Critical Reading Skills

Arts Academic Language and Learning Unit
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Critical Reading Skills

Reading is an **active** process, not a **passive** one.

You must engage with the text.
Critical Reading Skills

Always read a text with your purpose in mind. This will shape how we approach it.

You will not be reading the articles for their factual content as such.
Critical Reading Skills

Which texts we select to read, and how we read them, depends on many factors, including our purpose, and what counts as acceptable for our purposes in the discipline.
Critical Reading Skills

Excessive highlighting or excessive underlining in your reading is counter-productive, and just makes your material messy and difficult to understand.
Effective Reading

How does your purpose determine the strategies you should use?

When you read a newspaper, do you begin with the first word on the first page and read through to the last word on the last page? Of course not! But why not?

Academic articles and books do not need to be read word by word, nor do we necessarily need to start at the beginning.
Effective Reading

How should you approach a long subject reading list?

You cannot usually read everything on a reading list. But this does not mean you select one or two, and ignore the rest. Scan the reading list for authors’ names, more recent dates, or shorter (or longer) accounts, depending on what you want.
Effective Reading

What is meant by a critical approach to reading?

A critical approach to reading means asking yourself why this particular author has written this particular text. You can ask yourself many questions about the text - the more the better. These are shaped by what you already understand about the text, your topic of study, and what you need to get from it.
Effective Reading

Questions you can ask about the text:

- What appears to be the author’s main theme or point?
- What is the text really about (ie. special agenda, underlying themes)?
- Which aspects does the author focus on and why? Does he/she omit important points?
- Are there additional clues about the author’s attitude or stance?
- Is the author making any particular assumptions? On what authority?
Effective Reading

Questions you can ask about the text:

- What basis or criteria is the author using to make judgments?
- What explanations or supporting evidence are drawn on? Do they seem adequate or relevant?
- Is all the factual information correct as far as you know?
- Are there problems with the approach, or questions that remain unanswered?
- What does the structure of the text reveal? Is the framework clear? Is the material developed historically, or in order of importance?
Effective Reading

How do you take a critical approach to reading internet material?

- Is it clear who authored the material?
- Is it clear which pages belong to the site you accessed and which are linked pages to other sites?
- Where do the author’s hyperlinks take you? What does this tell you about the author’s perspective or intentions?
Effective Reading

How do you take a critical approach to reading internet material?

- Is the purpose of the site clear?
- Is the identity and status of the writer quite clear; are they qualified to express these views on this topic?
- Is there any evidence of potential bias, e.g. are they expressing the views of a particular organisation/institution? What effect do the domains .edu, .com or .gov have on the validity and usefulness of the materials? Is there a distinction between information and advertisement?
Predicting Content from a Title

Madness and sexual politics in the feminist novel

My questions might be:

- Which theorists and theoretical approaches does this text draw on?
- How does this writer define ‘feminist novel’?
- What is meant by madness in this text?
- Is female madness the result of male-oriented social relations?
Is it good to make people happy?

- Why might it be good to make people happy? Ethics wants to distinguish between good and bad actions. So a definition of ‘good’ seems essential.
- What is meant by ‘good’ in this context? Can I quickly find a definition?
- Why is it good to make people happy, and not merely nice to do so?
- Explore the link between morality, goodness and happiness.
Points to remember:

- Don’t overdo the reading at the initial stages of your study.
- At an early stage, focus on establishing and expanding global ideas and acquiring vocabulary.
- If an NESB student, preparatory/follow-up reading in your own language is desirable.
- Always interrogate the text as you read - always try to read actively.
- Summarise the text after you have read it and note key bibliographic details.
- Too much highlighting/underlining is not helpful.
- Read a chapter or article as an essay.
Reading a chapter or article as an essay

In the following pages, we will examine a text’s structure to uncover the key points in the discourse. In particular, we are trying to generate a \textit{global} understanding of the main features of the text.
Reading a chapter or article as an essay

Initially, we are trying to ascertain:

- general topic area
- the “problem”
- conceptual framework
- programme
- specific subject area
- author’s thesis
- methodology

These features should all be discernible in the abstract, introduction, and/or initial paragraphs.
Reading a chapter or article as an essay

In the body paragraphs, we are looking for:

- the topic sentences
- the key arguments the author is employing to support his or her contention
- the arguments the author raises *against* contrasting views to his or her own.
Reading a chapter or article as an essay

In the conclusion, we are looking for:

- a restatement of the author’s main idea
- restatement of the main argument(s) that support this point of view
- any problems the author sees with his or her thesis
- areas for future discussion or research
Reading a chapter or article as an essay

Next, let’s see how this approach to critical reading applies to an introduction, one of the most important elements of an article, chapter or essay.
Reading a chapter or article as an essay

General topic sentence:

‘Previous research into teachers’ questions has focused on what types of questions are more conducive for developing students’ communicative language use’
‘In this regard, *display questions*, whose answers the teacher already knows, are considered less effective because they limit opportunities for students to use genuine language use (Long & Sato, 1983)’
Reading a chapter or article as an essay

Setting up the problem:

‘Although the research into teacher questions has been refined in recent years, it is not certain how much we know about how display questions work, especially how they are produced and acted on in the course of classroom interaction by language teachers and students’
Reading a chapter or article as an essay

Methodology:

‘This article uses a sequential analysis (Koshik, 2002; Markee, 2000; Sacks, Schlegoff & Jefferson, 1974; Schlegoff, Koshik, Jacoby & Olsher, 2002) to examine teachers’ display questions. Sequential analysis considers how classroom talk is the outcome of the contingent coordination of interactional work of common understanding (Moerman & Sacks, 1971/1988)’
Reading a chapter or article as an essay

Programme & thesis:

‘Through analysis of transcribed interaction in an English as a second language (ESL) classroom, this article argues that display question are central resources whereby language teachers and students organise their lessons and produce language pedagogy’

Reading Guide

When examining articles or essays for your research, it can be helpful to write short summaries of their main points. The following are some headings you could use for this process.
Reading Guide

Reference details

- Title
- Author
- Source/Bibliographic details
Reading Guide

Topic Summary

What is the article about?
What are the main ideas and subjects?
Reading Guide

Thesis summary

What is the author’s contention?
What is the author trying to prove or disprove?
Reading Guide

Arguments in support

What evidence is there to support the claims made by the author?
Reading Guide

Counter arguments/rebuttals

What evidence is there against the claims made by the author?
Reading Guide

Your response

How persuasive is the author’s argument?
Has the author missed anything?