

Critical Reading Strategies

Here I present steps in a critical reading strategy that I have shamelessly stolen from someone else. These are steps that you can learn readily and then apply not only to the reading for this class, but also to your other college reading. Although mastering these steps will not make the critical reading process an easy one, it can make reading much more satisfying and productive and thus help you handle difficult material well and with confidence. You may give more or less importance to any of the steps below but it is important that you not actually skip any of them in the reading process.

Fundamental to each of these steps is annotating directly on the page: underlining key words, phrases or sentences; writing comments or questions in the margins; bracketing important sections of the text; constructing ideas with lines or arrows; numbering related points in sequence; and making note of anything that strikes you as interesting, important or questionable.

Most readers annotate in layers, adding further annotations on second and third readings. Annotations can be light or heavy, depending on the reader's purpose and the difficulty of the material.

Previewing: Learning about a text before really reading it.

Previewing enables readers to get a sense of what the text is about and how it is organized before reading it closely. This simple step includes seeing what you can learn from the head notes or other introductory material, skimming to get an overview of the content and organization and identifying the rhetorical situation.

Contextualizing: Placing a text in its historical, biographical and cultural contexts.

When you read a text, you read it through the lens of your own experience. Your understanding of the words on the page and their significance is informed by what you have come to know and value from living in a particular time and place. But the texts you read were all written in the past, sometimes in a radically different time and place. To read critically, you need to contextualize, to recognize the differences between your contemporary values and attitudes and those represented in the text.

Questioning to understand and remember: Asking questions about the content.

As students, you are accustomed to teachers asking you questions about your readings. These questions are designed to help you understand a reading and respond to it more fully, and often this technique works. When you need to understand and use new information, though, it is most beneficial if you write questions as you read the text for the first time. With this strategy, you can write questions anytime, but in difficult academic readings, you will understand the material better and remember it longer if you write a question for every paragraph or brief section. Each question should focus on a main idea, not on illustrations or details, and each should be expressed in your own words, not just copied from parts of the paragraph.

Reflecting on challenges to your beliefs and values: Examining your personal responses.

The reading that you do for this class might challenge your attitudes, your unconsciously held beliefs or your positions on current issues. As you read a text for the first time, mark an X in the margin at each point where you feel a personal challenge to your attitudes, beliefs or status. Make a brief note in the margin about what you feel or about what in the text created the challenge. Now look again at the places you marked in the text where you felt personally challenged. What patterns do you see?

Outlining and summarizing: Identifying the main ideas and restating them in your own words.

Outlining and summarizing are especially helpful steps for understanding the content and structure of a reading selection. Whereas outlining reveals the basic structure of the text, *summarizing* synthesizes a selection's main argument in brief. *Outlining* may be part of the annotating process, or it may be done separately. The key to both outlining and summarizing is being able to distinguish between the main

ideas and the supporting ideas and examples. The main ideas form the backbone, the strand that holds the various parts and pieces of the text together. *Outlining* the main ideas helps you to discover this structure. When you make an outline, don't use the text's exact words. *Summarizing* begins with outlining, but instead of merely listing the main ideas, a summary recomposes them to form a new text. Whereas *outlining* depends on a close analysis of each paragraph, *summarizing* requires creative synthesis. Putting ideas together again — in your own words and in a condensed form — shows how reading critically can lead to deeper understanding of any text.

Evaluating an argument: Testing the logic of a text as well as its credibility and emotional impact.

All writers make assertions they want you to accept as true. As a critical reader, you should not accept anything on the face value but recognize every assertion as an argument that must be carefully evaluated. An argument has two essential parts: a *claim* and *support* for the claim. The *claim* asserts a conclusion — an idea, an opinion, a judgment, or a point of view — that the writer wants you to accept. The *support* includes reasons (shared beliefs, assumptions and values) and evidence (facts, examples, statistics and authorities) that give readers the basis for accepting the conclusion. When you assess an argument, you are concerned with the *purpose* of reasoning as well as its *truthfulness* (these are not the same thing). At the most basic level, in order for an argument to be acceptable, the support must be appropriate to the claim and the statements must be consistent with one another.

Comparing and contrasting related readings: Exploring likenesses and differences between texts to understand them better.

Many of the authors we read are concerned with the same issues or questions, but approach how to discuss them in different ways. Fitting a text into an ongoing dialectic helps increase understanding of why an author approached a particular issue in the way he or she did.

Note for online students.

For online students, critical reading (such as the process above) is extremely important. Online students do not generally have lectures on which they take notes. Instead, all or almost all of their material is written material. It is extremely important then that they learn to approach that material from a critical viewpoint. The above process is a good way of doing that.