What does it mean to read critically?

Critical reading is a decision-making process. It requires that you ask many questions while you read. When you read critically, you notice not only what is written but how it is written. All authors have a purpose when they write. Your job as a critical reader is to figure out the author’s purpose.

Critical reading sometimes involves reading twice: once to become familiar with the material and a second time to analyze it. During your second reading, ask questions like the ones below and make notes in the margins of the reading or on paper. The more you read critically, the more you’ll automatically ask questions like these while you read.

Why is critical reading essential in college?

One of the hallmarks of college learning is asking questions. Unlike high school, where the focus is on learning facts, college students often ask questions and explore new ideas. Critical readers ask many questions as they read.

How can I read more critically?

Ask yourself:

- Why was this material written? What is its purpose? Is the intent to inform? To persuade? To compare? To illustrate? To entertain? To spur you to action?
- Who is the author? What qualifies this person to write about this subject? Why did the author write this? How can I find out more about this author? In the front of the book? At the end of the journal article? On the Internet? From my professor? In the library?
- Might the author be biased? Does the author belong to any group that might influence his/her point of view? Does the author have anything to gain if I take what s/he has written as fact? Does the author present both sides of the issue? Does the author omit information that would not support his/her view?
- Who is the author’s intended audience? How would that audience respond to the material? How would different audiences respond?
- What is the attitude of the author? Does the author express any emotions? Does the author seem sympathetic or unsympathetic toward the subject?
- When was it written? Is the information current? Or outdated? If the article was written recently, does it rely on current facts? What sources are given for the “facts”? What was occurring at the time the article was written that might have influenced the author?
- Is the information fact or opinion? A fact can be verified; an opinion is based on personal evaluation. Critical readers must be able to distinguish between fact and opinion.
- Where is the information published? Who published it? What is the reputation of the newspaper, the magazine, the journal, or the publisher? Is material typically well researched?
- What kind of language does the author use? Authors carefully select their words and readers need to notice these words. Do any words connote emotions? (For example, an author who wanted to stress patriotism might deliberately use words like “freedom,” liberty,” and “democracy.”) Do any words try to persuade you? Do the words try to paint a certain picture? How does the writing make you feel?

- Does the author omit anything? Admittedly, this seems like a difficult question to answer; nonetheless, it’s important to ask. You may need to read other material on the subject in order to discover the answer. But the answer to this question is the essence of critical reading. If the material is trying to persuade you of something, it is important to find out what might be omitted or suppressed.

- Is the material well-reasoned and logical? Does the author provide facts to support general statements? If the author expresses opinion, is it supported by facts? Is the sequence of ideas logical? Is the material well organized? Do the author’s conclusions logically follow from the information given? Are there any irrelevant details or facts? Are there any inconsistencies?

- What do you bring to the reading? Do you have any background knowledge that can help you read this subject more critically? Do you have any opinions that might make it difficult for you to read this material critically? Do you agree or disagree with what the author says?

References


