literature with the goal of assessing credibility and validity.

**Key words:** critical reading, reading, analyzes, question, think, critically.

Whereas reading retention and comprehension involve remembering and understanding the main ideas, critical reading begins the process of taking action. You are not simply absorbing the information; instead, you are interpreting, categorizing, questioning, and weighing the value of that information. In other words, you are engaging in higher-order thinking and the upper reaches of Bloom's taxonomy.

Critical reading can serve many functions. Sometimes you examine a text critically to **analyze** it, sometimes to **compare** it to other texts, and sometimes to **evaluate** it. As you get more advanced in your studies, you read for all of these simultaneously. In this resource, we have isolated the functions to better explain each one.

### **Reading for Analysis**

To *analyze* means to break a text down into its parts to better understand it. When you read for analysis, you notice the components of a text and how they work together. As you examine those components, you make inferences and interpret the message of the text (both the overt message and the subtler or hidden message). Ask yourself questions like these while reading:



## **Audience and Purpose**

- Who is the intended audience? (e.g., scientists, academics, educated laypeople, the general population)
- What is the author's purpose? (e.g., to inform, to entertain, to persuade, to share new research)

## **Argument and Evidence**

- What is the thesis?
- What are the main points that support the thesis?
- What evidence is used?

## **Methods (for Research Studies)**

- How was the study conducted? Is it qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods?

## **Language and Tone**

- What is the tone the author uses? (e.g., formal, informal, critical, objective)
- How does the author's use of language and tone support the audience, purpose, and argument? (e.g., specialized terminology, simple word choice, words with emotional connotations)

## **Reading for Comparison**

When analyzing a text, you engage in *noticing*—noticing what the authors are saying and how they are saying it. Scholars do not take a single article, book, or study as the complete truth on a topic. They read widely on the issue to get a well-rounded understanding. When you are critically reading for comparison, you widen the view beyond the single source and consider the text in relation to other texts you have read on the same topic. You may also consider what you have learned in previous courses.

This process of comparison is often called *synthesis*. Ultimately, scholars draw together many sources and articulate unique and insightful conclusions based on that evidence. Synthesis is the hallmark of successful scholarly writing, and it is much easier to do well if you begin as an active and aware reader.



If you are reading multiple sources (such as for a literature review), use an organizational tool like a matrix to keep track of important details and easily compare them. Ask yourself questions like these while reading:

### **Audience and Purpose**

- Are the authors writing for a similar audience and purpose?

### **Argument and Evidence**

- Are the authors advocating a similar or opposing position?
- How does the evidence in each article reinforce, contradict, or complicate the other?

### **Methods (for Research Studies)**

- How do the studies' methods compare?

### **Language and Tone**

- How is the tone communicated in each piece?

Critical reading is not simply careful and detailed reading. To read critically, one must actively recognize and analyze information he reads on the text. Textbooks on critical reading commonly ask students to accomplish certain goals in reading:

- to understand why the author writes this.
- to understand the important information in the text.
- To analyze and summarize.

Clearly that all these goals actually refers to something that does not exist in the text he reads. Each requires inferences from evidence within the text: the readers need to read between the lines.

- In reading, recognizing the purpose of the author involves inferring a basis for choices of content and language: what will the author say and why does the author choose to say so?
- If the reader wants to understand the reading material he needs to read deeply.
- To analyze and summary the reading material needs to express the reader's own idea based on his understanding of the reading material.



Frequently the students complain that they spend quite long time reading, but they could not understand what it is about; other problems are also happening: they forget what they just finish reading; the material is not hard but they cannot find the answers to the questions.

We see clearly the necessity of introducing the critical reading strategies to our university reading to help the students read better. Critical reading strategies that are frequently used in university classroom teaching are clearly stated as the

following:

**Step1.** Pre-reading: Learning about a text before really reading it. This method is the first step in a reading class. Mostly the teacher asks the students to prepare for the class by giving them the printed material to read a few minutes before the class. Previewing enables the students to get some idea of what the material is about and how it is organized before reading it more carefully. This simple strategy includes scanning the text to try to find specific information to help understand the text, and skimming to get a general idea of the content and organization of the text, and identifying the purpose of the writing. This usually takes a very short period of time and both the students and the teacher get a brief understanding of what they are going to deal with in the following class.

**Step2.** Reading in context: When we read, it is wise to place a text in its historical, biographical, and cultural contexts. Why is this necessary? In critical reading, the readers' goals are not only to get the basic understanding of the reading material, and they are not interested in facts only; the readers are also not satisfied with the fact that they read and comprehend only by memorizing the statements within a text. Critical readers get much more. They read just as they talk with the author. In this process, they obtain not only the basic meaning of the text they read, but also the idea that the author harbor deeply in his mind. The critical readers get more than he expects in this kind of reading.

Therefore, a profound comprehension of the reading material requires not only the readers' participation, but also the background knowledge of the material.

Understandably, non-critical readers mainly read to learn the facts of a certain situation to obtain basic understanding of this situation, while critical readers



read more deeply and carefully to try to work out how this situation exists and the possible reasons hidden. When the students read in classroom, the most effective way is that they use their own experience to discover unique perspectives in understanding. They employ different techniques to try to get better comprehension of the reading material. Pre-reading here will help them gain a general idea first, and then they will dig into the text to have detailed reading. From another point, wide background knowledge will also help the students achieve a better understanding of the material they read. In classroom teaching, when the students are asked to finish reading a text within limited time, they need to use all effective methods to achieve their reading goals. With pre-reading and contextualization, they surely will achieve more.

**Step3.** Further the understanding by asking questions and answering them: Asking questions about the content. This is a normal way in reading teaching and mostly, the students make themselves ready to answer the questions about the text they read. As students, they are accustomed to teachers asking them questions about what they read. Usually these questions are designed to help them understand the material and respond to it more fully, and often this technique works.

In critical reading, when the students finish reading, the teacher asks them to design questions themselves to help achieve further comprehension. Each designs his own questions and they ask each other to try to understand the text deeper.

With this strategy, the teacher lets the students write questions when they finish reading; and especially in difficult academic readings, the students will understand the material better and remember it longer if they write questions after they finish reading. Each question should focus on a main idea, not on illustrations or details, and each should be expressed in their own words, not just copied from parts of the paragraph.

**Step4.** Further thinking and reflections after reading. The reading material that the students read might challenge their attitudes, their unconsciously held beliefs, or their positions on current issues. That's why a lot of students would feel puzzled or even anxious while reading. They need more time to consider and reorganize the ideas they get from the reading material; then it is possible for them to obtain further understanding of the text after reading.



**Step 5** Outlining and summarizing: Identifying the main ideas and restating them in their own words. Outlining and summarizing are especially helpful strategies for understanding the content and structure of a reading selection. Most English teachers like using these methods to help their students understand the text. When the teachers ask their students to practice outlining and summarizing in reading, they teach them to recognize the basic structure of the text they read first; the students are required to write down the structure on a piece of paper, and try to recognize the main ideas and the supporting ideas and also the examples the author uses, because the main ideas form the backbone of a text.

Summarizing has slight difference from outlining. Outlining a text basically means listing all the important facts and examples together, while summarizing a text is to develop a new text based on the original structure of the reading material. Outlining depends on a close analysis of the material, and summarizing also requires creative synthesis. The readers are required to put ideas together in their own words and in a much more condensed form, which shows how reading critically can lead to deeper understanding of any text. In this practice, the students learn to think while reading, and thinking while reading is the primary purpose of critical reading.

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