

Critical Reading

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The following is a series of tips on how to become a critical reader.

1. Accept Controversy and Understand Motives for Academic Writing

- You have to accept that there are different ways of interpreting the same phenomenon. This tends to be frustrating at first sight. New university students typically want to know *the* answer, but often, especially in the humanities and the social sciences, there's not a single, definitive answer to most questions.
- For instance, what is the answer to the problem of unemployment? A conservative might argue for lower minimum wages, anti-union laws, and lower welfare rates. A Marxist might argue for the abolition of capitalism and an end to private control of the economy.
- *Every* author has a political point of view. *Every* author has a motive, an axe to grind. Otherwise, they would not bother writing. Most people write when they are upset about something, or they see a "gap in the literature," a problem that needs to be addressed.
- You have to get used to the fact that almost every writer is entering a *controversy* and is making an argument for one side of that controversy. Be aware that what is at stake rarely comes down to a stark "either/or" dichotomy. Usually writers on both sides of an issue have many matters on which they agree, but other important ones on which they disagree.
- Be cognizant of the common motives for academic writing. These have been nicely summarized by Gordon Taylor as follows:¹
 - AGREEING WITH, ACCEDING TO, DEFENDING, or CONFIRMING a particular point of view;
 - PROPOSING a new point of view;
 - CONCEDEDING that an existing point of view has certain merits *but* that it needs to be QUALIFIED in certain important respects;

¹ *The Student's Writing Guide for the Arts and Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 67.

- REFORMULATING an existing point of view or statement of it, such that the new version makes a better explanation;
- DISMISSING a point of view or another person's work on account of its inadequacy, irrelevance, incoherence, or by recourse to other appropriate criteria;
- REJECTING, REBUTTING, or REFUTING another's argument on various reasoned grounds;
- RECONCILING two positions which may seem at variance by appeal to some "higher" or "deeper" principle;
- RETRACTING or RECANTING a previous position of one's own in the face of new arguments or evidence.

2. Figure Out What's Going On

- Sometimes it seems as if the author is giving you nothing more than endless pages of description. This is especially the case in the textbooks which are used in many introductory courses. You scratch your head and say: "Is there an argument hidden in all that description?" There is *always* an argument – though you may have to look closely for it.
- More often than not, the prose is dense, it's not particularly well written, and many of the concepts are unfamiliar. In short, academic writing can be difficult. Despite this, you must push your way through. Don't get discouraged and stop reading. Do not be afraid to reread the text (or at least review passages you sense are important).
- Ask yourself: Why is the writer telling one aspect of the story and not another? For example, why in many books on the history of the welfare state do the authors pay so little attention to class conflict?
- The most challenging and yet the most important task of a critical reader is to figure out *what is missing*. What did the author leave out? There probably won't be any factual errors in what you read (for instance, no one will claim that Confederation occurred in 1895). What is "wrong" usually involves what is left unsaid, what the author did not consider.

3. Ask Questions

- When you are reading, do not run your highlighter lazily over the text, so that the page ends up looking like a banana peel. Any markings you make (and there should not be too many of these) should help you recall things such as the main argument, the relationship between sub-arguments, supporting details, the views being critiqued by the author, your own questions for the author, and so forth.
- Ask yourself: What is the author focusing on? Is the author trying to explain, evaluate, define, classify, theorize – or do something else? Pay particular attention to the opening paragraphs of the work, where the author should provide a thesis statement and a road map of the argument that is about to unfold.
- What existing belief does the author attack – and on what grounds – and what, in turn, is the author’s argument? Do not make the common mistake of inattentive readers whereby you attribute to the author something that he or she is critiquing.

4. Become an Active/Critical Reader

- Every author makes a “truth claim,” a claim that something is true, justified, preferred, fair – and so on. To be “critical” means to *doubt these claims to truth*. To excel at this, you need to think as you read. Do not just absorb information in the way a sponge absorbs water. You have to *pick the text apart*. Be “aggressive.” React, respond, disagree. “Oh, yeah?” “No way!”
- A critical reader is a *skeptical* reader. Your task is to poke holes in the author’s argument. “Workfare in Ontario has been an enormous success,” the author claims. Your first response might be: “Enormous? You’re kidding, right?” (You would formulate a more professional response later.)
- What evidence is provided in support of the argument? Does the author’s argument make sense? Is it convincing? Can you find weaknesses in it? Are the author’s criticisms of other writers justified? Is the argument important, or is the author telling us something we already know? Have they merely “explained” the obvious?

5. Recognize Ideas and Transitions

- Most writers present a general argument then support it with specific details. The main idea often appears in the first sentence of a paragraph (though not always). This is called the “topic sentence.” Sometimes the main idea is directly stated, sometimes it is not. When it is not, you’ll need to figure it out. In doing so, be careful not to get caught up in all the details while missing the main argument.
- Writers use transitions to indicate when they are moving from one major section to another or one idea to another. Take note of headings and subheadings; these often serve as the “signposts” of an argument.
- Transitions also take place within paragraphs where the author summarizes what came before and gives an indication of the argument to come (“We have seen that ...”; “We will now survey the three ...”).
- Watch for transitional phrases:
 - (1) that show the relationship between ideas → *at the other extreme, consequently, accordingly, the result of all this, because, in contrast, nevertheless, in comparison, on the other hand, similarly ...*
 - (2) that point to the introduction of a new idea → *the purpose of this chapter, let us now turn, the second aspect of, in addition, there is another way of viewing, furthermore ...*
 - (3) that take you from the “idea level” to the “supporting detail” level → *for example, for instance, to illustrate, specifically ...*
 - (4) that conclude → *in conclusion, all in all, altogether, to summarize, in brief, on the whole ...*