

Critical Reading

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Critical reading is the process of actively engaging with a text as you read it, going beyond simply following the author's arguments or explanation. It involves examining the underlying assumptions not made explicit in the text, both in the initial framing of the issue and in the reasoning from evidence to conclusions. In doing so, you place the text in a larger context, relying on your own knowledge of the field, your knowledge of related fields, your own personal experience, and the text itself.

Critical reading is not criticizing. You can read a text critically and come out the other end liking it or disliking it. In either case, you'll have a better idea of why.

In order to break down the process of critical reading into specific steps, I have found the following questions helpful. In answering these questions as you read, keep in mind who the author and intended audience are. These two pieces of information are an important part of the context. [NB: These questions were developed in the context of a sociolinguistics course, but I believe that they have broader applicability.]

- For articles reporting on research:
 1. What is the research question that the article asks?
 2. What assumptions/presuppositions are involved in asking/framing the question the way the authors do?
 3. How were the data gathered?
 4. What potential for bias was there in the gathering of the data?
 5. How are the authors' presuppositions involved in the way they collected the data?
 6. What are the conclusions presented in the article?
 7. What assumptions/presuppositions are involved in drawing those conclusions from that evidence?

- For textbook passages explaining concepts:
 1. What is the broader conceptual field that the concepts belong to?
 2. Do they contrast with each other, or with concepts introduced elsewhere? Which ones?

3. If the author presenting a taxonomy, what range of phenomena are covered by the taxonomy?
 4. Are the categories posited mutually exclusive or intersecting?
 5. What are the concepts useful for? (I.e., what kinds of research questions do they allow us to pose?)
 6. What assumptions/presuppositions are involved in framing the subject matter the way the concepts do?
- For persuasive pieces such as editorials:
 1. What is the thesis of the piece?
 2. What assumptions are common to both the thesis and its negation? (That is, what assumptions are involved in the way the author frames the debate?)
 3. What is the evidence presented in support of the thesis?
 4. What presuppositions/assumptions underlie each piece of evidence and/or its relevance to the thesis?
 5. What assumptions are involved in arguing from the evidence to the thesis?